

The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 19, 2017
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

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

We have a process for creation of the bulletins we use here on Sunday mornings. On a good week, Sue Farrell comes in early in the week to confirm which readings we'll be using the following week and who's assigned to help. She asks folks to send in announcements.

Judy Warren comes in as a volunteer to do the heavy lifting on Thursday morning. She pulls together the information others have collected or provided: hymn selections at the 10:15 service, names of the people who will read or, in other ways, help lead the worship, announcements, calendar details, and, of course, the text of the readings we hear here.

Then, Jan and I take a look at everything, making tweaks as needed. Nobody's perfect, after all.

Well, that's pretty much how it all worked this week. Except we didn't get bulletins printed before the end of the day on Thursday. I printed one to take home, so I could have it in hand for some sermon prep that evening.

And that's how it happened that I found a mistake. I should allow, I suppose, that it was a minor issue – a formatting detail that nobody else would even have noticed. It would only have bugged me. All the same, I came into the office on Friday morning, just as Jan had printed the first bulletin. She stopped the presses so we could fix the problem. And then, as she printed the corrected bulletins, Jan made a remark, something to the effect of my being a perfectionist.

I didn't take offense; I simply asked her to take a look at the last verse of this morning's gospel:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

It's a high bar, to be as perfect as God. Some of us strive to attain it, but it's really not a healthy aspiration. Nobody's perfect, after all. It's an unrealistic goal for any of us – myself included. Perpetually striving to reach the unreachable is a recipe for exhaustion – emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually. In my better moments ... in my healthier moments ... in my saner moments, I admit as much to myself.

There are a couple of points, then, we should know about this verse. In the first place, "perfect" probably isn't the best word the translators could have chosen for us. The Greek word *telos* literally means "end" or "termination" or "conclusion"; it could be translated as "complete" or "whole" or "mature." It isn't about moral perfection so much as reaching our intended outcome.

Translators who try to capture the meaning invariably need more words to sum up the meaning. The Common English Bible renders it:

Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

Eugene Peterson needs more words still:

In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

That's the first thing to say. "Be perfect" just doesn't cut it.

And then there's this. Jesus isn't addressing any one of us; he's addressing all of us. One of the shortcomings of modern English is the difficulty we have telling the difference between the second person singular and the second person plural – just "little ole you" versus "all y'all"!

But all through our readings this morning, the word "you" is almost always plural. When, for example, St. Paul, in our second reading this morning, admonishes the Corinthians, saying, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" the "you" is always plural. The point is that St. Paul is not encouraging us to take care of our physical bodies by eating properly and getting plenty of rest. He's telling us to make sure that we each take care of that larger corporate body, the Church.

To the extent that there's an individual calling laid upon any of us, it's a calling for us to be part of something bigger than any one of us. We are called to join together, offering mutual support and encouragement to live as God would have us live rather than settle for the smaller lives we would surely settle for otherwise.

And so, the first words of Moses we heard this morning were spoken to the whole congregation of Israel:

Y'all shall be holy, for I the LORD the God of y'all am holy.

The command to be holy is, in other words, to be like God is. The details paint the picture for us. Leave some of the harvest in the fields; it's like leaving money in the offering plate or giving to the poor. Care for the poor and the alien in your land. Tell the truth. Render justice impartially. Reject vengeance. One after another, the detailed points describe a people who are part of something bigger.

Moses challenges them to be the kind of people who reflect a God who cares not just for some – and certainly not just for you and for me – but for one and for all.

Jesus is echoing the same in the final words he speaks to his disciples gathered together there, telling them: “Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

This doesn't mean that Jesus is telling us to become doormats to violent people. To the contrary, although Jesus says not to resist an evildoer, he goes on to outline some creative non-violent responses:

- Pay attention to the details in the choreography of the first response: a soldier dismissively backhands your right cheek, so you turn and offer the other, shifting their line of sight so they have to look at you this time, seeing that you remain unbowed.
- Notice the stage directions of the courtroom scene: someone sues for your shirt, so give them your coat; strip naked and shame them.
- A Roman soldier could compel a subject to carry a burden one mile. (Remember Simon of Cyrene, compelled to carry Jesus' cross by a Roman soldier.) Fine. So walk a second mile, a challenge to their control.

Jesus said, “You have heard it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” Actually, that's not in the Bible; there is no Old Testament law telling us to hate our enemy. But it is in our DNA. Jesus is trying, as one writer put it, to get us out of our “reptilian brain” and into a different mindset (a kingdom of God frame of mine) where we hold that the love of God is in ... and that the love of God is for everyone.

Martin Luther King, Jr. captured the logic of Jesus' teaching when he said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

John Shea writes:

Each injunction presumes that the disciples are waging love in the world. They are waging this love with all the danger, sacrifice, and cost that it takes to wage war. But most of all they are waging love through cleverness.ⁱ

His image of “waging love” in the world put me in mind of the story of Vedran Smajlović. You may not recall the name, but I'm guessing most of us have heard the story of the “Cellist of Sarajevo.” It all took place in war-torn Yugoslavia, as it was then known (before that nation splintered apart into separate countries). Serb nationalists surrounded Sarajevo and laid siege. Life was a daily ordeal of trying to find food and water amid sniper fire and shelling.

On May 27, 1992, a long line of people had queued up at one of the still-functioning bakeries. A mortar shell fell into the middle of the line, killing 22 people and creating a bloody mess of body parts and rubble. Smajlović lived close to the bakery and was appalled by what he saw as he helped the wounded. He felt powerless as he was neither a politician nor a soldier—he was a musician, who could speak truth to the heart beyond any language.

Smajlović took his cello to the spot where those waiting for bread had been butchered and began to plaintively play. He played in a daze but in an incredibly evocative way. In spite of the risk, people gathered to listen. When he was finished he packed up his cello and went to a coffee shop. Quickly people came up to him expressing their appreciation, “This is what we needed.” Smajlović went back the next day and the next 22 days, one for each person killed. Sniper fire continued around him and mortars still rained down in the neighborhood, but Smajlović never stopped playing.ⁱⁱ

It was an act of waging love in a war-torn landscape.

What are we to make of Jesus’ command?

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Well, if it means we should make it our aim to be compulsive and neurotic, not much. I don’t need Jesus to tell me to be more of a perfectionist than I already am inclined to be.

But I probably do need to hear – as, I suspect, you also need to hear – that Jesus sees more in us than we likely see in ourselves, that he sees in us the capacity to “wage love” in the world and hopes we’ll do just that. And so, by the perfect love of God, we might be made whole and complete in loving God and the world, loving our neighbors and friends and our enemies and persecutors ... and more and more learning to accept the love of God for ourselves in the process.

ⁱ John Shea, in *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers, Year C: On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2004), p. 86.

ⁱⁱ Daniel Buttry @ <http://www.readthespirit.com/explore/vedran-smajlovic-celist-of-sarajevo-still-moves-the-world/>.