

Pastor Roy's sermon from February 23, 2014

Children's sermon: Friends, neighbors, sharing.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. How are we supposed to be perfect? What does it mean that God is perfect? The word perfect conjures up different things to different people. The meaning of perfect we assign to God probably says as much about us, as it says about God.

Who can know what it means that God is perfect? If we're honest, as we live our lives, from time to time, we'd like to give God advice because our reality in which God acts falls short of perfect. Loved ones and infants die. Ruthless dictators commit acts of violence. CEOs make decisions which are best for the shareholders and trample the needs of employees. There are extended droughts. Terrible storms. Crop failure. We and others we love get sick.

But Jesus says God is perfect, and we agree—we feel it in our bones even if sometimes we don't feel it in our hearts. The people of Jesus' day living under Roman rule had as many questions about God being perfect as the people of Syria, or Ukraine, Central African nations or North Korea today. Victims of domestic violence, child abuse, those who feel trapped by their own poverty or disability—they must wonder too. There are no easy answers for any of us. We pray to understand, to accept how it all fits together in God's mercy.

Beyond God's perfect nature, Jesus calls *us* to be perfect. How do we even imagine or conceive of our own perfection?

How about this? Perhaps when Jesus is talking about God's perfection, he is relating to the way God showers blessing on all people equally—that God is perfect in love. I like the New English Bible and especially the New Jerusalem Bible who translate and paraphrase verse 48 as “you must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none to his.” That is how they define what it means to be perfect. To not limit one's love. To bestow it and share it freely, responsibly, with kindness, and mercy.

So how can we love without preferring some and rejecting others because of what we think about them and how they treat us?

How can I love when I am weary, and disappointed, and wounded, and grieving? How can I have the strength to be the one to hit the relationship reset button as Jesus calls me and you to do? Siblings, spouse, long lost friend, neighbor who is different from me and has different priorities and values?

We ask these questions and we hear Jesus saying, don't limit your love to the people you like. Don't limit your love to the people who treat you well. There is no freedom in that. It's not even true love or mercy. That love will shrink down to nothing given the challenges of life. Jesus knew that we and our ability to love have to be stretched. The only love that is real is self-less love. The only way we can love selflessly is to love the people who don't deserve it.

True love is to love those who from the start, rub us the wrong way. True love is to love those whom we come to realize aren't as perfect as we thought they were. That is, pretty much everyone we meet. How can I act with love toward this person whom I am afraid might take advantage of me. It's so much easier to either walk away, or to treat them as they treat me.

Maybe Paul can help us here. Paul speaks of our bodies are the house of God—a temple. God dwells in us. Nobody earns temple status. We simply *are temples*. It comes with the territory of being

created in the image of God. Some believe only the baptized are temples of God. But clearly God loves and dwells within all of creation.

Including our enemies, the ones who rub us the wrong way, the ones who take advantage of us, the ones who seem to only care about themselves. We assign values of good and bad, worthwhile and worthless, friend and foe, all based on what's in it for us. We judge from our own standpoint.

Jesus and Paul and Moses in the Hebrew Bible proclaim a holy vantage point. The vantage point of God, the perfect One. The One who makes no mistakes, who never accidentally loves the wrong person—who never holds back from love and mercy. Jesus is calling us to let go of the judgment and love freely.

This is why we baptize babies. This is why Jesus embraces the world from the throne of his cross, as unpleasant as it was. No one is left out. None is left behind, though we instinctively feel that we and others might be left behind—Jesus and Paul and Leviticus remind us that everyone has value, everyone is worth loving, and the sooner we jump on board this train of mercy, the happier and better and more free we will be. Life and relationships will fill us with peace and joy because we are learning to freely show mercy in love.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is saying, “Welcome to the real world. The world of a Creator's mercy. A world of peace. A realm which never comes from picking and choosing favorites or carefully doling out grace and love to those who deserve it. Welcome to the reign of God, the Kingdom of God.” It is a good life which no one can steal away from us as we practice it. The Gospel today is that we *can* courageously and faithfully live with kindness and freedom, and we do so together.

Thanks be to God.