



***Revival: Living the Methodist Way***  
**“DARE TO BE PERFECT!”**

Rev. Gary Haller  
First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan

Philippians 3:4b-12

*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*

Matthew 5:43-48

*“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.”*

A few summers ago I was fortunate to see Garrison Keillor’s traveling musical and story-telling “Summer of Love” tour when it stopped for a night in Grand Rapids. Like many of you, I’ve followed Keillor’s narrative of life in small town Minnesota for years. Churches – the Lutheran church in particular – show up in a lot of Keillor’s monologues. In fact, he has published a collection of them called *Life Among the Lutherans*. In one monologue Keillor explains that the Lutheran minister, Pastor David Ingquist, is a direct descendant of the first Lutheran pastor to come to Lake Wobegon, Leif Ingquist, and his wife, Anna. They came from Norway long ago

because of a terrible church fight. The issue was the question of “whether we will recognize each other in heaven, or will our spiritual forms not have our earthly features.” These old country Lutherans fought it out for years. Some argued, “Yes, of course, we’ll know Grandma there, and she will know us.” Others argued, “No, we will go to a finer and better life, and if you think your face is anything God would allow in a place of perfect bliss, then you ought to take another look!”

People got all hot about it and the fight became so fierce that people would gladly have avoided heaven if it meant they’d have to talk to other Lutherans. So the Lutheran church split into the “Facial” and “Non-Facial” factions. The Ingquists got sick of it and packed up, left for America, and started a new Lutheran church in Minnesota.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever else this little story may say about the Norwegian Lutheran Church of long ago, it does remind us of this: the church isn’t perfect. I think we all know that. As is sometimes said, the church has a message of gold and feet of clay. The church is a human institution, instituted by Jesus but made up with people like you and me. And it reminds us that people aren’t perfect. I’m certainly not perfect and I’m going to check in on your perfection in a little bit.

But here’s the thing: we tend to ignore it, but Jesus commands us to be perfect. And not just any type of worldly perfection – perfection of beauty, of family, of clothing, of charity, of balance in our lives. No, none of this interests him. Jesus concluded one of his great stretches of teachings with this: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Be perfect! Jesus said it, and I believe him – I’m sure we all tend to take him seriously – so obviously this is something very important for us to consider. For what Jesus is instructing us here is no small matter. It’s like he’s going for all the marbles. Jesus doesn’t say, “Just try your best.” He doesn’t say, “Now, this is unrealistic, but....” He certainly doesn’t say, “You’re only human. I know you can’t really do this. So just leave perfection to me and go on being the fallen, heartless people you already are.” Not at all. Without qualification in any way he tells us, “Be perfect. Be perfect just like our heavenly Father is perfect!”

I want to try a straw poll this morning. I’m not going to ask how many of you are perfect this morning because I know, if you’re perfect, you’ll be too humble to raise your hand. But first question: how many of you take this commandment of Jesus to be perfect seriously? Just be honest; no one is taking names. May I see a show of hands? Who here is striving for perfection?

Now, here’s my second question: have you even heard this commandment before? It’s a mind-blower, so preachers tend to shy away from it. So, who among you have never heard of this commandment of Jesus? If you have never heard of this commandment, may I see your hands?

OK. I was hoping a good number of you had heard of this commandment, but the reality is people I talk with seem to just gloss it over. It seems like such an unreachable challenge. Our thinking goes like this, “That’s so unrealistic. I’ll never be perfect. Why even bother to try.” So the temptation is to ignore this verse.

I've got to tell you I really wrestle with this. After all, perfection is a major thing. It's not inconsequential. Jesus was making a tremendous demand upon us by making this commandment. The Apostle Paul: the passage we read from him today tells us that no one was more perfectly righteous than him. He was circumcised on the eighth day (perfect!), a member of the people of Israel (can't get better than that!), of the tribe of Benjamin (Saul, the first King of Israel, came from Benjamin!), a Hebrew born of Hebrews (meaning he could read Hebrew which few people could); as to the law, a Pharisee (no one was better!); as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. He was perfect by every measure the Jewish people considered important. Yet, he said, "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." He regarded all his former "perfection" as rubbish compared to the "surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." And he says he's striving on toward the goal of becoming like Christ who has made him his own.

