

7th Sunday of after the Epiphany (Year A) – Matthew 5:38-48
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Being Perfect

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

A few days ago, several women in our community gathered for our first “shindig” of the year. My participation in the scarf dying event helped me experience firsthand what a St. Andrew’s Shindig” is and join in creating what is “fun” about fundraising. When I first saw Joan Robert’s different examples of scarf dying posted on the parish hall bulletin board, I thought to myself that the process might be similar to watercolor. While I am very fond of viewing watercolors, I have not had the courage to “seriously” try watercolor painting. That’s because it’s hard to control the amount of color and water, and the outcome seems so unpredictable. I admit that I was confronted by my own tendency toward perfectionism. I imagined that I might be disappointed by the outcome; that the result wouldn’t be perfect.. For those of you who enjoy watercolor painting, you know how much patience, practice, and persistence it takes to be a talented watercolor artist. You recognize how a painting can take on a life of its own. And that perhaps by participating in the process of creation, the artwork is forming you as you are forming the artwork. You and the artwork are creating a kind of intentional relationship.

As human beings we are part of God's ongoing creation of intentional relationships. God desires that we participate in creating new life and delights in how we contribute to bringing about God's kingdom or God's realm through relationships within and across every generation. When Jesus teaches about sharing in the fulfillment of God's kingdom, he invites discipleship by commending participation, but not in the ways we might imagine. Participation in God's mission is always collaborative, cooperative and communal; and participation in God's ministry is always more than we could possibly manage on our own. As Americans we've been led to believe in the Horatio Alger myth of the self-made man; that we can get ahead in life by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps; that our hard work and elbow grease will pay off in the long run. But that perspective is too often used against those whose station in life is less than desirable and who may not even have bootstraps to pull up let alone boots to put on. The myth of the self-made man ignores the fact that we do not choose where we were born, or the family we were born in to, or the life circumstances we encounter. The myth of the self-made man ignores how societal structures have been developed to benefit certain groups of people more than others. And the myth of the self-made man ignores the fact that we are essentially social creatures meant to live as communal beings wonderfully interconnected with all of God's creation. The beauty of God's creation is both in our diversity and our interrelatedness.

When Jesus begins teaching about God's realm, he sheds light on places in the community that need attention; he sheds light on situations that need compassion; he sheds light on people who seek healing and wholeness. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the meek, the mournful. And then Jesus sheds new light on how God's laws and the laws of the land have been misinterpreted to benefit not the common good, but the very few who have acquired power and authority at the expense of the community's health and wellbeing. It is out of such a dysfunctional society that it had become commonplace to not only say "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," but to enact it as a way of bringing about a glimpse of fairness in an unfair world.

The idea of fairness is often used alongside the word "deserve." We might say, "that's not fair; you deserve better." But both words shed light on our expectations that life be a certain way if not for ourselves, at least for our families and friends. Both words shed light on our perspective of justice; our desire to make things right; to control the outcome toward our personal concept of utopia. But Jesus isn't teaching about human-inspired visions of paradise. Jesus is teaching about and embodying divine-inspired glimpses of the kingdom of heaven that are possible in our lives today.

Most of us know all too well that even when acting with the best of intentions our individual ways are not God's ways; that our society's ways are not God's ways, that even our church's ways are not God's ways

unless...unless we take the time to pause and discern God's will in all that we undertake. The psalms remind us to be still and know that God is God. Be still and know God. Be still. Be. God invites us into being through relationships and communities. Through faith and prayer, God guides our activities and actions towards the fulfillment of God's Realm in this life and the next. And while God invites and guides our participation as co-creators of God's Realm, God also desires perfection. Not human perfection, but divine perfection as completion or fulfillment of God's Realm through God's perfect love. Jesus reminds us that God's Realm is not complete without the least and the last of us. God's Realm is not fulfilled without both friend and foe; God's Realm is not perfected without both neighbor and stranger. Being perfect is not an individual goal. It is a collaborative one that is only realized when we are in right relationship with God and all of God's creation.

There is a beautiful prayer that I would like to share from our Book of Common Prayer that we offer at the Easter Vigil that speaks of God's promise of perfection not as an end in itself, but as the transformational power of God's love through life-giving relationships. Let us pray.

"O God of unchangeable power and eternal light... (BCP, 291)

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