

IMPERFECT OR PERFECT?

In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew's gospel (chapters 5 -7), Jesus is talking about loving your enemies, forgiveness, and other ideals he asks us to pursue. He states this jarring line "Be you perfect as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Many Christians have tried to embrace this injunction, to live a perfect life, and unfortunately, live with shame for not being able to attain it. This was certainly the path I tried to follow when I was becoming a Benedictine monk and preparing for priesthood. Many other faithful followers seemed to embrace it as well. I remember being discouraged by seeming to be placed upon on a pedestal and live an exemplary life. At times people would be very careful what they said in front of me, afraid of saying the wrong things. Of course they would never say anything off color in front of Father!

Many religious people have been weighed down by perfectionism. It may be personal perfectionism where I want to be right and correct about everything I do or say. It may be perfection in the lives of others where I see where they are wrong and I am anxious to correct them. Or it could be the imperfection of an event or situation, especially if I am involved in it. Perfectionism rears its ugly head in many ways. Unfortunately to be perfect is beyond our skill and we may end up being depressed or even suicidal.

When Jesus exhorts us to be perfect what did he mean? Remembering that he was a Jew is very important here. Jesus thought in Semitic ways of thinking and speaking. This way of thinking is comfortable with hyperbole, paradox, mystery and non-dual thinking which are not as familiar to the western mind. When Jesus said that if your right hand scandalized you, cut it off, did he mean it? Yes, there have been some people who have done this literally but Jesus may be serious about what this means but not literal. This is a big problem for some religious people today.

The early church took on the prevalent thinking of Greek culture in its early centuries. This is already evident in the fourth gospel, that of John, as he speaks of Jesus as "Logos". For Greeks, Plato in particular, virtues, just as charity, justice, patience, exist in some pure form and we have to work to attain this perfect form. Greek philosophy and culture colored the first Councils of the Church and their definitions of doctrines. It has been predominant for almost 2000 years.

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Perfection for the Semitic mind means completion. It means being what you were created to be. For us human beings it means learning to be fully human. Jesus, in his life, teachings, death and suffering taught and showed us what humanity is really about. We have tended to treat Jesus as perfect because he was God and we often bypassed his real humanity. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) is a summary of this human way of life (but expressed in very Semitic terms). It comes down to living a life of love which means forgiveness, patience, respect, care for each other and all God's creation, keeping God as our center.

The Hebrew prophets and Christian Mystics have uncovered what life is really about. The paradox of their point of view is that we need to faithfully name and face our faults, our denials, our prejudices. When, early in his years as Pope, Pope Francis was asked who he was, he simply stated, "I am a sinner". In our psychological age we tend to think of sin in terms of guilt and shame which ought to be eradicated by all means. But acknowledging our sins requires the human attributes of humility, vulnerability, intimacy, honesty. These are difficult for us and we would rather hide behind walls of power, possessions, prestige. Mystics have discovered this in various ages. Many of us finally come to it in old age when we can really be honest about ourselves and our faults. Do you remember the character of Sophia in "The Golden Girls"? People loved her honesty and craved for it. We want to be free but being perfect is seldom the route to freedom.

I have heard that weavers in certain cultures, such as Persian and Navaho, include an intentional imperfection in their weaving pattern, a space sometimes called a "spirit line". It is the opening where the Spirit moves in and out of the design. I believe Leonard Cohen also had a song about this paradox.

Perfectionism is not the same as striving for excellence. In the latter we know we must learn from our mistakes and that they are inevitable. Perfectionism can be a psychological problem but it is also a spiritual block to really coming to know ourselves, to know God's absolute love for us, to accept the ever-present mercy and forgiveness of God. If we live with our defects, and accept them as defects, we are open to God's healing. Saint Paul said that he gloried in his infirmities because the grace of God was manifest through them. And Saint Therese of Lisieux wrote, "If you are willing to bear the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter". So why would you want to be perfect? You can let me know at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

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