

Matthew 5: 38-48 Pastor Bill Uetricht 2/19/17 7 Epiphany

In some ways, I have been a performer most of my life. When I was younger, especially during my high school days, my performance focused on my trumpet playing. I really wasn't that good, but still I was given the chance to play solos in the high school band and the opportunity to accompany hymns and to play duets and some individual pieces at my home church.

As I got a little older, I discovered my singing voice, but really not until I became a pastor in Toledo. Most of the folks at Peace in Toledo couldn't sing particularly well, so they thought I was Pavarotti. And so I began to sing publicly more often, especially after I started studying voice with jazz singer Jean Holden, Toledo's first lady of song. She gave me many opportunities to perform big bossy Frank Sinatra songs and Broadway numbers like "The Music of the Night" from the Phantom.

Singing then became a greater part of my performance repertoire. But let's face it. The career that I chose—pastoring—has been more than singing my regular encounter with performance. I know that many preachers don't like to hear this, but preaching is a performance. Now, that for me doesn't mean doing something inauthentic up here, putting on some kind of show. I don't think that at all. But preachers are living in an illusion land if they do not understand that what they are doing involves performance. So I get to perform all the time.

As a performer, I often come to the conclusion that my ultimate goal is getting it all right. When I played the trumpet, I felt best about myself when my lips allowed me to get the notes right and to maintain the pitch. When I sing I feel most energized when I count the rhythms correctly and hit the right notes. When I preach, I feel most alive, most comfortable with myself when what I say is pointed and poignant and how I say it is crisp and without grammatical mistakes or errors in syntax. The goal of performance is getting it all right.

So I suppose that Jesus' words at the end of our gospel reading for today, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," seem

not all that jarring. Isn't getting it all right the goal of all performance? But let's be honest: I seldom get it all right. Truthfully, I often say to myself that almost every one of my performances contains some kind of mistake, which I feel is meant to keep me, as Paul puts it, "from being too elated," from becoming too sure of myself.

Yet I have to wonder if all of this—my belief that performance is about perfection and yet my awareness that I am always blowing it—is really to miss the point. Is Jesus really asking me to get it all right? Is he asking me to make sure that I get all the moral I's dotted and the moral T's crossed? Is he telling me that life primarily is about accomplishment or achievement, a long list of moral obligations that I have to fulfill? I have this little naughty sexual thought. Better take care of it. Have this unhelpful habit. Better get rid of it. Say some cuss words once in a while. Better stop it. Eat too many pieces of candy. Better knock it off. Get angry once in a while. Better tame my temper. Better keep doing all of these things until I really get better, until all of the bad things in my life have a little check next to them, indicating that they all have been taken care of. "Be perfect as my Heavenly Father is perfect." God has got it pretty well together, so I better get myself together . . . perfectly.

I am feeling kind of tired, quite overwhelmed, which is what happens often to performers. But that's what religion is all about, isn't it? Perfect performance! That's what Jesus wants, right?

Honestly, much of the problem with this view of the Christian journey has to do with the English words that are chosen for today's text and with the interpretation that is associated with them. When we hear the word *perfect* we Americans quickly move into our performance and moralistic mindsets. "We got to get it all right because God gets it all right" is how we interpret this. But the Greek word translated "perfect" is not about that at all. It is intimately related to a word that we would translate "goal," or "end," or "completion." When Jesus is being crucified in the Gospel of John he uses a form of this word when he cries out, "It is finished." The reason

he came, the purpose of his life has now found its completion. His mission has been achieved. It has reached its rightful end.

Jesus today is not asking us to perform without errors. He is not giving us the kind of encouragement that causes us not even to try because we are afraid that we will fail. He is asking us to be complete in love, the kind of love that he has been describing to us in the Sermon on the Mount. He is asking us to be *all in* when it comes to love and compassion. The kind of love and compassion that he is describing demands more than an occasional nod to niceness, an infrequent decision that says that I ought to be good to people.

Jesus' call in his teaching is indeed lofty. How he interprets the traditional commandments takes you and me to higher ground or a deeper place, depending upon what kind of metaphor you want to use. As he leads us beyond a tit-for-tat universe, calls us beyond responding to violence with violence (turning the other cheek), when he encourages us to respond to oppression (being asked to walk a mile or being sued for your coat) by leaping coals on the oppressors, i.e., by walking more than they asked for or giving more than they demanded, when he urges us toward radical generosity (giving to those who beg), when he pleads us to love our enemies and pray for those persecute us, Jesus is definitely taking us to higher ground. He is leading us to a righteousness that "exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees." He is calling us to be *all in* when it comes to love and compassion.

So it's not about getting everything in order. It's not about being Ms. or Mr. Goody-Two-Shoes. It's not about perfection as we often define it in our culture. In fact, I fully agree with whoever said that "perfection is the greatest enemy of the good." There's nothing quite like perfection to bring misery to individuals and communities. The people who think they are perfect we often don't like to be around. First of all, we know better. We know they are not perfect. And if they are, they sure can't relate to us folks who are more than well acquainted with our deficiencies.

Here's what I know. I do better work when I give up the goal of perfection. I am more authentic. I have a better time. And truthfully, when I have a better time I perform better because the performance isn't about me, but about what is happening in and through the performance.

This week I will be dancing with the local stars. If I think it is about getting it all right, I am and you will be deeply disappointed. Perfection in dancing is way beyond my pay grade, and besides, it misses the point. The point is the fun. The point is the cause. The point is love for the community and especially for those who struggle to put food on the table.

Dance, it seems to me, is a great image for what Jesus is asking us to be about. To dance is to participate. It is to be engaged with your body, the music, and yes, life itself. And let's be honest, the best dancers are those who are *all in* when it comes to the dance.

But before that makes you too nervous, you must hear this. The music that you are to dance to isn't your responsibility. The set list has already been chosen. And the music is already playing. The dance that you dance isn't yours to choreograph. It's already been choreographed. The dance is going on all the time. It has been going on since before the beginning of time. It's the dance of creation. It's the dance that brought together a community known as Israel. It's the dance that Jesus danced, even when crabby and fearful people tried to get him to stop the dance. But as you well know, God would have nothing to do with their fearfulness and crabbiness. For God, the dance that has been going from forever could not be stopped. Jesus was raised, and the dance continued.

The song and the dance are not yours to create. Even a cranky editor like the editor of the book of Leviticus got this. In this wild and sometimes confounding book, we hear these words: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." You are to dance the dance because this is the dance that God has been dancing all along. Being holy isn't about mustering up all the moral perfection you can. It's about

reflecting what is already true about life. It's about dancing the dance that has already been choreographed. It's about passing on what has been given to you. It's about loving because you have first been loved. It's about being holy because God is holy.

Jesus puts it this way: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." God is *all in* when it comes to love. God is fully and completely love. What God is about is love and compassion. Be about what God is about. Dance the dance that is already being danced. Sing the song that has been sung forever! Be all in when it comes to love and compassion.