



Don't Try to be Perfect, Try Loving Everyone the Same

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

– Matthew 5:43-48

Trying to be perfect is one of the greatest sources of unhappiness in life; the perfect is always the enemy of the good. I first learned that hard lesson in encounters with two of my early teachers. My third grade teacher tried any and every way she could to get me to pass my “Palmer Penmanship” handwriting test. That was Sister Saint Helena of the Cross, who loomed in my eight-year-old life as far more of a cross than a saint! She was leaning so hard on me to get my “Quick brown fox to jump” *perfectly legibly* “over the lazy dog,” that in the end, my parents had to intervene. She then grudgingly backed off somewhat, but I still had a feeling of being a failure, a notion Sister Saint Helena [my] Cross did little to dispel. To this day, my ‘fine motor skills’ remain pretty gross!

Four years later my seventh grade teacher, Sister Mary Frances called me up to her desk one afternoon to discuss the penmanship paper I’d just handed in. As I walked up I thought, “Oh, boy, here we go again!” Sister Mary Frances glanced at that paper and then asked, “Edward is this the *best* you can do?” “I’m afraid it is, Sister,” I replied, expecting to be berated for my honesty. “Well, O.K.,” she said. “It’s your handwriting, and that’s what we’ll send to the examiners. But you know, Edward, a lot of very talented people have lousy handwriting. Look at medical doctors – they’re famous for it!” I looked at her for a moment, and then said, “Thanks – thank you, Sister.” I walked back to my desk feeling grateful that I didn’t have to always be perfect.

Not always – at least I had learned that much. But I would still strive for perfection whenever and wherever I thought I might be able to achieve it. That’s what gets a lot of people like me into a whole lot of trouble. Trying to be perfect makes you less and less sure of yourself because it’s a goal you can’t possibly attain. It makes you critical, too

– of yourself, and of others. You’re always comparing yourself to somebody else and that makes you endlessly competitive. Whatever you achieve only feeds your grandiosity, but you’re really only a rat in a rat race, driven by a fear of losing and never quite winning because there’s always someone who’s out to top you and who’s better at it than you. All the striving only insures that you’ll be lonely, because ‘perfection’ is very hard to live with. The perfectionist becomes demanding, relentless, unforgiving. Who can abide such a trying partner or friend or family member?

At some point, if you’re lucky, you make up your mind, that trying to live as if you could possibly be perfect in life is a very bad idea. And then you [come to church and] hear the emphatic command of Jesus thundering from the mount: *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* (Mt. 5:48) And you think, “Good Lord, what hope is there for any Christian if Christ himself demands that we all be perfect?!”

Well, there is a disconnect here, and it lies in the difference between what we think of perfection and what Jesus means when he tells us that we must be perfect. Our idea of perfection comes from the idealism of ancient Greece where being perfect came to mean not having a single flaw, never being wrong, never making a mistake. We are also heirs to a moralistic theological tradition so that being perfect comes to mean being sinless, being morally unblemished, being pure as the driven snow. So when we project our notion of perfection onto what Jesus is telling us to do here, the text doesn’t make any sense. It seems like Jesus is demanding the impossible – expecting a perfection that only God could accomplish!

But that’s not at all what Jesus meant; when he tells us to be perfect, he’s not demanding that we be faultless or sinless. Instead, he’s telling

us to be τέλειος, in biblical Greek, which means being wholly and completely the same, in all circumstances. To be 'perfect' as Jesus understands perfect is to love others like God loves us. God's love for us is τέλειος, whole and complete. It's not divided up, given to some and not to others. God's blessings of sun and rain are given to all, to the evil as well as to the good. So Jesus urges us to love everyone with the same unrestricted love that is τέλειος, total and whole, and 'perfect.' to have the same love for everyone, whether they are our friends or our enemies.

By contrast, we like to make distinctions in who we love, depending on how much we think they might deserve our regard. Can you imagine God taking that same attitude toward us? God loves us with an overwhelming, never-wavering love, whether we're acting like an angel or screwing up like a fool! This love we've learned from God is unconditional love, a love we must show to everyone, friend and foe, alike. We don't have to love our enemies' hurtful, wounding ways, but we do have to love the enemy, just as God loves them.

And not only to love them, but also to pray for them, for what is praying for someone but loving them before God — asking that God's guidance and wisdom and strength be with them. That is why we pray for our governmental leaders every Sunday in our worship, whether we agree with their leadership or not. Indeed, Jesus exhorts us to pray for them, *especially if we disagree with them*, just as we pray for those we find lovable. For Jesus, being perfect like God means not having a double standard, not being loving in one instance and withdrawing your love in another.

Practicing this kind of 'perfect loving' involves finding the complicated answer to a deceptively simple question: how do you differ and

disagree, yet still love each other? That's the million-dollar question for a nation that's politically polarized, for a marriage that's facing hard issues, or for a congregation that has recently split apart. Is Jesus calling us here at St. Brendan's to address the challenge: "how do we differ and disagree, yet still love each other?" Until we figure that out as a community, we'll constantly be revisiting old pains and heartaches.

Sometimes when people ask me where I'm serving, I'll tell them and their response might be something like, "Oh, you're at St. Brendan's — they've had their problems, haven't they? And I always answer, "Yes, but they also have great potential for the future!" What I hope is that someday soon we'll all be able to say, "Oh, St. Brendan's: we're the church that's chosen to love — everyone can count on being loved here, no exceptions!"

Loving one another with unconditional love doesn't mean not caring what others might say or do. "To love without condition does not mean to love without concern," as Henri Nouwen put it (*Bread for the Journey*, Harper San Francisco, 1979, Feb. 5.). Loving a bully, for example, doesn't mean sitting back and letting him manipulate the church for his own purposes. Loving an emotionally needy personality doesn't mean holding back and letting them ride roughshod over the feelings of others. Loving an acerbic personality doesn't mean standing aside and letting her hurtful ways undermine the spiritual wellbeing of all.

We're not talking about a romantic love here, we're talking about a *responsible* love, a love that is willing to take responsibility for one's own actions and for the well-being of the community as a whole. Sometimes that might mean just keeping quiet, but sometimes it means speaking up in as loving manner as possible. Sometimes it means taking someone

aside and having a heart to heart with them. Sometimes it might require going in two's and three's, to try to work things through.

Shall we here St. Brendan's do all that we can to love each other with that same 'perfect,' no-matter-what, no-matter-who love we are blessed with by God? Shall we always lead with love here, a responsible love that sees our unity in Christ as far more precious than than anything else? And, when the inevitable differences do arise, will we talk things through, not just with *some* of our fellow parishioners but with whoever it is we need to have that conversation with the most? Indeed, shall we become known for offering each other, no matter what our differences, that 'perfect' love that mirrors God's unconditional, wholehearted, never-ending love for each and for all of us?

Shall we?

Amen.

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