

SEEKING PERFECTION TOGETHER

Leviticus 19:1-2; 9-18

Matthew 5: 38-48

A couple of weeks ago, at a meeting, I was very excited to reconnect with my dear friend and prayer partner Joe. Several months earlier, Joe had asked me to pray specifically for discernment in an important relationship. When I arrived at the first social gathering of the meeting, Joe dashed over to me, grabbed my hand, and pulled me to meet his lady friend, whom he had brought to the meeting. She was delightful and we connected easily. We all enjoyed dinner together. It was obvious that she and Joe love each other very much and hope for a future together. I was thrilled for both of them.

As soon as I got home from the meeting, I sent Joe an e mail note saying, “It was such a joy to meet Valerie; she is truly awesome and also wonderful for you. Thank you for sharing her.” I also received a very quick response, saying how much she loved meeting me and clarifying—“Her name is Vicki, not Valerie” with one of those smiley face icons, so I knew Joe wasn’t terribly offended. I realized I had been multitasking—writing to Joe while thinking about a communication from our mutual friend Chris, who is married to Valerie. “Valerie” just stuck in my head at the wrong moment. I wrote back to Joe explaining all this and he responded, “Alright, alright, already. It really is OK that you aren’t perfect!”

Friends, as human creations, we are far from perfect. We say and do awkward and hurtful things. We don’t say or do loving and caring things when we have the chance. One of the first things we do in worship, as we did today, is confess our brokenness to God. We confess—sure in the knowledge that God forgives us, that God accepts us. The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich wrote an entire sermon titled “You Are Accepted.” He said, “Just accept the fact that you are accepted by a power that is greater than you.” This is indeed wonderful news. It really is OK that we aren’t perfect!

But then we get to today's gospel. Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Huh?! What's up with this? What happened to "You are accepted"? What happened to "It really is OK that you aren't perfect"?

God knows our sin and forgives us anyway. And it is okay not to be flawless. The word "perfect" in today's gospel text doesn't mean "flawless". "Perfect" here means "complete, mature." Jesus is challenging his followers to grow in our faith and our practice. He's inviting us to seek a mature faith, grounded in who God is. To grow into the persons and communities God intends us to be. "As your heavenly father is perfect" doesn't mean that we are to become mini Gods. There is one and only one Lord. As we hear God say over and over in today's reading from Leviticus "I am the Lord."

But by the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives, God conforms us to the image of Christ. God empowers us to love, as God would have us love. In the words of today's Gospel, to turn the other cheek, to give the cloak, to go the second mile, to give and to lend freely, to love our enemies, and to pray for our persecutors.

Yes, God accepts us in our brokenness. And forgiveness is where God meets us. But God doesn't intend that we stay in that place. God means for us to journey forward from where God meets us. God accepts us and forgives us with a purpose—to free us to love God and neighbor as Jesus teaches.

God knows that we bicker, we squabble, we pout, we gossip, we resent, we wound—in our families, in our schools, in our workplaces, and yes, even in our church family. In God's forgiveness, we find the power to love people we can't stand, to be faithful to God and to each other in times of adversity and challenge, and to live out the claims of the Gospel in every aspect of our lives. In God's acceptance, we find the freedom to grow in Christian love and to open ourselves to a mature faith—to seek the perfection God intends for us.

It takes a lot of courage to seek perfection. Fortunately, it isn't something God calls us to do all by ourselves. The stories of Scripture witness to God calling people not one at a time but together. God calls

Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the leaders and all the people of Israel. Jesus calls not one but twelve disciples to follow him. While each person has a special place in God's plan, God's call is to God's people—to seek perfection together. And to find our deepest joy there.

Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church has a long and rich history as a people who have responded to God's call. You are a people who have been seeking perfection together for nearly a century—praise God! I offer special thanks to your own historian members ER Jeter and Addie Stokes Mayfield, whose words I have the privilege to include this morning. Oakland Avenue was founded in 1912-1913, before the “war to end all wars”. The tall and splendid oaks outside that we are all enjoying today were slender saplings then and a car traveling what was then a dirt road was an event.

