

Persistence, Not Perfection

Back in the day, when churches had acolytes, it was the duty of every young person in the congregation to take a turn at suiting up in a robe and going decorously up to the altar to light the candles. In one of my former congregations, this was a pretty big deal. Back then the big marble altar was still up against the wall. On either side there was a brass candelabra with seven candles in descending order. On the altar itself were two more large brass candleholders. These candles were to be lighted only on the Sundays we had Communion (this was when Communion was only on the first and third Sundays at this church). Now there was a very specific way that all these candles were to be lit. Evidently the previous pastor had been insistent on this and all the acolytes trained by him knew the drill.

Then I came along. Sometimes a newer acolyte – or one of the older ones who forgot – would ask me, “Do I light the candles from the left side or the right side?” I’d have to say that I didn’t know. I didn’t say I didn’t care, although I usually quipped that since girls weren’t allowed to be acolytes when I was their age, how was I supposed to know?

Anyway - one Sunday little Millie Martin was scheduled to be acolyte. I was already up in the front, in the big chair behind the lectern, and I could see across the way into the sacristy where Millie’s mom was helping her get the candle lighter ready. So Millie comes out and starts lighting the candles on the candelabra. Suddenly I hear this hissing noise from the sacristy. Millie hears it too. She looks over, and I can see her mouthing the word, “What?” I couldn’t hear what Mrs. Martin was saying and evidently neither could Millie, so she had to go over and find out what the problem was. When she came back out to finish lighting the candles, I noticed that she was crying – not big, sobbing crying, but definitely shedding tears.

The acolyte always sat in the chair next to me, so when Millie came and sat down, I asked what was wrong. She said her mother told her she was lighting the candles wrong; she was supposed to light the altar candles first because it was a Communion Sunday. Thankfully, there was a long prelude that day because I needed to talk to that child.

The first thing was to tell her that actually her mother was wrong; it was not a Communion Sunday and Millie had been doing it right in the first place. The second thing was to tell her that I didn’t think Jesus would be concerned about which candles were lit in what order anyway, and there was never a need to do things perfectly in church. After church, as I was standing by the door greeting people on the way out, I watched as Millie went up to her mother and announced that the pastor had told her that it was OK with Jesus to not be perfect - which warmed my recovering perfectionist’s heart.

Those of you who know that I'm a big fan of the Enneagram know that I am a One, which is sometimes called the "Reformer," but is also often called the "Perfectionist." Ones believe there's a right way to do something and a wrong way and are often very happy to tell you the right way – whether you want them to or not. But Ones don't only pick on others. Depending whether they're on the healthy or unhealthy end of the spectrum, Ones have a strict inner critic that lets them know when they've made a mistake. You know the phrase "beating yourself up"? Ones are the masters of it. So, as a recovering perfectionist myself, I sincerely hoped that I had nipped this tendency in the bud for Millie.

So it is always with dismay that I read Matthew 5:48: "Therefore be perfect, as God in heaven is perfect." Really? After my victory over the forces of perfectionism with Millie and over my own inner critic, how can I believe that Jesus would say something like this? Especially after taking us through all the hard teaching of the Sermon on the Mount? Turn the other cheek. Go the second mile. Love your enemy. Pray for your persecutors. Just to name a few. Jesus has set the bar extraordinarily high for those who are courageous enough to be his disciples. And we're supposed to be perfect at it?

As gospel (which is supposed to mean good news), this seems like a whole lot of bad news. Especially now, as people of faith are looking for spiritual guidance and strength to face the bad news of the day – in its multitudinous forms. As we struggle to get organized and figure out what can be done – on national, local, personal, and congregational levels – it just isn't helpful (sorry, Jesus) to lay the demand of perfectionism on top of all that.

So what do we do with this vexing verse? The first thing is to do a quick check on this word in Greek (this is why we learn this stuff in seminary) where we see that the word here is *telos*. That can be translated as *perfect*, but not in the sense of always doing everything correctly or of moral flawlessness. *Perfect* can also be translated as *complete* or *mature*. A further definition of *telos* is an intended goal, a determined end. And in this case, this definition makes the most sense. Throughout the whole Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes, Jesus has been talking about how to live in the Realm of God. That is our goal, our intended end, our completion, the vision for which we strive.

