

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

Just Perfect

A sermon preached September 7, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Romans 12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,¹ by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual² worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world,¹ but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect.² ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. ⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.¹ ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;¹ do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;¹ for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 16:21-28 ²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." ²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷ "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and

then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

At any given time, there are one or two neckties hanging in my closet which, in a famine, I could suck on for nourishment. It is as though certain fabrics, special to the tie-making industry, were manufactured to have an addictive relationship to mustard and beef gravy. That's why I was particularly intrigued by a special price I, as a card-carrying member of the Quality Paperback Book Club, was offered on the Stainbuster's Bible. The author, Don Aslett, had obviously peeked in my closet. "There's a stain out there with your name on it," he says in the accompanying blurb. Obviously, Mr. Aslett is a fastidious but masterful character. He's also listed as the author of a book titled, Make Your House Do the Housework – no doubt to be followed by the sequels Make Your Car Change Its Oil, and Make Wire Coat Hangers Disentangle Themselves.

These titles fascinated me with the possibilities. I've never even been able to train my hair, much less get my dog to heel or my kids to hang their clothes anywhere but on the floor, so Mr. Aslett's alleged mastery over the dust balls, carpet lint, and silver tarnish of a household, not to mention the magnetic properties of chicken soup and neckties, was mighty impressive.

And then there was the title –The Stainbuster's Bible! This was not a manual, mind you, or a guide, nor even a handbook. It was nothing less than a Bible. It was a lucid moment for me; I noticed immediately the theological implications. As Spotslayer Don put it, "The Stainbuster's Bible will help you maintain a spotless reputation!"

His passion for spotlessness mirrors that of Old Testament law, as only a goat without blemish was good enough to be sacrificed to God, and echoes Paul's concerns when he wrote to the Ephesians, "... so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish." But blemishes have always been an important part of life. You can answer for yourself, of course, but it's been as difficult for me to live my life without moral and physical scars as it has been to wear a tie without accumulating an assortment of gravy stains. A peaches and cream complexion may be an adolescent's dream, but wisdom's face is rarely so clear or so innocent. Cecil Beaton, the great photographer, tells of showing Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, a selection of photographs of herself from a sitting she had granted him. After she selected her favorite, Beaton discretely suggested that the picture could be retouched to conceal some wrinkles. The Queen Mother wouldn't allow it. "I would not want it to be thought that I had lived for all these years without having anything to show for it," she said.

What we all have to show for it, though, is far more than lines in our faces. Fortunately for us, every moral error we have committed does not become recorded in some ghastly portrait like Dorian Gray's, but in truth we do become spiritually wrinkled, morally scarred. The perfect life, one without error or blame is beyond us. Spotless ties may be a remote possibility; a spotless human life is an inherent contradiction.

How do we reconcile this fact with the language of faith? Where is that blemish-free goat to sacrifice so as to atone for our sins? Where is that splendid, spotless, pure people of Christ scripture seems to be expecting? Where, indeed, is that person inside

of each of us that succeeds in living up to our own high standards of expectation, standards so high that we either collapse in despair at its unattainability or wrap ourselves in hypocrisy, pretending we are superior?

I've never had the guts to say what I have – in sarcastic moments wanted to say – to those self-righteous characters who refuse to come to church because, "The people there are all hypocrites!" "Good decision!" I want to retort. "Why add to the problem?!"

But it underscores a point. If to live is to err, if to live is to learn by experience, if to live is to make decisions of deep complexity, clearly our faith is not meant for this world, for this human creature, for this life we live. The sardonic poetry of Stephen Crane frames the issue well:

"It was wrong to do this," said the angel.
"You should live like a flower,
Holding malice like a puppy,
Waging war like a lambkin."

"Not so," quoth the man
Who had no fear of spirits;
"It is only wrong for angels
Who can live like flowers,
Holding malice like the puppies,
Waging war like the lambkins."

There are strains of perfectionism in Christianity, as in all religions. It is good that they are there, for the call to the highest righteousness keeps before us the gap between our hopes and our decisions. What is vital to remember is that faith's call to perfection is not there to condemn us, but to exhort us. The thrust of our faith is not to cut us off at the knees for our mistakes, but to carry us through, to move us along, to bring us home. Were our faith a doctrine of perfection, it would be lifeless, senseless, dead, and incapable of hope.

