

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany  
Matthew 5:38-48; Leviticus 19: 1-2, 9-18

February 20, 2011  
Rev. Brian Hiortdahl

*You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.  
Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Mel Clawson informs me that I have failed as your pastor.

In the nine plus year that I have been here, five children have cried during baptism, which is five too many.

Others have helpfully pointed out my mistakes in the bulletin, in pastoral care, in preaching, in my personal life, in my leadership, and in my wardrobe, to name just a few of my failures without even mentioning the attempts at singing.

*Your heavenly Father is perfect* but your pastor is not, in direct disobedience to Jesus.

Bishop Miller can be reached at 773/248-0021.

I trust that you will report me after worship today and request that your next pastor be perfect, and I wish you good luck with that.

In the meantime, you have a bigger problem.

Moses spoke of holiness to the whole people, and Jesus spoke of perfection to all of the disciples and quite possibly the crowds, so it is fairly clear that when the Bible says to be *holy* and *perfect*, God is actually speaking to all of you.

Listen carefully.

No really--listen carefully.

Listen in Hebrew and in Greek.

In Hebrew, the word *holy* means *set apart, different*.

In Greek, the word imperfectly translated *perfect* really means *complete, whole*.

It is a form of the same word Jesus speaks from the cross in John's gospel when he says, *It is finished*.

It is fully accomplished, it is completed.

This word does not have to do with the absence of mistakes but with the fullness of integrity.

God makes the rain and the snow and the sunshine to cascade upon everyone, equally abundant grace not because of who we are but because of who God is.

That's why we perfectionists invented snow shovels; God doesn't organize grace the way we would, with more here and none there, rich here and poor there, good fortune to the pious and ill fortune to self-centered scoundrels...why do good things happen to bad people?

It is because God is complete, and God is different - God is perfect and holy.

And since God is your parent and you are God's child, you shall be different and complete too.

Our calling in baptism is a commission to strangeness.

When we promise today to pray for freshly baptized Elliott in his new life in Christ, I would suggest we take our cue from the proud t-shirts and bumper stickers of Austin, Texas, praying to the Lord, "Keep Elliott weird."

Keep him different, set him apart, make people notice him, his light so shining, his saltiness so flavorful, his lifestyle so strangely marked by integrity, by generosity that is complete and love that is thorough and daring enough to be memorable and creative.

That is what Jesus is getting at with his crazy talk about the other cheek and the extra mile.

Insightful biblical scholar Walter Wink explains:

*Jesus' Third Way is not an insuperable counsel to perfection....it establishes us in freedom, not necessity.* (Jesus...p. 103)

*This message, far from being a counsel of perfection unattainable in this life, is a practical, strategic measure for empowering the oppressed.* (Jesus...p. 21)

*Turn the other cheek, thus indicating to the one who backhands you that his attempts to shame you into servility have failed.*

*Strip naked and parade out of court, thus taking the momentum of the law and the whole debt economy and flipping them, jujitsu-like, in a burlesque of legality.*

*Walk a second mile, surprising the occupation troops with a sudden challenge to their control.* (On Earth...p. 84)

*Once we determine that Jesus' Third Way is not a perfectionistic avoidance of violence but a creative struggle to restore the humanity of all parties in a dispute, the legalism that has surrounded this issue becomes unnecessary.* (Jesus...p. 21)

*It is something we are not required to do, but enabled to do.* (Jesus...p. 82)

(Wink, Walter. *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003 and *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* as quoted by John Shea, *On Earth As It is in Heaven*, Minnesota: Collegeville Press, 2004.)

Israel's call was to be a light to the nations, to show the world a different and life-giving way, a strange way that deeply honored the dignity of all people, including the poor and the alien and the deaf and the blind and the guilty neighbor.

Jesus pushed that same call deeper: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*, presumably out loud in front of them as they are trying to steal your coat or your dignity.

Our call in baptism is not to piety or perfectionism--and frankly your pastor's real failure is in wasting far too much time with both--but to a deeper, more difficult, but also more intense and interesting and even more fun call to elevate love from a feeling to a decision, to engage the predictable world that God so loves with behavior so refreshingly bizarre that it does not know how to respond.

The sacred weirdness of Jesus may just puzzle and perplex others so much that they have no other choice but to pay attention, like Sheriff Clark in Selma or the perpetrators of apartheid in South Africa so artfully loved by Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela.

This, of course, is a high and harrowing calling--it's really every baby who doesn't scream that means the pastor has failed...failed to teach them what baptism really means.

I don't suspect that Elliott will live up to it anymore than I or the rest of us do.

But God lives up to it.

Every day God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and also on those of us who are both.

God is holy and perfect, different and complete, wondrously and wonderfully weird, and present with us and for us in the Palestinian preacher who not only articulates God's creative love but demonstrates it, speaks it and then shows it.

He is struck on both cheeks, he is stripped naked, he is forced to carry a cross by bullying soldiers, he loves the enemies who crucify him, he prays for those who persecute him, and he does not refuse a one of us who beg from him.

Four hundred sixty-five years and four days ago, Martin Luther's last written words were not about God, but about us: *We are beggars, this is true.*

Two days later, his Father in heaven did not refuse him.

The God who went far more than a second mile for him and for us all in Christ welcomed brother Martin as now God welcomes brother Elliott, and will welcome him again when he has used up all his miles, not because Elliott did it all correctly, but because God is different and complete like that.