

February 23, 2014 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

Perfect: Being Who We Truly Are

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

Matthew 5:38-48

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

The readings and sermon for today seem to complete something that began three weeks ago. The lectionary has led us into the subject of the laws and commandments, our relationship to them and what they mean to our lives. In Deuteronomy, Moses gave final instructions to the people of Israel before they crossed the Jordan River into the land of the promise. As long as they chose and followed the precepts and commandments of God, their life in the land would be full and rich. We have been moving through the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes, which are not what we think of as laws, but ways to live that bring blessing, or true happiness. Then Jesus' other teachings. Killing another human being is prohibited, and we are not even to harbor anger or hate toward, or speak disparagingly of others. We are to reject the "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" way of living, the way of retribution or "getting even". We are to love those we consider enemies, and pray for their well-being. Our love is to fall upon everyone, just like God's rain and sun are freely given to all--the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous. Then Jesus says, at the end of today's portion, that we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

How do we approach these things without falling into legalism, making the life of faith a dreary matter of obeying rules? How do we take seriously the commandments, precepts, and teachings that are essential to our spiritual tradition without being discouraged or despairing when they seem so difficult to fulfill? How do we hear God's words to the people of Israel to be holy as God is holy, or Jesus' words to his followers that they are to be perfect as God is perfect, in a way that gives rise to joy instead of heaviness or discouragement?

I believe that it begins with rediscovering and reaffirming that our true nature is not original sin, but **original goodness** (Gen. 1:27-31). Two weeks ago we heard Jesus' teaching that we are the light of the world, the salt of the earth. That is who we truly, essentially are. This is a major shift in thinking and self-understanding for most people whose lives have been affected by the church. The dominant message for centuries has been that we are originally sinful and need to be made into something we are not, that is, worthy before God. Jesus did not believe that. The Bible as a whole does not lend itself to such a view, though it takes sin very seriously.

The commandments, ordinances, precepts of God, the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and other places--these are not external expectations that we have to "live up to" in order to become something we are not. They are ways of living that correspond to our truest nature. We CAN do them because they are the expression of who we really are, though we may have wandered far away from them. The law, in Israel's view, was a gift from God, not some harsh, unattainable imposition. Psalm 119, a portion of which we read this morning, is a long celebration of the law: *Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it* (v.35). Jesus' teachings were not laws laid down for those who didn't have it in them to live by them. *My yoke is easy, says Jesus, my burden is light* (Matt. 11:28-30).

In the reading from Leviticus, God says to the people through Moses, *Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy*. We are created in God's image, according to the first creation story in Genesis 1. We have it in us to be a reflection and expression of God. Paul writes to the Christian community at Corinth that their bodies are temples of God. The word Paul uses (*soma*) means not just our physical bodies but our whole lives—body, soul, spirit, mind, actions, relationships...everything about us. Paul was writing to a community, and so he also meant that the community of Jesus was the dwelling place, the temple of God. The whole of our lives is the sacred dwelling of God. That is our true nature. The problem was, in Paul's view, that the folks in the Corinthian community weren't acting like themselves. They had forgotten who they really and truly were. And, to me, that is a good definition of sin—forgetting who we truly are and acting out of that forgetfulness in ways that are hurtful to others, to the creation, to ourselves.

Jesus instructs his disciples: *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

That verse used to make me edgy! It felt heavy, burdensome. Growing up, I had many experiences of others expecting things of me, the fear of not measuring up, and the terrible guilt of failing to live up to what was expected. An athlete. A scholar. A boy who was polite and nice all the time. So on and so on. We have all experienced this in one way or another. It is living from the outside in, looking to external expectations and demands, and measuring ourselves against them. So the idea of Jesus telling us we have to be perfect like God is perfect can feel dismally heavy.

Then I learned a new meaning of “perfect”. The Greek word (*teleios*) used here, and in other such contexts, doesn't mean “perfect” the way we commonly think of it. It doesn't mean never making mistakes, or measuring up to someone's expectations, or having and maintaining a clean moral record in every respect. It doesn't mean that when we fail in some way, we are scratched off the list of worthy human beings. The word means “complete”, “fulfilled”, “whole”, or “mature.” In other words, it has to do with something that we already are, but has been forgotten or covered, unfulfilled or not completely formed. So when Jesus teaches that we are to not only refrain from killing another human being but also from hate or speaking in demeaning ways, or that we are to reject the practice of “getting even” with others for what they do to us, these are things that have to do with our true nature. When Jesus says we are not at liberty to love our neighbor, those near to us or like us, while hating our enemies, but are to love and pray for the well-being of those we consider enemies, he assumes that we can do this because it has to do with who we really are. We are not born to hate, to discriminate, to seek revenge, to make judgments and distinctions. We are born to love, to be like God's rain and sun, falling and shining upon every one of God's children. Our grace, our loving regard needs to be toward all people, and not selectively parceled out only to those we judge as worthy or who act the way we think they should. This is being perfect as God is perfect.

When God tells Moses to tell the people of Israel to be holy like their God is holy, when Paul tells the Christians in Corinth that they are the temples, the dwellings of God, when Jesus says to his disciples, the crowds, and us that we are to be perfect as God is perfect, we are hearing the core message of scripture: **we are created good, holy, loving, and are continually called to be, to live according to, who we really are.** How different this is from how most of us view ourselves and others! Our self-understanding and self-view have been shaped by the idea that we must become something we are not. We are deficient somehow,

and our task is to overcome our deficiencies. We lack something essential, and we must spend our lives looking outside of ourselves for the things we lack—intelligence, wisdom, acceptance, love, whatever. Don't look here and there and everywhere for the kingdom of God, Jesus taught. It is within [or near, at hand] you (Luke 17:21).

It makes all the difference in the world when we begin to see ourselves as essentially and originally good, created in the image of God, made to reflect and express the sacredness that is at the heart of the universe. It makes a difference when we see ourselves, our whole lives and our life together, as the temple, the dwelling place of God. It makes a difference as we hear Jesus' call to be perfect as God is perfect--complete, whole, fulfilled, mature. We begin to see that the laws, commandments, precepts, teachings that are part of our tradition are gifts and blessings that correspond to our truest nature. Along with the psalmist, we can delight in them! And when we hear Jesus teaching that one commandment fulfills them all, it makes perfect sense: *You shall love the Lord your God with your whole being, and your neighbor as yourself*. In working with these things, we are on the path of life that is true and good and real because it is the way we are made and meant to be and to live. It is not easy. It takes daily attention. It takes becoming aware of all the things in us—habits of thinking and acting, layers of distractions we have taken on, knots of guilt or fear or anxiousness we need to patiently unravel, and so forth. It needs our opening to God's presence and love and spirit each day, drawing from the source of our life. It takes a life of discipleship, looking and listening to Jesus, the “pioneer and perfecter” of our faith (*The Letter to the Hebrews*).

This is why the Church of the Covenant came into being, to be a community of those who commit themselves to the “perfection” of their lives--to remembering, becoming, and fulfilling who we really and truly are. And it is why we recognize that working with some simple, time-honored spiritual practices or disciplines provides the framework we need for our true selves to become perfect, fulfilled, or we might say, to fully blossom.

I want to leave us with this message today: You are perfect. We are perfect. The light of the world, the salt of the earth, the image of God, the temple of God's presence. Our spiritual life, our spiritual work is to become who we already are.