

“The Perfect Church”

Exodus 20:1-17, Matthew 5:17-48 (selected verses)

First Presbyterian Church

February 16, 2020

Exodus 20:1-17

20 Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

3 you shall have no other gods before me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

8 Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

13 You shall not murder.

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading

The scene takes place in a movie called “The Princess Bride.” It’s a fairy tale... about Princess Buttercup and her servant, Westley, who silently loved her. Princess Buttercup is forced to marry to the evil Prince Humperdinck... their wedding is scheduled to take place in the grand Cathedral. As it turns out, though, Buttercup does not marry the evil Prince Humperdinck... and as the movie unfolds, Buttercup begins to think about Westley... she remembers the early days when she mistreated him... and how every time she barked an order at him, his response was the same... he would say, “As you wish.” What else COULD he say? He was her servant... But what Buttercup finally realizes is that whenever Westley said to her, “As you wish,” he was really saying to her, “I love you.” And when she eventually understands that whenever Westley said “as you wish,” he was really saying, “I love you...” she realizes she needed to hear not ONLY what he SAID, but also what he MEANT. And what he *meant* was, “I love you.”

In Matthew's Gospel, we are hearing Jesus preach his famous Sermon on the Mount. In the section we hear today, the sermon is already in progress. Jesus is quoting a series of commandments that everyone knew well... yet, this time he asks them to NOT ONLY listen to what God *said*, but to also ponder what God *meant*... to go deeper to discover the true intent of the law... to pass through what we might call the letter of the law to find the heart or spirit of God's commandments.

Matthew 5:17-48 (selected verses)

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment...

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

³³“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...

⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Sermon

Perfect is one of the scariest words I know... and unfortunately, it's a word I know fairly well.¹ Though in reality I am far from perfect, I am a tad perfectionistic... (some of you may have noticed) and I apologize for that. Even though I know my perfectionism makes me hesitant to take the risks that might lead to growth... even though it causes me to feel terrible whenever I've done the best I can, and still my performance falls short of some imaginary standard... even though I know it makes me preoccupied with myself and how I'm doing and critical of others and how they are doing. These are just some of the reasons perfect is one of the scariest words I know. And with the advent of social media, "perfect" now has a very powerful platform... with folks posting the perfect evening with our perfect partner... the perfect vacation with the perfect family... perfect children doing all their perfect things. Nobody posts about that imperfect evening with our imperfect partner... that imperfect vacation with our imperfect family... their imperfect children doing imperfect things. Yes, perfect is one of the scariest words I know... and yet, Jesus says to his disciples: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Well, THIS is one of those Bible texts that just doesn't make sense... and whenever Presbyterians are faced with a Bible passage that doesn't make sense, we have a couple of options. One, we can just take it at face value and go with it... go with the plain meaning of the text. Some years ago, I saw a bumper sticker that summed up this approach – it read: "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it!" If Jesus says, "Be perfect" – deal with it. But there's another option when faced with a difficult text - it is to remember that the words WE read in OUR Bibles are always a "translation" of words that come from a very different language and place and time... and though the very smart people who made the translation did the best they could... sometimes we need to dig a little deeper to see what we can find. And when we do this with the word "perfect," we find that it's not so much a scary WORD as it's a scary translation.² Because for us the word "perfect" means without blemish... flawless... faultless... guiltless. But in Jesus' time, "perfect" had a different meaning and that's what we need to explore this morning.

When Jesus says perfect, he uses the Greek word which typically points to something that has grown up and become mature. It's referring not so much to someone who's morally perfect as it is someone who has changed and been changed so that she has now reached her intended purpose. "Perfect" is the goal or desired outcome of a thing. A fruit tree's "perfection" we might say, is to grow and tall and mature so that it will bear much fruit. So perhaps we would be better reframing – and re-translating – this verse as does Eugene Peterson does. In his version of the Bible called *The Message*, Jesus says: "In a word, what I'm saying is, *Grow up*."

¹ This introduction was inspired by "Perfection," an essay by Kathleen Norris which was eventually published in her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Christian Century, February 18, 1998, p. 180.

² Norris again.