So – if even Paul wasn't perfect – I wonder, "How can we be perfect? How can Jesus expect us to be perfect? I mean, really." Now, I know I'm not perfect. I tell you this on my own authority. You don't need to go to Laurie for confirmation on this. Nor do you need to send me any corroborating evidence you've collected. I know it all too well.

So here's our dilemma. We don't think we can be perfect. We don't even think being perfect is realistic or important, so we ignore this clear command of Christ's. We just write it off as some completely irrelevant to our earthly lives.

And nothing could be further from the truth. First, Jesus commanded us to be perfect, so at the very least we have to try to fathom what he is talking about. Second, this commandment is at the very core of what Jesus taught and how he wants us to live. So to ignore this commandment is actually to disregard the heart of Christ's teaching. Here's what I'm talking about. Jesus is very clear about what he means by perfection. Take a look at the context of this command. Context is always crucial in interpreting scripture. And this command comes right after some of Christ's most clear-cut, hard-hitting teachings:

"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 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."

What makes Christ's followers different? Christians love – not only our families and our neighbors, but our enemies. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you and then you may be children of your heavenly Father. What makes Christ's followers different? We do not greet just our brothers and sisters, we welcome and embrace everyone. Even the spiritually-ignorant Gentiles greet their brothers and sisters, even the hated tax collectors do that. But those who follow Christ offer God's love, God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's welcome to everyone. Those who follow Christ are to love with the perfect love that comes from God. If you're not even trying that, you've abandoned the path of Jesus Christ.

That's why, by the way, the Table of our Lord is open to each and every person. God's grace is offered to each and every person, to each and every one of you, because it is as if you are welcoming Christ into you through this sacrament. God's love is freely offered to you, but not because you are righteous. Paul taught us that. What we consider to be decent and righteous, God considers to be rubbish. Paul learned this the hard way. What we consider to be so good and righteous is all going to pass away. Only faith, hope and love will last, Paul wrote, and the greatest of these is love. And God is love. This love is patient; it is kind. This love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. This love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It is sacrificial, self-giving, long-suffering. And that's the nature of the perfection Jesus desires for each one of us.

Let me bring this home to John Wesley. Wesley understood what Jesus was saying. He didn't expect us to conform to some standard such as keeping all the hundreds of laws and proscriptions you'll find in the Hebrew scriptures. He understood perfection as having God's love perfecting us from within, such that Christ lives in us, and moves us on toward the goal of God's love. It changes us within and compels us to change the world at one and the same time. So perfection is not a sterile idea, not to Jesus and not to Wesley. It's really at the core of everything. For to be perfect is to love with God's love.

Many times we hear that Birmingham First United Methodist is a very friendly church. You are a friendly church. We heard from the people joining today how friendly you are, that no matter what pew they sit in someone welcomes them and makes them feel welcome. You need to know that about yourself. You have a heart for hospitality. And we all know that this congregation has a great heart for mission. We heard that from John and Nancy Smith in our Mission Minute today. You excel in this work more than any church I have ever seen.

But my dream is that we would be known for something more. I think our goal, our inspiring vision, needs to be for us to be the most loving congregation anyone has ever encountered. Are you willing to strive for that? As a congregation, are you willing to make that your goal? As a follower of Christ, are you willing to strive for God's love? For Christian perfection means to be perfected in love. We are not to be like those Lutherans Garrison Keillor spoke of, who ended up hating each other over an argument about recognizing one another in heaven and telling others how wrong they are.

We're to follow how Jesus approached this, by starting with ourselves. Don't worry about the speck in another person's eye; focus on that log in your own. Don't concern yourself about whether that person who wronged you asks forgiveness; you need to just go and forgive them. Don't worry if someone doesn't appreciate and affirm you; go out and find someone who needs your affirmation and love. Love is our goal. And if love is not our goal...then what is? How sad if our goal were anything less than the perfect love of God.

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<sup>1</sup> *Life Among the Lutherans*, pp. 36–37.