

Epiphany 7A 2017, Matthew 5:38-48, February 19, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

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

What does it mean to be perfect? A strict dictionary definition offers a couple of insights. One definition is “Free from any flaw or defect in condition or quality; faultless.” Another, “corresponding to an ideal standard “

This past week the 141st Westminster Dog show was broadcast on television. The Best in Show winner was a German Shepherd named “Rumor.” Each dog competing in the show is not really competing against each other, but against a standard, a description of an ideal example of the breed. In other words a “perfect” dog of that particular breed. The ideal description is quite lengthy, covering everything from over-all appearance, to disposition, to the fine qualities of bone shape, eye placement, gait, proportion and dozens of different markers depicting a perfect dog. To take this year’s winner, a German Shepherd, for example, the ideal shepherd is described as “The first impression of a good German Shepherd Dog is that of a strong, agile, well-muscled animal, alert and full of life. It is well balanced, with harmonious development of the forequarter and hindquarter. The dog is longer than tall, deep-bodied, and presents an outline of smooth curves rather than angles.” Dogs are judged in competition against the ideal standard, and points are deducted for any flaw or defect in condition.

Are there other definitions or examples of “perfect.” In baseball we speak of pitchers pitching a “perfect game.” What is a “perfect game?” Major League Baseball defines a perfect game as one lasting a minimum of 9 innings during which no member of the opposing team reaches first base safely. That means no hits, no walks, no hit batsman; in short, 27 batters up, 27 batters out. There have been 21 perfect games in baseball since 1900; the last coming in 2012 when Felix Hernandez pitched a perfect game against the Tampa Bay Rays.

Is that the kind of perfection Jesus has in mind when he says we are to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect? Is perfection of the Christian life measured against an ideal standard, free from any flaws or defects, like being judged at a dog show? Or is it going through life, as a pitcher pitching a perfect game, without any setbacks or defeats?

I suspect that most of us are sometimes dogged, excuse the pun, by the thought that this is indeed what Jesus means when we are to be perfect. After all, doesn’t he set up some mighty high standards by which to live in the verses just preceding this command? “Turn the other cheek when someone strikes you, give both your cloak as well as your coat, go the extra mile when someone forces you to walk one, give to those who beg, lend to those who want to borrow, love your enemies, pray for your persecutors.” Those are high ideals. And I’m not sure if any of us here can pitch that kind of perfect game. Or measure up to that judge scrutinizing our lives according to that standard.

So what do we do? Give up? “Nobody’s perfect,” we say. By which we usually mean ourselves. So we’ll turn our cheek when the initial blow or hurt isn’t very strong. But if it hurts enough we might just lash back. It’s easier to ridicule your enemies, dehumanize them, make

them smaller in your eyes than it is to pray for them. For when we pray for them we acknowledge their God-given humanity and that we share more in common than what divides us. Yes, it's hard to pray for someone who hates you.

When Jesus says, "Be perfect," we hear "Be without flaws, be without defects." But that's not what Jesus is really saying here. He uses this word "perfect" in a different sort of way. The original word Jesus uses can also be translated as "goal" or "destination." The goal of an archer, shooting his arrow, is to hit his target. The goal of a peach tree, growing in an orchard, is to yield peaches. Does it mean that every arrow shot by the archer is going to a bullseye? No, some may not even hit the target. Is every peach on that tree going to be perfect without spot or blemish? There will be some that are bruised and spotted, maybe a worm growing in it.

Something that's perfect means it does what it's supposed to do. A perfect chair is one that doesn't collapse when you sit on it, that's comfortable and supports your seat, has a back on it that keeps your posture erect. But a perfect chair can also be one you sink into with a good book, one in which you take a nap for an hour or two. Does it mean the chair doesn't have a nick or two on it, or the finish might be a little scratch up? I have here two pens. One is a very nice 14 karat gold filled Cross Pen. Comfortable to write with, satisfying to hold in the hand. Here is a Bic pen, probably costs about 15 cents. It also writes clean, smooth lines on paper. Both do what they are supposed to do. Both are perfect in their own way.

So, what is our goal, what is our purpose? Jesus says to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." How do we know our heavenly Father, and the perfection the Father intends for us? The only way we know anything true and real about God is by looking to Jesus, his Son. "If you know me, you know the Father," Jesus says. God creates us in his image, and that image is to be seen in Jesus. In other words, our goal, our purpose, is to be like Jesus. The journey we are on, the destination to which we shall arrive, is to become like Jesus in every way. So, these words, to be perfect, are not so much a command that is continuously and forever out of reach, but rather a promise. A promise by God given to us through Jesus, that we shall be perfect. Our goal is to be perfect. Our destination is to be perfect. Where we shall end up will be the perfect place with the perfect one living in a perfect state.

Does that mean we shall always be perfect in loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile? No, not perfectly. But that's not really the point. It's not our job to bring in the kingdom of God. That's what Jesus does. In his life of love for the enemy, the stranger, the unloved. By praying for those who crucified him, by rising from the grave defeating death. It's our job to live like that kingdom is already starting to break into the world, like we really believe Jesus' love triumphs over hatred, scorn and even death.

What we get to do is practice. We practice each and every day as though the kingdom of God is already here. We get to practice by loving our enemies, turning the cheek. We are becoming what we shall be by God's promise, God's grace; perfect. Amen.