You are kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”³ Or, as another translates it even more simply, “Be the person God has created you to be, just as God is who God is supposed to be.”⁴ That’s different isn’t it? Rather than flawless, faultless, without blemish... rather than “Make sure you get A pluses on every single moral exam,” the message is, “Turn... with all you have and all you are... turn... with your whole will and being... turn to God as he has turned to you.”⁵ Grow up until you are full-grown... complete... mature... perfect. Well, just speaking for myself, this re-translation DOES help me better understand what was a very difficult text. This redefining the goal from “Be perfect” as moral perfection (which will NEVER happen) to “Be perfect” as spiritual maturity (which I hope IS HAPPENING) makes a lot more sense. But still, I’m nowhere close to the goal... nowhere close to having turned all that I have and all that I am to God. I’ve GROWN in faith and witness over the years - (largely because I have been blessed to walk this journey with so many faithful disciples like you) ... but still, I’m nowhere close to being full-grown, complete, mature. Which is why it’s important to understand one more thing about Jesus’ words here on the mountainside. To this point, we’ve given our attention to one word in the text – the word “perfect.” But there is another word that may be just as important as we try to hear what our Lord is saying. It is the little three-letter word “you.” You. Because when Jesus says literally, “Be YOU perfect...” he’s obviously talking to someone... right? The question is “Who?” Well, being the self-absorbed creature, I am, I always assumed he was talking directly to me! I’ve always just assumed he meant, “Whit, I expect YOU to be without flaw or blemish.” And the truth is he IS talking to ME... but not to me *alone*.

He’s talking to US... his disciples ... his community ... you see, the YOU in the text is not singular, it’s plural. And what he’s saying as he looks out on his disciples and other followers is that together we can be whole... complete... mature... grown up... perfect, even as God is perfect. Surely, this is what the apostle Paul is describing when he writes: “Now you are the *body* of Christ and individually members of it.” You are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Each of you... each individual member is called and gifted and given the power of the Holy Spirit to be part of the body. No one of us has all the gifts... all the faith... all the generosity... all the Bible knowledge... all the love... all the hope. Not one of us alone is perfect, but when we’re drawn together by Jesus... in the power of the Spirit... something happens that’s a real wonder to behold. There was a small Quaker meeting in upper Wisconsin who had gathered for worship one bitterly cold Sunday in February. Apparently, it had been snowing for two days and with the wind chill factored in, it was about 20 degrees below zero. Still about 40 faithful saints huddled together that day for silent prayer and Spirit-inspired sharing. The service was in progress when all of a sudden, the door of the meetinghouse burst open and a heavily bundled man explained there had been a bus accident on the interstate... that the driver was seriously injured... and that fifty passengers were stranded out in the weather. Without another word, the entire congregation went into action.

³ Eugene Peterson in *The Message*.

⁴ David Lose in his February 14, 2014 devotional “Daily Bread.”

⁵ R. Gregor Smith, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, edit. Alan Richardson (Macmillan,1950), p.167

Some to the kitchen to make coffee and heat soup... others to get their coats and four-wheel drives to ferry the passengers from the crash site to the church. Some got on the phones to find lodging... others set up a TV and VCR for the children. When people started arriving, they were warmly greeted... wrapped in blankets... given something warm to eat and drink. It was a marvelous thing to watch, the visitor wrote. Everything happened with a minimum of communication or fuss. Each person did what he or she did best... and it all fit together perfectly. After a while a young woman - a victim of the crash – walked up to the pastor and apologized for interrupting their worship. He just smiled and said, “You didn’t interrupt worship. This IS worship.” And so, it is – perfect worship. I have witnessed this perfection, my friends... HERE... right here in THIS body of Christ. I have witnessed perfection as imperfect disciples (that would be me and you) when imperfect disciples grow strong and tall and mature so that together we bear fruit for our Lord. And as we try to be the persons God has created us to be, I have witnessed at least glimpses of that perfection here in our church - when together one has strong faith

- and one has extravagant generosity
- and one sings beautifully
- and one teaches
- and one has deep compassion
- and one has unfailing hope.

Together... with a lot of help from the Holy Spirit... we will be perfect, even as God is perfect.

(A version of this sermon was also preached in 2005 at Springdale Presbyterian Church and in a pulpit exchange with Grace-Hope P.C. that same year... and in 2006 at Leavenworth Community Presbyterian Church, IN.)