Fifty years later, at the time of your golden jubilee, E.R. Jeter wrote, “Oakland Avenue has passed through two world wars, to which it sent a goodly number of its sons and daughters. Some of them paid the last full measure of devotion, and still rest in hallowed foreign soil. It has passed through a period of intense financial depression, when the acute need to husband every dollar only served to draw the ranks closer together.”

For your diamond jubilee, Addie Stokes Mayfield wrote, “Oakland confidently assumed the responsibilities which arose in the turbulent decade of the 1960's. The tumult which followed the Supreme Court's 1954 decision calling for the integration of the public schools spilled over into the churches...the Session approved the policy that all who came to worship at Oakland would be seated wherever seating was available.” In enacting that policy, you turned the other cheek. You responded to the violence around you by opening yourselves in quiet dignity to brothers and sisters, rather than perpetuating racial humiliation and insults. In the South of the 1960's, that was far from easy. Turning the other cheek, responding to violence and insults and humiliation with the gentle dignity of Jesus, was and is a difficult and wonderfully faithful response to God's call to reconciliation.

Fast forward to the present. Today, you give the cloak by supporting A Place of Hope, the Dorothy Day Soup Kitchen, the Alternative Gift Fair, and many other ministries. You go the second mile through the Adopt-a

-Doc ministry. You give freely in the Crop Walk. Some of you have family members who have served or are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and we join you in praying for their health and safety. My husband and I are veterans. A couple of days ago, Rock Hill dedicated a new Veterans Memorial. This week, Veterans Day is a special reminder to us, to be grateful for the men and women who put their lives on the line for the rest of us. May we pray for them and care for them and remember them every day. Veterans Day reminds us; too, though to love our enemies and pray for persecutors, that God may be at work in their lives in ways that move us beyond war. I paraphrase the Veterans Day prayer from the late John Paul II: O Lord, may we pray for our soldiers when they cannot pray and for our enemies for whom we would not pray. We ask for an end to all wars and the dawning of a new era of peace as a way to honor all of our veterans. Give us all the creative vision to see a world which, grown weary with fighting, moves to affirming the life of every human being and so moves beyond war. Hear our prayer, O Prince of Peace.”

Brothers and sisters, seeking perfection together is both extraordinarily hard work and incredibly deep joy. It’s a journey that doesn’t end. It requires creative vision, deep passion, solid commitment, a strong heart, and often a sense of humor. As you move toward your centennial celebration, Oakland Avenue has called as its pastor Jim Simpson, and I can tell you he embodies all of those things. I have had the great privilege of serving with Jim for many years and the honor of being Jim’s friend. Jim and I have walked many steps of our vocational journey together. We’ve celebrated one another’s gifts. We’ve been one another’s refining fire. Not all that long ago, Jim was serving as Director of Church Relations at Presbyterian College. In many ways, at Presbyterian College Jim was at the top of his game—traveling, planning events, doing public speaking, engaging energetic and inquisitive students, and building and nurturing relationships. But as so often happens, just when we think we have settled in, the Spirit starts to move. Jim felt his pastor’s heart stirring and discerned that God’s plan was to use Jim’s gifts, once again, in leading a richly faithful and deeply committed congregation. And God has led Jim and Oakland Avenue to one another.

God has joined Jim's gifts and Oakland Avenue's gifts now. God has woven Jim's story and Oakland Avenue's story into one story now. In a few minutes, you will yoke yourselves together in covenant to journey as one people. One people whom God meets in forgiveness. One people who find in God the power to love people you can't stand. One people faithful to God and to each other in terms of adversity and challenge. One people who live out the claims of the Gospel in every aspect of your lives. One people who turn the other cheek. Give the cloak, go the second mile, give and lend freely, love your enemies, and pray for your persecutors. One people growing in faith and practice. One people seeking a mature faith, grounded in who God is. One people continuing to grow into the persons and community God intends you to be. One people seeking perfection together. By the power of the Spirit, may your journey be more deeply joyful than you ever imagined Amen.