

A sermon preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Danvers, MA
Date: September 17, 2017
Rev. Kevin M. Smith
Matthew 28:16-20; 2 Corinthians 13:5-14

Messy Living?

I remember playing in our living room in the house I grew up in. My younger brother Randy and I would be playing with toy trucks and cars and making a race track out of the couch and the big easy chair and even running our toy trucks up and down the walls. The couch pillows became mountains and we would make forts out of the chair cushions. I remember my mother coming into the house from doing her gardening or shopping. She would walk in and see us screaming around the room like it was the Indy 500 race. She would put her hands on her hips, look down on us as we raced around the living room on our hands and knees, and exclaim, "What a perfect mess you boys have made!" And then she would really lower the boom and warn us "You better get this mess cleaned up before your Dad gets home from school!" If nothing else, that threat would work and kick us into gear cleaning up the room. You see, my Dad was a school principal and knew a little bit about discipline!

"What a perfect mess you've made!" I don't know about you, but I always thought it was strange how anyone could make a "perfect" mess. At the least, it's an oxymoronic statement. How can any a "mess" be "perfect?" But I guess if you can have what the weather people call a "perfect storm" out on the Caribbean, we can also make a "perfect mess."

Speaking of a perfect mess, how about our Christian ancestors: the disciples? We read in Matthew this morning about the time after the resurrection of Jesus when Jesus told Mary Magdalene to go tell the disciples, the remaining eleven disciples, to meet him on the Galilean mountain, probably the Mount of Olives. Like dutiful and obedient children the eleven remaining disciples hiked up the mount and sure enough the risen Jesus appears to them. But in Matthew 28:17 we hear that "when they saw him, they worshipped him; but some *doubted*." There was Jesus standing right before their eyes yet some of the disciples doubted. Now Matthew does not tell us who among the disciples doubted (although we might guess that Thomas was a bit skeptical) nor does the scripture say *what or who* they doubted. Did they doubt that it was Jesus standing there before them? Did they doubt that Jesus had actually died and was resurrected? Remember that most of the disciples except for the women fled when Jesus was crucified. Needless to say, even after the death and resurrection of their leader our bumbling and stumbling disciples, the originators of the Christian church, had a lot of issues and made a lot of miscalculations and mistakes.

Even though these disciples, these flawed people, were at varying stages of faith and competence, the next thing Jesus does is commission them to go out "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit." (Mt. 28:19) We call this the Great Commission. What was Jesus *thinking*? Were these bumbling and stumbling and doubting disciples really the people that God wanted to go out into the world and represent the love and grace of the Almighty? I think what Jesus was doing in this great commission was comparable to my Mom coming into that mess of a living room and instead of warning us to clean up our mess before Dad came home if she would instead have said to us "You boys go out and find people who will follow you and, oh, by the way, do it in the name of God. Go out and make a perfect mess of all the other kids' homes in the neighborhood!" If she had said that to us, I know I would have looked at my mother and thought she had really lost it!

But, you know, there must have been something to this trust that God had in the disciples. And Paul had trust in the Corinthian followers of Jesus. Take our Pauline letter we read this morning to the people in the church at Corinth. They were people who were fighting over who was right and who was wrong. They were jealous of each other's gifts from God and debating who had the better, more important gift. The Corinthian church members frankly had to be taken to the wood shed by Paul in his first letter to the church. Now, in second Corinthians, we read that the Pauline writer is saying to these same church people "For we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect." Perfect? How could this herd of cats and troublemakers in Corinth ever be thought of as being capable of perfection?

What is going on in the Bible with this idea of being perfect or achieving perfection? I did a little checking around and found out that in both the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, and in the Christian Scriptures or the New Testament, there are thirty-five times when our Bible mentions being perfect or achieving perfection. Now, of course, some of those times the scripture writing is about the perfection of God or Jesus, but in many cases the character in the scripture who is doing the talking is talking about humans being made or becoming perfect. I don't know about you but this seems really strange to me. We've known since Adam and Eve that human beings are far from perfect creations. In fact, I've often wondered why God, a God that many people these days think is infallible and perfect, would make living beings who were so broken and imperfect as we are. Down throughout biblical history God has made and relied upon individuals who were far from I would call perfect. Just look at King David as a leading example! Talk about a flawed individual who committed adultery and murder! And what about Peter who denied he even knew Jesus three times! Yet, these two individuals who are esteemed by people of faith are the heroes of our biblical stories. David and Peter were all too human, yet it is they who we honor as important characters in the stories we base our Jewish and Christian faiths upon.

