

7th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A: 20 February 2011

“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Most of us are familiar with this verse;
many of us may use it regularly as a personal goad.
Conventionally it is given a broad spectrum of interpretation,
from “Make yourself into a perfect being,” to
“Get your act together; stop being imperfect.”
It’s a nice idea (maybe) but it’s not very realistic.
After all, God is, well, God, and we—
even while made in the image of God to be co-creators with God—
still, we are only human.

So if Jesus said this, what does it mean for us?
How can we approach this verse in a healthy, life-affirming way
instead of a negative, shaming, “I-can-never-measure-up” way?
Well first of all, we need to understand
that it was never intended to mean moral perfection.
No one is without flaw or can claim that, anyway.
What is at issue is something else entirely.

The Greek word here translated as “perfection” is *teleios*, from *telos* or “destiny”.
Teleios has something to do with reaching or completing our destiny.
Used of persons it means “full grown, mature”.
A better translation, therefore, would be “completion” or “complete”.
Thus the verse might read, “Become complete (or reach completion)
as your heavenly Father (your divine Source) is complete.”
In his New Testament paraphrase, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders it like this:
“In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up...Live out your God-created identity.
Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

Imagine a piece of fruit growing on a tree.
A peach that is not ripe is not complete, not having reached its full intended potential.
And when it does reach completion it may not be flawless,
having been pecked by a bird or scratched by a near-by branch.
It is not perfect, but it is still complete: plump and juicy, it has fulfilled its destiny.

This, then, is the goal: to fulfill our destiny.
This is what it means to reach completion or full maturity.
As Paul says, our mission in life is to come to the measure of the full stature of Christ.
God is a complete being, in whom nothing is missing.
If we are meant to be like God, then this means
that we too are to become completed beings,
having reached the destiny for which we were created.
Like the peach, we are meant to be ripe, plump and juicy.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

So what is a complete human being?
Scripture gives us lots of direction;
so do the spiritual traditions of Christianity and other world religions.
Basically a ripe human being possesses certain inner qualities.
With fruit one can tell ripe from unripe by its taste.
What has changed about the fruit is not only its exterior color,
but its inner sugar content.
In a ripe piece of fruit the sugar content is higher,
and other flavors have developed as well.

What about with human beings?
What are the qualities that contribute to “full flavor” here?
In the Hebrew Scriptures the prophet Micah names three:
do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God.
Jesus boils it down to two, saying that to love God and love one’s neighbor
is to fulfill all the Law and the prophets.
For more specific lists, we have to turn to Paul.
In one place he gives three qualities of completion: faith, hope, and love.
In another he highlights goodness, righteousness, and truth.
And in Galatians he gives the fruits of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, faith, long-suffering,
gentleness, goodness, meekness, temperance.
So in our Judeo-Christian tradition we find human “ripeness,” maturity or completion,
gauged by how well or fully a person displays these qualities.

We may never reach this perfection on this side of the veil,
but we are called to try...with God’s help.
It is a lifelong process for us,
just as the peach continues to ripen until it falls from the branch.
Unlike the peach, however, which begins to decay and ultimately rot,
our maturity or completion is not a static state.
We continue maturing into and within God even after our physical death.
Union with God is the destiny for which we were created.

This passage comes in the exact middle
of Matthew’s version of the sermon on the mount,
that long teaching crammed with tidbits of advice
about what it means to live as God expects us to live.
I believe this positioning is no accident,
And that the saying holds valuable lessons for self-care,
and for the interface of our inner life and health
and the person we are in the world/as well as in the Church.

So I submit the following for your consideration:

- You cannot be complete/whole trying to be someone else. Who are you and what is the fullness of your maturity, as the unique child of God you were created to be? First *be* authentically, then you can *do* authentically.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

- You cannot be complete/whole if you're not paying attention to the process of your own maturation. (If you don't have a spiritual director, get one! If you're not living a rule of life or following an articulated vision, work on it!)
- You cannot be complete/whole if you cannot self-differentiate, if you cannot tell where another ends and you begin or if you cannot separate criticism from your inner sense of self. I call this the principle of being engaged but detached.
- You cannot be complete/whole if you are a slave to the gods/idols of this world. To follow Christ is always to be an alien in the predominant culture.
- You cannot be complete/whole if you try to go it alone. We need God, we need community. To me this means we need a prayer life/practice, and we need others as both support and correction.

(These suggestions are as valid for a church community as for an individual by the way. Perhaps they might be worth applying in this discovery period.)

Never forget:

Yours is a sacred design, a sacred destiny.

You were born to fulfill it, born to complete it.

Blossom. Ripen. Be juicy and fruitful.

There is your wholeness, your perfection.

Now go and do.

This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.