

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**

**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**

**Church Year A**

**2/19/17**

**Epiphany 6**

**Matthew 5:38-48**

I have a confession to make. I am afflicted by many sins. I'm not going to bore you with all of them because, well, most of them are just that. Boring. Probably a lot like yours. But one of my sins that I will share with you this morning is one some of you will also know well. The sin of perfectionism. That's right. I believe perfectionism is a sin. It's a sin because when we are holding ourselves to the standard of perfection, we are imagining that we are supposed to be like God.

That will never happen of course, and so the perfectionist beats himself up and criticizes himself and twists herself into knots because she can't do the impossible. Be like God. And perfectionism has some pretty interesting symptoms – like procrastination. When I was a young lawyer, I suffered from this symptom. It really devilled me. It was hard for me to get big projects started because subconsciously I knew it would never be done perfectly, so why bother to start?

Talk about being in a bind. So I went to see a psychotherapist. She was helpful about lots of things but about my procrastination issues, well, not so much. So one day I read an article in the paper about a seminar for procrastinators. Well, since that was me, I thought I'd better go. So a few evenings later, I walk into the lecture hall and I'm pleased to see a few other lawyers I know, a couple CPAs of my acquaintance, a stockbroker or two – all of us, fellow procrastinators. I was not alone! And then, a few minutes later, who should walk into the lecture hall but my therapist. And she wasn't there to teach the class. No, she too, was a procrastinator. No wonder we couldn't solve my issue in her office!

Now as I've gotten a little older and maybe even a little wiser over the years, I've let go of any perfectionism. I've realized I don't have to be perfect because, thank God, I don't have to be my own Savior. I've already got a Savior. And because Jesus is my Savior, I don't have to be my own Savior. That's mostly what perfectionism is about. Our attempt to perfect **ourselves**, you see?

So why am I going on and on about perfectionism when we just heard Jesus say a minute ago, "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect"? Because it turns out that what Jesus is really saying is a lot more interesting than perfectionism.

But first let's get more perspective on this. We meet Jesus this morning at the end of Chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel. He's concluding the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, a sermon which starts with the Beatitudes at the beginning of Chapter 5 and finally finishes at the end of chapter 7. He does go on for a while. You'll recall we heard the Beatitudes three Sundays ago, those descriptions of life in the Kingdom of Heaven. And there's one I want us to particularly remember this morning. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Bookmark that one, OK? And then Jesus goes on to talk about certain behaviors and attitudes that don't have any place in the Kingdom. And in last Sunday's very fine sermon we heard Fr. Steve point out to us that the underlying thread in all of these counterproductive behaviors was anger. Anger that gets acted out in very destructive ways. And now this morning we hear the culmination. Forget an eye for an eye, Jesus says. Responding to violence with violence only creates more violence. Have the courage to break out of the cycle of violence. Because this is what is happening in the coming Kingdom. In Jesus, God is breaking the cycle of violence and embracing the enemies of God.

Which leads directly to the next and perhaps, hardest, of Jesus observations.

"Love your enemies", he says. "Riiiiight," we say. "Riiiiight." Tell me the truth, now, in your heart of hearts, you don't really want to love your enemies. You want to destroy them. Come on, now. You know it's true. And I'm really only half-way kidding. There is something deep in our reptilian brain that wants to destroy anything that we feel threatened by. Like those who oppose us. Whether it's something as remote as an ISIS militant to something a little closer to home like a political or cultured figure you detest, to something really close to home like a creepy co-worker or a family member you're in conflict with. Hard to imagine loving them, isn't it? Hard because it's abstract. OK. Here I am, "loving my enemy". What does that even mean? And then Jesus tells us to do something about it. Pray for them. Pray for your enemy. And not because your prayer will necessarily change your enemy's heart, although it might. But because praying for your enemy will sure change **your** heart. Praying for your enemy will break your own heart out of the cycle of violence. And you won't ever change the violence in the world without first changing the violence in your own heart.

Remember, it's not just "over there." It's also "right here." Don't just take Jesus' word for it. Try it this afternoon. Go home and begin praying for someone you detest. Pray for someone who scares you. Pray for someone whose heart needs changing. And keep it up. See what happens over time. See if you can't locate some compassion for them and for yourself. It doesn't mean you have to condone bad behavior or poor moral choices. Leave that up to God. You can stand up for what is right. You can stand up for God's justice. And you can do that with a kind heart and a humble acknowledgment that at the end of the day it's God alone who will

judge. That's what Jesus means when he goes on to observe that God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and God sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

We are all – and I mean every one of us – children of God made in God's own image. God loves all of God's creations and God is at work healing and redeeming all of creation- including the ones we think of as enemies! So our role is to pray for them. And in praying for them, allow our own hearts to be healed.

So all of this now brings us back around to Jesus' troubling injunction to be perfect just as your Heavenly Father is perfect. First, we need to know that we have a translation issue here. It helps to know that Jesus is actually quoting Moses who says to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy, "Be perfect as the Lord is perfect". The Hebrew word, *tamin* which gets translated into English as "perfect" actually means "whole." Be whole, then, as your Heavenly Father is whole.

That carries a little different sense doesn't it? Be whole. Be complete. And in the Greek in which Matthew's gospel is written, it's the word *telos* that gets translated into English as "perfect." *Telos* means purpose or meaning. So in Greek Jesus would be saying "live into your purpose as your Heavenly Father lives into his purpose." And what is your purpose, yours and mine?

Simple. To love God with all our heart mind and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. To love and serve God single-mindedly and whole heartedly; that's our purpose. That's what it means to live a whole life, a complete life, a life filled with meaning and purpose. Remember the Beatitude we bookmarked? "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God"?

Blessed are those who know that their purpose is life is to love God. Their only purpose. And a life rich and whole and complete flows directly from living into that purpose.

What's your purpose in life? If your honest-to-goodness answer to that question isn't to love God and to love your neighbor, well, you may want to re-think your purpose. No perfectionism allowed here. Just try your best. Let your intention focus on love. Love for everyone. Even the ones you don't like. And then be Whole as your Heavenly Father is Whole. Amen.