

**"Going on to Perfection"**  
**Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**February 20, 2011**  
**Text: Matthew 5:38-48**  
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We tend to think there is simply no way that any of us could ever be perfect. Once in a worship service, the minister was seeking to make the point that only Jesus himself was perfect by asking the congregation, "Have you ever known or heard of anyone who was perfect?" After a long silence, one elderly gentleman at the rear of the sanctuary raised his hand. "Preacher," he said. "I know someone who was perfect . . . my wife's first husband. Apparently he could do no wrong."

Despite our doubts about being or becoming perfect, in United Methodist faith and practice, it is believed that Christian perfection is a legitimate goal for all of us. For example, the following questions are asked by the Bishop to each person who is about to be ordained as a deacon or an elder in the United Methodist Church. These questions are historic and foundational to the ministry of our church, because they have been asked of every candidate for ordination since the time of John Wesley.

There are nineteen questions in all (Wesley always was thorough), but the first four are these: "Have you faith in Christ? Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Are you earnestly striving after it?"

Wesley held to the notion of Christian perfection, that is to say, the idea that if we will yield ourselves completely to the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit, *we can be made perfect in love*. In other words, if we will give ourselves over fully to God's will, we can become as perfectly loving in *our* lives as Jesus was in his.

Our passage of scripture for this morning from Matthew's Gospel ends with the clear command from Jesus: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." As Christians, followers of Jesus, we are expected to become godly, which means to become perfect. That's a tall order to be sure, and we need to be reminded of just how high the bar has been set for us in terms of our conduct, especially how we are to relate to other people in love. Jesus describes in this passage exactly how radical perfect love is. Let me spell out for you the nature and character of such love as set forth here, so we can be confronted with how far we need to grow in our faith in order to measure up to what it means to love perfectly.

**To be perfect in love means to refuse to retaliate.** Notice that Jesus assumes there are evildoers in the world and that because

that is true, there is a really good chance that at least at some time in our lives, we are going to get hit in the face. In Old Testament law, retaliation was allowed as long as it was a fair and measured response. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" meant that the person retaliating could not take more from his abuser than what the abuser had taken from the person being abused. If someone poked out your eye, you couldn't take from that person a lung or a kidney. That certainly seems fair. It was a way of limiting retaliation to an acceptable and appropriate level.

But *that is not perfect love*. Perfect love means no retaliation at all, no matter how much we have been wronged or hurt. This response to being attacked or abused is radical enough on the interpersonal level, but imagine how radical it is on the international level. Fred Craddock, one of my teachers of preaching in seminary, was once a part of a symposium on this subject at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. When former President Jimmy Carter heard about the event, he called Craddock and asked him about the meaning of "turning the other cheek" as a country when we are dealing with such things as a hostage crisis or a terrorist attack. It's a provocative and problematic question, and I certainly don't have the answer to it. But as Christians who claim to want to obey even Jesus' hardest

sayings, we need to be examining our relationships at every level by the standards Christ has established for us.

**To be perfect in love means to be extravagantly generous.** Jesus goes on to say that if someone wants to take a coat from us by means of a law suit, we should hand over our cloak as well. In other words, no matter in what manner someone wants something of ours, we should be willing to give to that person even more than they seek to take from us. And we should never pass on the opportunity to give or to loan to someone in need.

One of my favorite scenes from the movie, *Les Miserable*, takes place when Jean Valjean is graciously offered by a local bishop the hospitality of his home for a meal and a good night's sleep. Valjean repays the bishop's kindness by stealing his host's silver utensils. Valjean is caught and brought back to the bishop, at which time the priest claims that he had presented the silver to Valjean as a gift and goes on to chastise the released convict for forgetting to take the silver candleholders, worth much more than the utensils alone. That is the kind of abundant generosity Jesus is pointing to as being characteristic of perfect love. That is what it means to go the extra mile in terms of our extravagantly generous giving to others.

