

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany ~ February 19, 2017

Sermon preached by the Rev. Deacon Holly Hanback

Readings: Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18, 1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23, Psalm 119:33-40, Matthew 5:38-48

“Becoming Perfect”

*God our Creator, Christ our Redeemer, Holy Spirit our Life Giver we give thanks to you for the rising of the sun and sending of the rain for ALL people and we ask for strength and courage as we seek to live into your perfection, becoming all you have called us to be. Amen.*

“Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” I figured I might as well jump right in with one of the hardest sentences of the Sermon on the Mount. We have now been hearing the Sermon on the Mount for a few weeks. We began with the glorious beatitudes assuring and comforting us. Last week the words were a bit more difficult with a lot of commandments on what to do and what not to do. This week we have come to the part of the sermon where Jesus is really laying out exactly what the life of a Disciple will look like. We have very clear instructions. I would even venture to say difficult instructions that can feel overwhelming and impossible to achieve. Then Jesus finishes with sending the Disciples and us out into the world with the dismissal “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Wow!

When I say or hear the word “perfect” the first thought that comes to my mind is “without error”, “without flaw”, and then I start to think “unattainable”, “not achievable”, “impossible”. If I am being truthful the word “perfect” makes me feel a bit anxious and overwhelmed because I don’t believe I will ever do anything perfectly and I will never “be perfect”.

As I began to research the Hebrew and Greek roots of the word perfect I was able to take a deep breath. The English word “perfect” has been translated from the Hebrew word: “tam” or “tamim” meaning “Complete”; “Mature”, and “Healthy”. And the Hebrew word was then translated into the Greek word “telos” meaning “intended maturity”.

After this research, Jesus use of the word “perfect” makes so much more sense. From a biblical perspective, this word “perfect” is really describing God’s intention for us. It is not a commandment to be flawless or without error or never mess up when we are in the midst of hard circumstances rather it is an invitation to live into and continue to become who God has called us to be. This directive to “be perfect” is actually an invitation to continuously be maturing and moving towards God’s love and bringing about God’s kingdom with that love.

What does saying yes to that invitation look like in our daily lives, in our relationships, our homes, our jobs, our neighborhoods? What is required of us to be perfect? In our Gospel today Jesus gives

us some practical examples: 1) Do not resist an evildoer; If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 2) If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 3) if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile; 4) Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you; 5) Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

These are not simple tasks. Jesus is telling us that to be disciples we will have to risk being offended, we will have to work at reconciliation, we will need to strive for excellence and we will have to give with no expectations and grateful hearts. And maybe hardest of all we will have to pray for those who purposefully harm us.

I received a phone call from a victim of domestic violence. They shared their story with me and asked me to pray with them and for them. We then planned to meet for the first time when they needed to go to court for a hearing. I arrived at the courthouse wearing my clerical collar and I noticed someone staring at me, looking at me as though they wanted to speak to me. I went over to them and asked them if they would like me to pray with them. They nodded and I began to pray. The person became emotional and began to share with me their relationship with God and some of their heartache. As we continued to talk and pray they mentioned a name of a family member. I suddenly realized I was speaking to and praying with the abuser of the victim I was meeting at the courtroom.

In less than a second a thousand thoughts went through my head and my heart. What if the victim walked in and saw me praying over their abuser? How do I stop the conversation and let this person know *I know* who they are and why they are here and that I am here to meet with their accuser? I sent a fast and furious prayer to God asking to fill me with the right words for everyone. I told the person that I need to stop them from telling me more of their story. I needed them to know I knew of their family, had been praying for them and their family and was actually meeting their family in this place at this time. And then I had to tell the victim I had inadvertently met and prayed with their abuser. I didn't know what to expect from either person. They could both feel betrayed by me and angry with God and lash out at me and one another.

What actually happened was separately they both thanked me and asked me to continue praying for each of them and their entire family. They asked for prayers for guidance, healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice. They prayed with me and for each other.

My brothers and my sisters this is what "perfect" looks like. It is the striving to become who we are called by God to be in the midst of any circumstance. Jesus telling us to "be perfect as God is perfect" is an invitation into wholeness. May we embrace the opportunity to move towards God's love and bringing about God's kingdom with that love. Amen.