

Holy and Perfect

The Rev'd Andrew Van Kirk

February 19, 2017 (Epiphany 7, Year A [Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48])

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

In our gospel reading, Jesus ends what has been a long section of difficult teaching (we've read it over several weeks) with what just might be the hardest instruction of all...the summary statement just "be perfect." And it doesn't help that to explain, Jesus says, "Just be like God." Which is a really, really, really high standard. What is Jesus up to here? How are we to be perfectionists in God's kingdom? What are we to do with "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."¹

I had an unforgettable encounter with perfection as a middle schooler. I participated in this program in which seventh graders took the SAT and then had the opportunity to go to what's probably best described as summer camp for nerds — it was on a college campus and one lived in a dorm and spent six hours a day in what was billed as a college-level class. I studied game theory and public persuasion, and I felt very grown up.

My first summer I roomed just three doors down from the first seventh grader to score a perfect score on the SAT. This was back when 1600 was a perfect score; and this kid — whose name I have lost, but whose face I can still see clearly — he had done it. A 1600. Perfection.

And friends: perfection was a little strange. I guess realistically, all of us there were probably a little strange — we had voluntarily chosen (and convinced our parents to spend a lot of money) on super-summer school. But this kid was just a little extra-weird; kind certainly, and very bright, but also a awkward and aloof.

Perfection is a little strange. In hindsight, I wonder if we didn't make him a little strange, by treating him differently. In a world full of bright kids, it was the one with the perfect score who was treated differently. And this is because perfection is not just strange, it is also elusive; we'd all tried — and not gotten there.

Are we as Christians to be perfectionists? Are we to spend our lives obsessing over whether we're going to get a perfect score on our spiritual SAT? Perfectionists — those of you who tend in this direction know this, and those of you that don't have met us — perfectionists are never satisfied, because perfectionists are grasping after an ideal that is never obtainable. Trying to be perfect is exhausting, and — strange seventh graders taking the SAT not withstanding — generally doomed to failure.

To get at what Jesus is going for, I want us to actually start in Leviticus. This phrase of Jesus, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” has an Old Testament equivalent. We read it this morning. It’s from Leviticus, you can see it there in verse 2: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

Holy doesn’t mean super-moral, or very pious. Holy means something that is set apart, dedicated for God’s purpose. God’s people, the people of Israel, were holy not because of anything they had done, but because God had chosen them from all the people of the earth to be the ones through whom the salvation of the world would come.

God is the one who makes things holy. Our celebration of Holy Eucharist is a great example. There is this line the priest says, right before we receive communion. In our liturgy, it’s “The gifts of God for the people of God...” In the old Latin liturgy the phrase was more compact — it was “sancta sancti” — literally “Holy things for holy people.” In either case, the idea is that the bread and wine in the Eucharist are holy because God has made them holy, set them apart for giving us grace in the sacrament; and also the persons receiving them, you and me, are holy because God has made us holy, set us apart for serving him in the world.

What I’m driving at is that holiness is a divine gift. We can’t make anything holy; the best we can do is to make things sacred (we can set them apart for divine purposes) — but God makes things holy.

Biblically, it’s impossible to hear Jesus say “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” and not here the echo of Leviticus, “Be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” But perfection does add a new twist.

This is actually the only time in the Bible God is called perfect, but it’s a common Biblical term. ‘Perfect’ is the word usually used to describe animals appropriate for sacrifice to God. In the Jewish law, an animal offered for sacrifice was to “be perfect,” without fault or blemish. In other words, you can’t sacrifice to God the one-legged, blind goat with asthma and hair loss — even though that might be the goat, out of all you’re goats, you’re most interested in getting rid of.

No, no, God said. Don’t bring any of that stuff up in my house. Only bring the perfect ones.

And here’s the thing...remember how I said humans can’t make things holy, only God can do that? The same thing is true of making things perfect. Humans can’t make an animal perfect without spot of blemish (or ourselves for that matter, the well-lined pockets of plastic surgeons notwithstanding).

So perfection, biblical speaking, is a God-given quality of the sacrifice — the lamb, goat, bull, dove — itself. God is perfect in this sense too, because in the person of

Jesus Christ, the Son of God is himself the perfect sacrifice. He is without blemish; without even a spot of sin. And he is offered on our behalf.

By calling us to be perfect, Jesus reminds us that we too are called to be a sacrifice, to give up ourselves. Elsewhere Jesus says we must “lose our lives.” And God knows — seriously, he does — that we cannot present ourselves as a living sacrifice before him, perfect and holy, unless he himself makes it so. Holiness is something only God can give; perfection is something only God can give...so if we’re going to get from here there, if we’re going to be holy and perfect, it’s going to be because God empowers us to do so.

We can only get to that holy and perfect place by God, but we can only show it by the way we relate to one another, our neighbors and our enemies.

