

Sermon for Sunday, February 5, 2017

PERFECT!

Every day, often more than once, I drive six miles to the church, and every time I do, I lose my religion. Because every time, some blanket-blank driver does something stupid or appalling, and in the privacy of my own vehicle, I tell them about it. It makes me feel better, but I know that if they heard what I said, it would not do much to foster a sense of community, or especially the communion that characterizes the kingdom of heaven. And I can't honk my horn at them, because it just might be one of you! So I get to confess that which separates me from God and from God's children—in other words my sin—every day, sometimes more than once, and throw myself on the throne of grace, trusting in God's merciful, forgiving, and reconciling love. Perfect! And you?

Then I read the Sermon on the Mount, most especially our text for today, in which Jesus teaches that “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees—who by the way prayed seven times a day, tithed their income, attended synagogue without fail, observed kosher food laws, maintained ritual purity, and kept every jot and tittle of the Law of Moses—you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” “To enter the kingdom of heaven you must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).”

Well, there goes heaven for me, and for you, and for everybody I know, because we aren't perfect, and especially not as God is perfect. Far from it in fact, and “alternative facts” won't save us, which begs the question: “Then who can be saved?”

Apparently not the scribes or the Pharisees, despite their over-the-top religious piety. How come? And if not them, then who? It's not like Jesus to exclude everyone from the joy of heaven. What's he up to? What does it mean to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect?

What bothered Jesus about the scribes and Pharisees was their hypocrisy. They were two-faced. From all outward appearances, they were upstanding church citizens. But behind closed doors, they were different. They were exclusionary; they were proud; they were discriminatory; they were judgmental; they had that better-than-thou attitude. So they were publicly righteous, but privately unrighteous.

You and I are publicly righteous when we don't take God's name in vain in public, when we attend worship, when we work at the Food Bank, when we engage in public prayer. Public righteousness includes all those acts and attitudes that can be seen by others. Most of us are pretty good at public righteousness. But you and I fail at private righteousness more than we like to admit. When we harbor a grudge toward another, or think another person is beneath us, we are privately unrighteous. When we think things and do things that we wouldn't want other people to know about, we are privately unrighteous. When I say things in my car about other drivers, I am privately unrighteous, because though my unheard words make me feel better, if they were heard, they would do little to preserve a spirit of community. Private righteousness includes all those thoughts and attitudes that can't be seen by others, but which serve to build and preserve community. In other words, when our public righteousness matches our private righteousness, we keep body and soul together, like Jesus, and like our heavenly Father.

Our observance of the Law, every stroke and letter of it is terribly important. It's imperative that we read and study the Scriptures, that we worship God with unfailing regularity, that we pray without ceasing and that we tithe our income for the sake of others, that we keep the ten commandments, and that we assist the poor. But Jesus wants us not to just keep the Law as he did; he wants us to fulfill it, as he did. He wants us to be righteous, as he was righteous.

According to Jesus, righteousness is not simply obeying the Law, but living beyond the Law, of living the Law's spirit. Perfection in the kingdom of heaven isn't about doing things right; it's about doing things righteously. Doing things righteously, is doing those things that are necessary for preserving our covenant relationship with God and with God's community. So righteousness is that

which preserves the communion of the covenant community. The scribes and Pharisees were indeed righteous to the degree that they kept to the letter of the Law. But Jesus knew that the Law was not to be kept for its own sake, but was to serve as a guide to preserving good relationships between us and God, and between us and our neighbors. Righteousness has to do with creating and maintaining good relationships. When we focus on that, we are perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Self-righteousness is, of course, the root of the problem, that attitude that has no need of anyone else. It's the attitude of self-community, in which a person is simply right with him or herself. Adolf Hitler, for instance, was self-righteous toward the Jews; he didn't think he needed them. Ebenezer Scrooge was self-righteous; he didn't need anyone. The elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son was self-righteous; he didn't need his brother or his father. And us? Whom do we not need? Refugees, Muslim immigrants, gays, undocumented workers, Democrats, Republicans, Native Americans, the President, bad drivers? Our self-righteousness is tearing our society apart. There is no room whatsoever in the kingdom of heaven, for self-righteousness...period.

The problem Jesus identified in the scribes and the Pharisees was that their private righteousness didn't match their public righteousness. They were religious hypocrites, and it pained him. So he challenged them to get their act together. Because the Law, which is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves, is fulfilled only, when our private righteousness and our public righteousness coincide with each other. So when Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees, this is what he meant. We must be as faithful to God in private, as we are in public.

It's kind of like the rooms in your house. All of us have public rooms into which we invite our guests, and private rooms we don't want anyone to see. That's because the private rooms are a mess. But our house isn't really clean, until every room is in order and open for display, which begs the question again: "Then who can be saved?"

Thankfully, there is also God's righteousness. God's righteousness is what God does to restore us into covenant communion. It is what God does to repair and sustain a right relationship with us. Through Christ, God made a new covenant with us, making it possible for us to have enduring fellowship with God. When we accept that new fellowship we are also compelled to renew our fellowship with the community God calls into being, which is the church. So Christian righteousness, is accepting God's saving act in Christ, and living responsibly in the community of faith. Living responsibly in the community of faith, requires keeping public righteousness and private righteousness in line with each other, or put more simply, requires keeping body and soul together. Our actions and our thoughts need to align.

Therefore, says Jesus, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Fulfill the Law designed to keep you in communion with God and one another, by keeping body and soul together—matching your private righteousness with your public righteousness—through faith. Faith and its good works are what preserve, sustain and maintain the fellowship of the kingdom of heaven. Faith in Jesus Christ is Christian perfection. God renders it as righteousness. We are saved by grace through faith, and thank God for that. Yes, thank God for that!

Communion, in which we are about to participate, is the celebration of righteousness, of God's righteousness, of what God has done in Jesus Christ to restore us into right relationship with our Maker and with each other. It is the glorious moment of Christian perfection, when our private righteousness and our public righteousness, our thoughts and our acts, become as one in the body of Christ. Come together in Jesus Christ, believing in him, and experience the perfection of the kingdom of heaven.

PRAYER: Almighty God, help us to keep body and soul together through faith in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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February 5, 2017
Matthew 5:13-20