So we could say that Jesus is not asking us to be perfect, but to persist in the goal Jesus has for us. Being a disciple doesn't require perfection but persistence in bringing the vision of the Realm of God, the Beloved Community to bear on our world. Not that persistence is an easy path. We read the names of some of history's persisters in the opening litany brought on by the attempt of Senator Elizabeth Warren to read the words of another persister, Coretta Scott King, only to be silenced, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted."

The litany was written by someone in the United Methodist tradition. We could add to it with some of our own Lutheran persisters, as well as countless others from history. And we can add so many more from the New Testament: the woman looking for her lost coins. Mary of Bethany sitting at the feet of Jesus. The woman with a flow of blood who dared to touch him. The woman at the well. The women who went to the tomb. The sinful woman who washed his feet with her tears and her hair. The poor widow's offering. His mother insisting Jesus help out with the wine at a wedding. Mary of Bethany (again) confronting Jesus at the tomb of her brother Lazarus. The gospels do suggest that an essential characteristic of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus is to persist in working toward the goal that the Sermon on the Mount lays out for us. I'm sure you can name your own examples of persistence – not only women, although the Elizabeth Warren incident brought on that particular battle cry.

As I said earlier, Enneagram Ones are also often called Reformers. People like Cesar Chavez, Daniel Ellsworth, Angela Davis, Al Gore, Nelson Mandela, Thurgood Marshall, Eleanor Roosevelt are often put into the One category. Also, quintessential reformer Martin Luther. Those of you who participated in the Enneagram workshop we did a few years ago might recall that we agreed with the idea that a congregation can have its own number and that First United was probably a One congregation – based primarily on our commitment to justice issues.

I heard a webcast recently that discussed how the different Enneagram types are responding to the election. Ones, along with Eights and Threes, are the ones leading the charge to “do something!” (hence, Tamara organizing the trip to the March on Washington). Twos, Fours, and Sevens – being more relational types – are experiencing the difficulty of broken relationships and desiring of their restoration (hence Pastor Anders attending the inauguration in a referee jersey, carrying a copy of “Reaching Across the Red-Blue Divide”). I actually think Middle Circle (like their pastor) is an Enneagram Seven – which is (dare I say it?) perfect because Seven is the direction in which a One moves when it is healthiest. Not that we give up our One-ness, but we become less “perfectionistic” and I'd say better able to carry out our work of persistent reformation.

We also need to keep reminding ourselves that we are not alone in our persistence and resistance. Jesus is not telling us to get our acts together and do this right. I think many of us all over this country are struggling right now to know how best to engage. There are so many issues. Every day brings another executive order, another petition, another request to make a phone call, make a donation, show up for a rally. We worry about our stamina for the long haul of this resistance. So this is not the time to be perfect, but to persist. As individuals, as families, we need to make decisions about where to focus our energies. As a congregation, we need to do the same thing. We'll be talking about this more in our

leadership circle. How can we focus our resources and our energies in ways that will sustain us for the duration?

And we need to remember our foundation. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, the groundwork has already been laid. "No one can lay a foundation other than the one already in place." Our foundation is our spiritual connection to one another and to the Divine. When we care for and maintain that connection, we are stronger beyond our wildest imagination. Going persistently deeply inward enables us to reach persistently widely outward.

This is not the time to be perfect, but to persist. To persist toward the goal to which the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount give witness. To persist in bringing about the Commonwealth of God for all people in the face of continued resistance. To persist in a vision that others might not be able to see, but that we see. Not toward the goal of judgment, correction, or condemnation, but toward the divine end that realizes the full blessings, the perfect shalom, that God intends for all of creation.

Amen

Matthew 5:38-48

"You have heard the commandment, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'
But I tell you, offer no resistance whatsoever when you're confronted with violence. When someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer the other. If anyone wants to sue you for your shirt, hand over your coat as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go two miles. Give to those who beg from you. And don't turn your back on those who want to borrow from you.

"You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. This will prove that you are children of God. For God makes the sun rise on bad and good alike; God's rain falls on the just and the unjust. If you love those who love you, what merit is there in that? Don't tax collectors do as much? And if you greet only your sisters and brothers, what is so praiseworthy about that? Don't Gentiles do as much?

Therefore be perfect, as Abba God in heaven is perfect.