

“Perfect Love”
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How many of us here always got 100% correct on every test we took in school? Put your hand up if that is, or was, true for you. (react to hands if any) That’s a pretty tall order, right? To get a perfect score every time would be pretty amazing. It certainly wasn’t true for me. Now, how many of us were able to ride a bike perfectly the very first time we tried? Again—not an easy task to perfect right away.

In the English language, we generally understand perfection to be the same as flawlessness. Nothing can improve something which is perfect. When something or someone is perfect they are beyond reproach. Now, you may have guessed this already, but I surely have never been perfect in this sense, and I know that I never will be. I think it is an impossible goal, this particular English understanding of perfection.

So, I was a little put off when I began reading the passage from the First Letter of John for this morning. The idea of perfection sits right in the middle of the reading. It reads in part:

Love has been *perfected* among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as (God) is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but *perfect love* casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached *perfection in love*.¹

Just as I was never a perfect student, or able to do anything perfectly on the first try, I have never known perfect love either. I have my share of doubts and failings which automatically render any love in which I am involved imperfect, at least in this English sense of the word. Now, don’t mishear me—I love God as best I can, and I am blessed by the love of my friends and family. But I am human, and therefore imperfect.

So what is all this business about perfect love, and perfection in love? How can human beings relate to being perfect? Well the good news is that as it turns out, the word “perfect” may be an imperfect choice for the best meaning of the original ancient Greek word. *Preacher’s Magazine* suggests that “(T)he word behind the translation is a form of *telios*, which doesn’t mean “flawless,” but “fulfilling its purpose.”² Another translation of the word *telios* from an online theological dictionary is “to make whole.” If you substitute these terms in place of perfect or

¹ 1 John 4:17-18, edited for clarity.

² *Preacher’s Magazine* July 9, 2006.

perfection then the meaning really opens up. Consider this restatement of the passage I just quoted:

Love has *fulfilled its purpose* among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but *wholeness making love casts out fear*; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears *has not fulfilled the purpose of love*.³

Love has fulfilled its purpose among us in this way—that we may have boldness on the day of judgment—in other words, love has come to cast out our fear, and to bring us *beyond* a sense of judgment. Continuing with the restatement, the passage goes on: “There is no fear in love, but wholeness making love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears *has not fulfilled the purpose of love*.” Understood in this way, we are called not to some so-called perfect love—which is likely to be beyond our human grasp—but to embracing God’s love to help cast out our fear. This reveals God’s plan as nurturing us in love rather than submitting us to judgment—as saving us rather than condemning us.

We already know pain in this life. We already know fear. Pain and fear are regular staples of our economic, health and environmental news. Throughout human history there has always been bad news percolating up from the cultures of the world. Fear has always led humanity to horde what we have and turn blind eyes to the suffering of our neighbors. Human beings have always been inclined to judge the group they are in as somehow beyond or above other groups. All of this springs from fear—fear of scarcity, fear of intimacy, fear of others.

But, hear this good news: “By this we know that we abide in (God) and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit...So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. *God is love*, and those who *abide* in love abide in God, and God *abides* in them.”⁴ This love of God—both *from* God and *mirrored back* to God—is what casts out our fear and helps us to reach out across the many, many boundaries we impose between ourselves and other humans. The Sufi poet Rumi has this to say about the power of love in our lives: “Love is the cure, for your pain will keep giving birth to more pain/ until your eyes constantly exhale love/ as effortlessly as your body yields its scent.”

When we receive God’s love fully, and offer it back in kind, then love is perfected among us and within us, and there is no room left for fear or pain. Offering God’s love back is not simply a faith stance or something to recite in church on Sundays. It is not something you say, it is

³ 1 John 4:17-18 re-translated.

⁴ 1 John 4:13, 16

something you do. Just as God took on human form as Christ, we too are called to bring our bodies into the work. This morning's reading concludes like this:

We love because *he first loved us*. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister *whom they have seen*, cannot love God *whom they have not seen*. *The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*⁵

We are *commanded* to love our sisters and brothers. We begin the work of love with those we can see—all the people in our lives: those we love easily and those we do not. Those who agree with us, and those who never will. Those like us and easily understood, *and* those whose ways are so different from ours that we are utterly baffled by them. Even those who directly and consistently oppose us and actively seek our undoing—we are called to love even them. Our friends, loved ones, colleagues, rivals and enemies are all children of God. And our gracious God extends the gift of love to all of us. By extending this love to others; by beginning with those we see, we return this love also to our invisible God, who is the source of all love.

The work of love is complex. We are called to act out love in a variety of ways. Sometimes people in our lives have wounded us deeply. Too deeply for us to be comfortable remaining in their lives. I have no doubt that God does not want to lead us into deeper pain by insisting that we remain in relationship with them. But in other cases, we are called to put our bodies on the line: to go to those who are suffering and to help them; to be mindful of the needs of our mother earth and to walk more lightly upon her; to reach out across rivalries and to extend love and reconciliation.

As we practice that, we enter into a place where we abide in God and God abides in us more and more fully. Again, the poet Rumi writes:

Although I may try to describe Love/ when I experience it I am speechless.
Although I may try to write about Love/ I am rendered helpless;
my pen breaks and the paper slips away/ at the ineffable place
where Lover, Loving and Loved are one.
Every moment is made glorious/ by the light of Love.

And, friends, *this* is perfect love: not that we get 100% on every test, or do things perfectly the first time, or every time, but that we are forever mindful of the love of God around us, the love of God within us, and the love of God we can—and are called—to offer to others. And that we keep striving to cast out our fears, and open ourselves up to a deeper and richer love in which

⁵ 1 John 4:19-21.

“every moment is made glorious.” *This* fulfills the purpose of God; *this* is what makes us whole; *this* is perfect love.

Amen?

1 John 4:13-21

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.

15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. 19 Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

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