**To be perfect in love means to love those who not only are hard to love but who are practically impossible to love.** Let's face

it: not everyone is easy to love. All of you are extremely easy to love of course, but that is not true for everybody. What makes some people hard to love? Let me count the ways. Some people are insecure, and they act out on the fact that they don't feel good about themselves by doing any number of inappropriate, offensive, and even abusive things. So for example, some people are bullies. Some people feel the constant need to put down other people in order to make themselves feel better.

Some people are two-faced and can't be trusted. Some people have power and control issues. Some people have to be right all the time and never can admit when they have made a mistake. Some people can't let go of things and therefore can't be forgiving. Some people violate other people's boundaries on a regular basis. Some people are simply mean-spirited. Some people are know-it-alls. Some people are condescending. Some people are rude or crude. Some people are judgmental. Some people are insensitive, prejudiced, or intolerant.

Some people are narrow-minded or even closed-minded. Some people are negative nearly all the time. Some people have anger issues. Some people have holier-than-thou attitudes. Some people are just obnoxious or arrogant. Some people are totally wrapped up in themselves and are narcissistic. Some people don't have a clue as to the whole concept of appropriateness.

It seems that the longer you live the more opportunities you have to come in contact with all of these people at one time or another. There are lots of characteristics people can exhibit that make it a challenge to love them. But *love them we must*. That's what Jesus commands. And not only that, we are to go even further and love our enemies. Now that's a stretch. This is where Jesus sets the bar so high we are tempted to give up and not even attempt to love as he expects us to. But I want to offer a rather modest proposal as to how we might at least begin to love our enemies as Jesus has taught.

Immediately following the tragedy of 9-11, several of my fellow United Methodist ministers and myself began asking the same questions with regard to those persons involved in the terrible terrorist attack: "Who are these people and why do they hate us so much?" We discovered that we were woefully ignorant in this regard. We had to admit we didn't know the first thing about Islam, even though we had studied religion for years. We were clueless about Muslim militant extremism and what a *jihad* might be. Many of us had never heard of al-Qaeda.

And so we began to seek answers. We went looking for experts on Muslim faith and practice. We tried to learn at least a little about the culture and lifestyles of predominately Islamic nations. We sought to know more about the history of America's past relations with the

terrorists who planned and executed the attacks on 9-11. As Dr. Phil says, "No matter how flat the pancake is, it still has two sides." And so we ministers began to try to understand the other side, that is to say, what had caused those persons who apparently had at one time considered us their allies to now treat us as hated enemies. It is important, extremely important, to keep in mind that Jesus is not asking us to do whatever it takes to be loved *by* our enemies, only that *we* should love them, whether or not they ever return that love to us.

At every level of our relationships, attempting to understand those who have attacked us or abused us or hurt us in some way can go a long way toward helping us to begin to love them. Whether it is an enemy of the state or a relative of ours or a member of the church, love begins with understanding, and understanding begins with knowledge. But please hear this: *loving our enemies, no matter who they are, never excuses their actions in seeking to bring harm to us.* In the words of the theologian Huey Lewis, "Sometimes bad is bad." There is simply no rationalizing or justifying bad, evil, sinful actions. But when we understand what may have led the individual or the group or the nation to act in such destructive ways, we can leave room for love, and I think that is what Jesus is asking us to do.

To love perfectly is an extremely hard thing to do, in fact it is impossible to do all by ourselves. However, with the power of the Holy

Spirit working within us, we can get close at least. Nothing is impossible with God, and the more we let God help us to love in this way, the nearer we will come to perfect love.

That is why I appreciate so much the questions that are asked to candidates for ordination in our church. We are asked if we expect to be made perfect in love in this life and if we earnestly are striving after it. Do you hear what is really being asked? We are asked to strive, to pursue, to seek, to work toward, to make a priority and a goal to become perfect in love. It's not easy for sure, but as followers of Jesus, we are to make it our aim and be purpose-driven to achieve Christian perfection by the will of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. That is all we can do, so let us never fail to try or quit making the effort.