

**7 Epiphany – Year A – February 20, 2011**  
**Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48**  
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We need to begin today with the last line of the Gospel reading, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” There are more than a few perfectionists here today, or at least those of us who have perfectionist tendencies. That word alone was enough to capture my attention and my ear to hear what Jesus has to say. As is often the case, the English translation does not do justice to our understanding of the sentence. Therefore, our first task is to set aside our notions of perfectionism or any modern interpretation of the word perfect. There is a more profound meaning to the word, and to Jesus' teaching. These days, we probably jumped to the conclusion that Jesus is giving us an impossible commandment to be morally perfect, pure and virtuous, or even without sin. It is also the kind of poor, literal interpretation of translated Scripture that atheists jump on to discredit the Word, or at least everything Jesus says. In fact, the word stems from the Greek *telos*, which has elegant nuances of meaning including, our divinely ordained end in which we will know completeness and the fullness of God, integrity and wholeness, as well as maturity. In other words, all that Jesus talks about in this passage come to fullness in each of us as we grow up in Christ and mature in our faith. This is how Paul describes the process in his letter to the Ephesians 4:15-16, “But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.”

Cutting straight to the bottom line in more familiar language, this passage is Jesus' teaching His disciples that in order to become spiritually mature we need to get over ourselves, and grow up. This is true for all of us, and for at least two reasons. The first is that our physical age often has little or no correlation to our spiritual maturity. The second is that in our humanity we resist, rebel, and generally struggle with the specific moment-by-moment choices, which lead to demonstrable acts of selfless and unconditional love, which are the hallmark of getting over ourselves, and growing up in Christ. According to Eugene Peterson, “We are only capable of renouncing a false life when we are familiar with a real life. ... [Spending time as a disciple of Jesus helps us to realize] that life is what God gives us in Jesus: grace, healing, forgiveness, deliverance from evil... the personal presence and word of God. And [when we] know what [real life] is, [we] know it is *not* self-preservation, self-help, self-aggrandizement, or self-importance.” To be perfect as God is perfect means accepting God's love for us, despite the knowledge we each harbor of just how unlovable we can be, and then loving others with the same extravagant grace, and with the same abundance as God loves us. It has been said, “Love is pure gift, other-centered and boundless in its range and scope... It is love without preference and without distinction” (Joint Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and World Methodist Council, 1986-1991). We are about to find out just exactly what that means in real terms, in the real world, in order to live a real life in Christ with no apologies, no excuses, and no exceptions. Jesus means precisely what he says.

Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you.” Then we are bombarded with some of the hardest lessons of love that we will ever read in Scripture: do not resist an evildoer; turn the other cheek; walk the second mile; hand over our coats as well as the shirts off our backs; give to everyone who begs from us; and love our enemies. As John McEnroe just loved to say to the line judges for those close calls in his tennis matches, “You CANNOT be serious!” We really want to rationalize these passages, throw up our hands and claim that they are impossible ideals to strive for, that they can't possibly apply to us in this day and age, or that they are metaphorical statements that simply point out just how much we need God's grace. Actually, none of the above applies. There's abundant theological and scholarly evidence to confirm that Jesus is not kidding around here, trying to scare us into believing in Him, or setting out the impossible as some kind of bizarre cosmic joke to torment us with failure. As we put each into perspective

according to the overarching themes of our maturing in Christ, and loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves, then these hard lessons come alive as steps along the path of discipleship, and a natural part of being and acting as God's beloved children in the world.

In fact, we are surrounded by those who live relatively modestly in order to give to those who are less fortunate, and have fewer worldly distractions, in order to serve the Lord more fully. There are those amongst us who share through random acts of kindness. And whole nations who have gained their freedom, chosen to forgive, and now work alongside their former oppressors. There are famous exemplars of non-violent resistance including Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Then there are those who live God's mercy and compassion by caring for the invisible and the despised, like Mother Teresa. Whether our deeds attract world attention or not, we can each choose to live in love wherever we are and in all circumstances. The message here is that love must govern our responses, even at the expense of individual rights. But there are some important details to note. When Jesus exhorts us not to resist evildoers, including the violent, or those who desire to humiliate us with a backhanded slap across the face, or press us into service just because they are in a position of power, He's not telling us to be the proverbial doormat for everyone to walk over. What He is saying is that we should not fight fire with fire. Our responses are instead to model God's love, exclude violence, and actively resist any underlying system of injustice. It all sounds a lot like our Baptismal promises to "persevere in resisting evil, proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ Jesus, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being" (BCP 304-5). There are no limits to God's expansive love, and therefore in the integrity of our faith, our motivation is to respond to all people and situations with love. Jesus' teaching applies both to those who already love us, or treat us well, as much as to those who dislike or even hate us. Even in the most difficult or painful of circumstances, we are compelled to give to one another only what we would want for ourselves. That includes dignity and respect, as well as goodness and love. That command even disqualifies us from doing the right thing grudgingly. Love must be our intention, and our motivation. Jesus intends to change the world's ways by breaking the persistent cycles of violence, anger and hatred. As His disciples, we must do the same.

Christian love is a life-long process. Even though we are born into a state of needy self-love, as Paul Jones notes, "Conversion begins as thankful love rooted in what we receive from God, expressed as gratitude.... Growing in grace [moves us towards] self-giving love, where we no longer love God simply for loving us, but because God is love.... The final stage is sacramental love – loving God for the sake of God." (End quote.) To become whole is to accept God's gift of healing, and to live in a way that brings healing to others. To live with integrity is to be reconciled and in right relationship with God and our neighbors. To love is to grow. No living being or vital community of faith can remain static. As Eugene Peterson writes, "Self-love assesses its position by what it has and is panicked at the thought of losing any of it... In new relationships, its first consideration is not of the new fields for love but of the appalling prospects of loss. So it clings. It holds. And it whines." Through our faith in Christ Jesus, we die to self, and instead of clinging and whining, we trust God's abundant love, share it willingly with others, and in so doing, we grow. However, "that does not mean that growth is painless. Growth calls into action new parts of our minds, our emotions, our bodies" (Peterson). Yet the pain of growth is worth every feeling of insecurity or loss, every ache, every tear, because it moves us to greater wholeness, and into greater participation in real life. "The spirit knows that its growth is the real aim of existence" (Saul Bellow). I pray that we will all choose to live in the fullness of God's love, build up the Body, and live our faith with integrity, always growing into maturity in Christ.

Amen.