So if people like the Corinthians and David and Peter could become perfect, maybe we should take a little closer look at just what being perfect means. Now, for the most part, our Christian scriptures were written in Greek. And when we look at the word "perfect" in Greek we find that at its root is the word, *tēlos*, which has the meaning of an "end" or a "goal." Aha! Now we begin to get some insight into what the New Testament writers are talking about when they talk of being perfect. It's not necessarily about what we are now but what we might become in the end or what the goal of our faith in God is about. Let's move on to the word used by the Pauline writer when he is telling the cats in Corinth that they must become perfect. The word used in Second Corinthians is *τέλειος*. In the Greek of that day, and in other Greek writings, the adjective means "whole," or "full," or "mature," or even "dedicated." In Matthew the word "perfect" carries the "sense of 'whole' or 'undivided.'" In the Pauline corpus of letters 'whole' seems to be what being perfect is about.¹

Now the picture is becoming clearer. When Jesus was commissioning his disciples, as flawed and doubtful as they were, he knew of their faults and shortcomings better than anyone. In fact, he probably knew things about them that they would not even admit to themselves. Yet, he still went ahead and placed the future of his movement, of God's work in this world, into their hands. Even those disciples who had doubts about him or about themselves or doubts about their mission or their capabilities were entrusted to go out and preach and teach and care for the God's flock. And God certainly knew the faults of King David and Moses and Solomon and Saul and yet they were made leaders of the people of Israel. They were entrusted with the physical and spiritual well-being of God's chosen people.

¹ See Bromley, Geoffrey W. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, Eds. (Grand Rapids, MICH: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), pp. 1161-1165.

I think what the message to us today is, that even with all the mistakes we make, with all the thoughts we think that fall short of compassion and honesty, if we truly love and believe and have faith in God that we can indeed be trusted to be disciples. Even if we have doubts about God or about our capabilities God still loves us in all our “wholeness.”

I do not think that “perfect” has the sense or meaning of being without spot or blemish. Rather it has the meaning of being able to live our lives in the full sense of what it means to be a human in relationship with God. It means turning over all our shortcomings, all the times we miss the mark, and realizing that we worship a God of infinite mercy and grace who will save us from ourselves no matter what. Being perfect is trusting in the truth of a loving merciful, generous, and grace bestowing God, while recognizing that we will fall short from time to time. And that includes your pastor. How else can the writers of the letter to the Corinthians “rejoice when [they] are weak and [other believers] are strong?” In our weakness, we are perfect, because it is only then when we realize how dependent we are on a God of love and mercy that we have a chance to be *perfect or complete or whole*.

In those moments when we are strong and on top of the world, we too easily can get the sense that what is happening to us is the result of our own works and actions. When, indeed, much of what has happened to us up until those moments when things are going well is the result of God’s nudging us in the direction we have gone. In moments when we realize that all of the good that has happened to us *is perhaps not our own doing* we can more fully appreciate what God has done for us.

Even when we have doubts, just as some of the disciples on that mountain had who had witnessed the resurrection of Jesus, God can still send us out to be disciples—we can still be whole. Through the fruits of God’s grace we can still help the oppressed. In fact, when we *do not have doubts* about some aspects of God, or our relationship with God, we can get into dangerous territory; because when we think we know specifically what God wants, or what God is, is one way that people get into trouble and cause a lot of trouble for their neighbors. No one knows the mind of God, or can know the mind of God at least on this side of eternity. Our doubts keep us humble and open to sharing our faith in a diverse and pluralistic world that God has created. We can turn over our doubts to God. Only when we become so sure in our thinking and believe that our way is the only way to God do we become *imperfect*. So, let us be the *perfect mess* that God created. And let us become whole and complete in our love and faith of God and our neighbor. Amen.

Copyright © 2017 by Kevin M. Smith. All rights reserved. The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. All rights reserved.