Leviticus has a lot to say about the neighbors side of things. Specifically, Leviticus is concerned with extending that definition of neighbor as far as possible.

Leviticus has what I would call a maximalist definition of neighbor. It includes the hungry who would need to glean from the excess crop left in your field; it includes low-skilled, underpaid laborers. It includes the deaf, the blind. It includes those you’re tempted to slander or gossip about. It includes the rich and poor, but not treating either group specially.

There’s even this great line in verse 17, “you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.” What this means is that you must tell the other person when he or she has done something to hurt you. Reproof has a preventative function; mostly to prevent you, the harmed party, from sinning in response.

I was at the PSA last week, which always makes me feel like a cow in a feedlot, and after the game, Henry and the other players were huddled up around their coach, and then us parents were in a huddle around the kids. In joining this huddle, I had inadvertently stepped too close to a man who had already been sitting at one of the tables when our team arrived, and halfway through our coach’s victory speech, this man pushed his chair back, stood up, and said, too loudly, “Excuse me. Look, I don’t appreciate having your bottom (not the word he used, but you can imagine) up in my face.” And he went over to the other side of the table, sat down, and glared at me and shook his head.

I didn’t feel real great about that. And I had a lot of excuses. It’s not like there was a lot of space, and I legitimately don’t think I was that close. But look, he reproved his neighbor (me), and even if we wasn’t super-nice about it, that reproof enabled me to go up to him afterwards, and say, “Hey, I’m really sorry, I didn’t realize I was so close to you. I apologize.” And he said, “Yeah, I get it. Thanks for saying something.”

We could have left that situation as enemies; but we left it as neighbors because he had reproved me. He told me how I wronged him.

I can't tell you the number of situations in which Christians struggle in their relationships with one another because they feel smothered by some veil of silence and won't talk to the other person about how they feel wronged. People end relationships (even marriages), change churches, or stop seeing friends because, for some reason, doing that seems easier than saying, "Hey, you hurt me, and here's how." The Bible — and Jesus teaches about this too — commands you not to do that. That is a sin. It is not loving your neighbor to keep silent when you feel wronged. That is not holy — it is as bad as calling a deaf person names (which is a horrible thing to do).

The Laws in Leviticus — and this friends, is the text Jesus was quoting when he said the second greatest commandment is to "love your neighbor as yourself" — are about how broadly we must define neighbor. That's holiness. But Jesus takes the whole thing a step further. Jesus says not just love your neighbor, but love your enemies. That's perfection.

Now note that Jesus doesn't say "forgive your enemies." At the very least, that's not the starting point. No, what he says is love them and pray for them. Now praying for them is relatively concrete. If there is someone in your life that you just can't stand, maybe it's your next-door neighbor, maybe it's Sean Spicer, maybe it's the person two rows behind you (don't look now) try praying for them. Pray that God would bless them, not that God would change them into the person you want them to be, but that God would just bless them. You have enemies; this is something concrete you can do, that you should do. You can pray for them today.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian and martyr, had this great line about this sort of prayer — so great we actually use it in our new members material. He wrote, "I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner."

Loving your enemies is a little more nebulous of a concept than praying for them. Luckily, Jesus gives us a pretty good example in the text. It's in verse 45. "For [God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." God does good things to bad people. That's God loving his enemies; that's being perfect.

We can do good things for bad people too. Probably a little more modestly than God does, at least to start. Think less having Hitler over for tea and crumpets and

more picking up an extra coffee at Starbucks for the coworker you despise. Even that can be hard.

And the worst part is all this perfection on our part may not do anything to change the enemy at all. Jesus, after all, prayed for his enemies while he was hanging above them on the cross. They didn't take him down, but he prayed for them all the same.

There's a risk in this. Being perfect, especially to our enemies, may cost us something. Being perfect may require sacrificing our anger, which may very well be just. Being perfect may require the sacrifice of our woundedness. Being perfect may require the sacrifice our desire for vengeance, or even our commitment to being "fair." There's a lot that being perfect will sacrifice at the altar of God. Of course, that's the idea. That which is perfect gets sacrificed to God.

And all this being perfect, it will definitely make us a little strange. The more live into this holy, perfect life, the more we start living like God, the weirder we're going to seem. That's how perfection works.

Leviticus, with its commandment towards holiness, offers plenty of challenge enough. Jesus, adding perfection — the sort that leads to sacrifice — well, that's a whole other level of impossible. Which is why when you step into the world, and start thinking about how you're going to be holy and perfect, you must remember this above all: those are qualities only God can accomplish in you. God can command it, because God will help you do it. Holy and perfect — they are his words. He saves them to describe his people that he makes holy and perfect. Let him make over you. Amen.

1. Matt 5:48 [↩](#)