It is equally important to think carefully about what kind of perfection it is that our faith calls us unto. It is not – and please put big, red exclamation marks behind this – it is not a call to moral perfection as our society or culture would define it at a specific historical moment. It would be as jarring to run across the word *morality* in scripture as it would be to encounter the word *bicycle*. It's just not there. In fact the case could be made that the antithesis is there. That is, that what Jesus' ministry is all about is replacing the harsh, judgmental behavior of moral righteousness with humble, forgiving acts of mercy and self-denial, and if there is anything more in opposition to contemporary morality it is self-denial.

This is a harsh, self-absorbed age in many ways, whose twin moralities – greed and personal satisfaction – define what is good. The age has a sense of fair play, but it's a kind of kindergarten mentality usually at work, assuming that everyone has something to share, that everyone starts from the same point in life, that everyone has something to share, that everyone is capable of cleaning up his own mess, and that what everyone needs most of all is TLC and a twenty minute nap. Robert Fulghum's paradigm in Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned In Kindergarten warms us,

comforts us, entertains us, but after all is said and done, it's still crackers and milk. It's nostalgia, which has no capacity to spiritually sustain adults in their on-going work of raising children, remaining faithful to their spouses, expending their energies at a work which does not always seem meaningful, and trying to do as little harm to others as possible.

It's the kind of morality Peter acted on when Jesus told of his intention to carry his ministry to Jerusalem, acknowledging that there he might well meet his death. Such a dread sacrifice was inconceivable to Peter, and doubtless to the other disciples. "God forbid it, Lord!" he blurts out, horrified by the very idea. It was the morality of self-absorption, the cult of private rights to life and freedom, where everything must be fair and everything must be moderate and nothing must disturb the community's contentment. It was crackers and milk time – protect the naïve innocent from himself, keep the moral issues simple, and don't let anything change, because we like it the way it is.

How far removed from that morality is Jesus' examples and exhortations, such as, "If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

How much more immoral can you get than to tell someone to deny themselves? It's unreasonable, it's un-American, it's un-kindergarten, and it's unlikely, until we grow up and learn that there are things in life worth giving of ourselves for, worth striving for, worth going to the cross for. There are things in life precious beyond our counting, like love, faithfulness, joy and trust that no pile of wealth can buy and no philosophical formula can reason out for only faith's lessons of self-denial and humility can secure them.

John Calvin, the father of Presbyterian theology, quotes St. Augustine in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "As a rhetorician, on being asked what was the first thing in the rules of eloquence, replied, 'Pronunciation' and on being asked what was the second, and what was the third, gave the same reply so, should any one ask me concerning the rules of the Christian religion, the first, second, and third, I would always reply, Humility. The greater your weakness is in yourself, so much the more the Lord assists you."

We are called to be complete, to strive for that full integration of what we believe with what we do, so that our faith informs our being, including our personal behavior and our politics. Yet in doing so, we are not then rewarded with a life without difficulty. Indeed, life is more difficult for the Christian, not less. If you want an easy life filled with simple answer, neat decisions, and no ethical struggles, don't follow Christ. Christ complicates things. He makes unavailable some of the choices others carelessly enjoy. If you want a relatively easy life, be conventionally moral, not Christian.

Throughout its history Christianity has been denounced by its detractors as a religion promoting weakness. As some contemporary critics have put it, Christianity is for losers. Perhaps the term is unavoidable, as Jesus says we can only save our life by losing it. But if the cross is for losers then there is no room in this world for love, for courage, for compassion; there is no room for the weakness of children, the tenderness of affection, the vulnerability of trust. If

the cross is for losers, only guns shall have the last word and only thugs will be philosophers, poetry shall have nothing to say, and symphonies, wrung out of the pain of a composer's anguish, shall be soundless. If the cross is for losers there was no God to hear Christ cry and none to hear our own.

But if there is a sense in creations of beauty wrought from trial and grief, and if there is meaning in our scars and wrinkles, our spots and stains, then there is possible a humble kind of decisiveness which refuses to let evil have the last word, and there is hope with each new victory of good over despair. We work at it moment by moment, like the sea wearing a rock smooth. And in the living of it, we learn what we need most to know, that God is present and faithful to the humbly kind.

As Margie McCreless Roe's *Turning* has it,

*They say the straightest line
turns somewhere
beyond our knowing
in the long calm of infinity.*

*Our lives, however,
enjoy no such majestic subtlety
no changes so slow
they do not matter.*

*We are ribbons tossed
upon a floor in curve upon curve
turns touching turns becoming knots
becoming parodies
of the smooth movement of eternity*

*Finite wiggles
seeking the calculus of God
which might somewhere
turn our turns
which might make straight
our twistedness
which might make our twistedness
curve infinitely.*