



*I invite you, therefore, in the name of the church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.* Book of Common Prayer, page 265

*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* Matthew 5:48 (NRSV)

Lent makes me nervous. And, of course, the whole trouble comes from Jesus using the phrase, “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” But my fear of not being perfectly up to the task changed after I read an interesting article in Christian Century by Kathleen Norris about this troublesome word “perfect.”

*“The good news about the word “perfect” as used in the New Testament is that it is not a scary word so much as a scary translation. The word that has been translated as “perfect” does not mean to set forth an impossible goal, or the perfectionism that would have me strive for it any cost. It is taken from a Greek word meaning to complete: entire, full-grown. To those who originally heard it, the word would convey “mature” rather than what we mean today by perfect.”*

Norris points out that in this sense, Jesus calls us to make room in our lives for growth. To seek a life of closeness with God that will result in each of us growing closer to being the type of spiritually mature person that does God’s will not out of the pursuit of perfection but out of joy. In this sense, Lent should invite us to become the kind of “perfect” people that are mature enough to offer ourselves to others and to lose the self-focus so symptomatic of our society today.

Now I don’t want to ruin your plans to lose twenty pounds but as we make our way through Lent, let me suggest that we throw out the image of *Martha Stewart* type perfection. Instead let’s use these forty days to see ourselves engaged in a struggle to grow, to mature and to bring ourselves to the type of completion that honors the divine image that God has created. This might not be as flashy as giving up dessert but I feel it has much more potential for enriching our lives and the lives of others within our St. James’s community.