

BE PERFECT  
(Matthew 5:43-48)

That pretty well sums up what I've been saying for the past month about things I wish Jesus hadn't said. Most of those sayings challenge us to be better than we are. And today it's not just "be better" but "be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect," – a demand that I have about as much chance of measuring up to as I have of flying. Jesus says, "Be perfect," and I say, "You've got to be kidding!"

Demanding that we be like God carries some risk. Remember how the serpent enticed Adam and Eve? "Go ahead, eat the apple. It'll be all right. You will be wise and powerful – just like God." We know where that got them.

But I don't think that's what Jesus is doing here. He's not setting us up or tempting us with visions of becoming something we're not and never will be. Still – "be perfect" is a pretty high standard.

At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council Pope John XXIII had trouble telling the American cardinals apart and regularly confused Richard Cardinal Cushing from Boston with Francis Cardinal Spellman from New York. He did it so often that he finally got embarrassed and apologized. But Cardinal Cushing set the Pope at ease. "That's all right, Holy Father," he said, "no one's infallible." John XXIII was a Pope with a rare sense of humor who appreciated a good joke, even one that was on him.

Claims of infallibility aside, no one is perfect, not even the Pope. But there are those annoying folks who appear just too good to be true – whose hair is always perfect, whose kids get straight As, who never burn the toast. Do we strive to be like them? Or do we deep down resent them and yearn for them to stumble? That yearning accounts for how Red Sox fans feel about the Yankees, or used to, anyway.

No one is perfect. But here's Jesus saying that's exactly what we have to be – perfect, just as God is perfect.

This counsel of perfection comes at the end of the six antitheses that I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, where Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said X but I say to you Y." X is a command from the law and Y is Jesus' taking it up a notch. Today's lesson begins with just such an antithesis: "You have heard it said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you."

"Love your enemies" is certainly one of the "things I wish Jesus hadn't said." Be perfect" is even broader and includes "love your enemies." In fact, "be perfect" pretty well sums up many of Jesus' "hard sayings." Remember that last week Jesus told the rich young man that if he "would be perfect" all he needed to do was sell everything he had and give the money to the poor.

Jesus' talk about perfection isn't intended to create superhumans. Jesus knew that wasn't going to happen. But perfection is nevertheless something he

holds up for us to aspire to – a challenge to us to make the effort to represent the will of God in our lives and in our dealings with others.

Jesus is no utopian idealist. He assumes that the world is going to continue pretty much the way it's always been. There will always be anger that leads to murder. There will always be lust that leads to adultery. When he tells us to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile and love those who hate us, he assumes that the evils those commands are intended to overcome will continue. Otherwise there's no need for the new commandment.

There was one man the Bible says was perfect, and that was Job, who "was perfect and upright, ... who feared God and eschewed evil" (Job 1:1 KJV). And what happened to Job? Job's virtue turned out to be its own punishment when he became a poker chip in a bet between God and Satan. Job lost it all – possessions, children, health – until finally his wife urged him to curse God and die. But Job refused. He didn't understand what was happening to him or why. But he never doubted his own integrity and he never doubted the ultimate perfection of God. Job is a case study in the ambiguity of perfection and the reality of a life lived in an imperfect world.

But doesn't Job's world make sense to us? We are used to imperfection and don't expect anything more. Things may never get as bad for us as they got for Job, but we are surrounded by little imperfections – the car battery that's dead when we need to be somewhere, the button that pops off when we're getting ready to go out, the cold we catch the day vacation begins.

Dr. Pangloss, the always optimistic philosopher in Voltaire's *Candide*, taught that this is the best of all possible worlds. But his student Candide, after being driven from home, after being told that his beloved Cunegunde is dead, after being beaten twice, after being shipwrecked, after seeing the city of Lisbon leveled by an earthquake, asked plaintively, "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others?"

Good question. If this is the best of all possible worlds, the others must be absolute hells. We don't have to imagine a perfect world to imagine one that's at least better than the one we have and that we have to endure. There is poverty, violence, war, disease, corruption, incompetence. We make plans only to see them foiled by things we can't control. Our bodies wear out and in the end, we die. You would think God could have created something better than this. But maybe this is the best we can hope for.

Any fool can live in paradise where there's no right or wrong, no sin, no error, no mixed motives, no compromising opportunities, no choices to make. But it sounds boring. Somerset Maugham said, "Perfection has one grave defect: it is apt to be dull." Of course, we'll never know for certain because this isn't paradise and it sure isn't perfect, which is why Rabbi Harold Kushner's book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* is still a big seller. In a better world than this, he might have titled his book *If Bad Things Happen....* But it's not a matter of *if*, only of *when*.

Bad things will happen and all we can do is make the most out of less than the best. Sure, we are disappointed, we get frustrated, we wonder if it's all worth the effort. But then we remember someone like Mother Teresa, who worked in

the most dismal conditions imaginable but who never gave in to despair. Or someone like Archbishop Elias Chacour, who some of us had dinner with and heard speak last week. I look at conditions in Israel and don't see any hope for peace and justice for the Palestinians. But Archbishop Chacour keeps on working and refuses to give up.

Someone has said, "The indefatigable pursuit of an unattainable perfection...is what alone gives a meaning to our life on this unavailing star" (Logan Pearsall Smith, *Afterthoughts*).

Don Quixote in *Man of La Mancha* put it this way when he described the mission of a true knight: "To dream the impossible dream...to reach the unreachable star." Don Quixote's own quest was:

To follow that star  
No matter how hopeless  
No matter how far.  
To fight for the right  
Without question or pause.  
To be willing to march into Hell  
For a heavenly cause.

When Jesus says "be perfect," he's not setting us up. The perfection we're challenged to imitate won't reward us with a perfect world. But the virtue for the faithful, even if we achieve nothing else, is that by seeking and serving that which is perfect we fulfill the will and work of God. That work is never done, and that is why we must ever be about doing it.