



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

February 5, 2017

“Perfect”

(Mt. 5:48)

Rev. David K. Groth

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48).

Collect of the Day: O Lord, keep Your family the Church continually in the true faith that, relying on the hope of Your heavenly grace, we may ever be defended by Your mighty power; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Is it just me, or are a lot of people using the word “perfect” today?

I did an outdoor wedding this past summer at a resort in Illinois. A wedding planner was involved, and she was very kind and efficient, but she had the habit of sprinkling the word “perfect” on us like chicken feed in the hen house.

“Pastor, can you stand just a little more to the left?”
“Perfect!”

“Groomsmen, hold your hands together in front, right hand over left.” “Perfect!”

“Bridesmaids, turn your shoulders a little more toward the center.” “Perfect!”

I started counting and lost interest 16 or 17 perfects later. You would think with all those perfects flying around, the wedding would go off without a hitch. And it might have, were it not for me. You see, the marriage certificate in the State of Illinois looks very much like the one in Wisconsin but with one critical difference. In Wisconsin only the witnesses sign the certificate. In Illinois, it’s the couple that was just married that signs the certificate, and it doesn’t say bride and groom. Because of the legalization of gay marriage it says “Person One” and “Person Two”. Not bothering to read the fine print, I had the maid of honor and the best man sign where Person One and Person Two should have signed, which caused a small legal mess and some odd dynamics between the maid of honor and best man! So it wasn’t perfect!

Growing up, I had always been given the impression perfection is the goal, but never really achievable, not by mere mortals at least. Years ago my vicarage supervisor was completing a series of sixty questions or so sent by the

seminary to evaluate my skills. Scores were on a scale of one to four, four being the highest. I was his thirteenth vicar, and before showing me his appraisal he said, "By the way, no one gets fours around here, ever! Those are reserved for the Holy Trinity." Similarly, my view is perfection isn't possible. If I were a gymnastics judge, just for the principle of the thing I don't think I could give anyone a perfect 10. But now, I seem to be achieving perfection without so much as lifting a finger. Opting for the all you can eat salad at the Olive Garden, the waitress pronounced my decision "Perfect." My chest swelled a bit, as did my waist line.

In any case, the way we sprinkle around the word perfect has a way of cheapening the entire concept of perfection. Perfection is a rare, precious thing. We are not all Nadia Comaneci. We are still poor miserable sinners who are not perfect in anything, not even close, and therefore not able to stand in the presence of perfection, in the presence of holy God.

Thinking theologically, the only one on this earth who has ever been perfect is, of course, Jesus. Others in the Bible were called "good" or "righteous." "Now Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation" (Gen. 6:9). By that the Bible means he stands out as a good man compared to his contemporaries. But it does not mean he was perfect, without sin. We know that because just a few chapters later we find him dead drunk, passed out and naked in his tent.

In the Bible, something that is holy is without sin, fault, or imperfection. In the Bible, only God is absolutely perfect and holy, so in the vision of Isaiah, the cherubim and seraphim called to one another saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts!" (Is. 6). And whatever man is, is the opposite of holy and perfect. Ecclesiastes 7, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" (Eccl. 7:20). James 3, "For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body" (3:2).

Yet here's the thing: God still demands perfection from us! In our Gospel, Jesus says "You therefore must be

perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). We think that’s totally unreasonable, and so we lower the bar for ourselves to something more relaxed and achievable. We tell ourselves it must be okay because everyone is doing it or it must be okay because it’s legal in this country. But God doesn’t cooperate and insists the bar stay right where it is, at the level of perfection. For example in our text he says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ With our lower bar in mind we may think, “well at least I’m good on this one. I haven’t killed anyone.” But Jesus comes right back and says, “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment . . . and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Wish he hadn’t said that! But he’s not finished. “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ And we may puff out our chests and say, “Good on this one too.” But Jesus comes right back and says, “But I say to you that everyone who looks a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Apparently he doesn’t care if man’s law says it’s legal or commonly acceptable. You are to be different. “You must be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

So we have a problem. Paul articulates it for us all. “I know that nothing good dwells in me. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. I don’t understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” That is, he knows he has these sinful desires. He knows they’re wrong. He tries to avoid sin. And yet he inevitably fails because of sins grip on him. “The evil I do not want to do is what I keep on doing.”

And so it is with us all. Ecclesiastes 7, “Surely, there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” Romans 3, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23). And again, “None is righteous, no, not one” (v. 10). And 1 John 1, “If we say we have not sinned,

we make him a liar, and the truth is not in us” (v. 10). If we say our sin isn’t a big deal, we make God a liar. It is a big deal to him, and it should be to us as well because the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). The stakes are high. That’s why Jesus said, “If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire never goes out” (Mk. 9:48). That is, you may not take your sin seriously, but God most certainly does. One glance at God’s Son Jesus on the cross should convince you of that.

Coming from God and being of God he was perfect. Right from the start, the angel said to Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore [he] will be called holy – the Son of God” (Lk. 1:35). 1 Peter 2, “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (v. 22). The author of Hebrews reminds us he was tempted in every way we are, yet he was without sin (4:15). 1 John 3, “He came to take away sins, and in him there is no sin” (v. 5). The Bible says he was “without blemish”(Heb. 9:14), “full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). Again from Hebrews, “And being made perfect, [there’s that word again!], “And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation” (5:8-9).

But he didn’t win salvation for us by remaining in his heavenly state of perfection. No. Isaiah prophesied, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned each to his own way; and the LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is. 53). Paul saw it too. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21). Can you imagine? He who was perfect, obedient to the Law down to the jot and tittle (Mt. 5:18), became full of sin. All your sin was dumped on him, and all mine, and all the sin and wickedness of everyone you know, and of those billions of people living today you don’t know . . . and the sins of those who lived before us were on him, and the sin of those who will come after us were also on him. That’s what Paul meant when he said, “he died for all” (2 Cor. 5:15). And that’s what John meant when he said,

“He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 Jn. 2:2). So the Perfect One, holy and almighty God was crushed under the weight of our sin.

Why? To make you perfect. Colossians 1, “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” (v. 22). “Holy and blameless and above reproach”. Wait a minute! Those are the adjectives formerly reserved for God alone, but now they are being used of us! “Holy, blameless and above reproach!” “Cleansed of all sin” John writes (1 Jn. 1:7). Paul says we are now, “children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15).

Because Christ became sinner, we became righteous. “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect?” Paul asks. It’s a rhetorical question. No one can bring charges against us anymore! It’s too late. The case is closed. God has already declared us not guilty. Because of the blood of Jesus, we are perfectly innocent, righteous, blameless, and above reproach.

One last thing: there’s a growing Amish population in Wisconsin, and one of the things the Amish are known for is making exquisite quilts. All the stitching is done by hand and the stitches are very small and uniform. Some say the Amish will intentionally incorporate a mistake into the quilt because they believe only God is perfect and they don’t want to mock God by attempting perfection. I don’t know if that’s true or not. What I do know is no one ever has to try for imperfection out of reverence to God. We get imperfection whether we intend it or not. Perfection cannot be achieved by us, it can only be given us by God. And in Jesus Christ, God has given us his perfect righteousness, his perfect forgiveness, and with that, a perfect future where “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things [the imperfect

things] will have passed away” (Rev. 21:4). Amen.

