

Being Perfect
Matthew 5:21-48
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Jonathan Franzen's latest novel is entitled *Freedom*. It is being hailed by some as an "important" book. Plus, it keeps getting nominated for various awards; however the serious reviews of it are mixed. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks identified two key claims the novel makes: "First, [the novelist] argues that American culture is overobsessed with personal freedom. Second, he portrays an America where people are unhappy and spiritually stunted."

And, I think, that does a pretty good job of capturing the characters in this novel. They, ostensibly, have much personal freedom, but next to nothing to help guide them in living. At one point the main character, Walter Berglund, describes his experience to his best friend,

'This was what was keeping me awake at night,' Walter said. 'This fragmentation. Because it's the same problem everywhere. It's like the internet, or cable TV--there's never any center, there's no communal agreement, there's just a trillion little bits of distracting noise. We can never sit down and have any kind of sustained conversation, it's all just cheap trash and [crappy] development. All the real things, the authentic things, the honest things are dying off. Intellectually and culturally, we just bounce around like random billiard balls, reacting to the latest random stimuli.'

I don't know, maybe sometimes you feel that way. While I don't think this novel describes every person in our contemporary American culture, there is quite clearly a fragmentation, a loss of center and communal agreement, and definitely "a trillion little bits of distracting noise."

Now some of that is a good thing. We are a more diverse, more multi-cultural, more pluralistic culture than we once were. But even that good thing generates anxiety, confusion, and fear in many people. So today we witness all sorts of cultural movements reacting to our nation's diversity.

Ten years after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. After the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. After the tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and the earthquake in Haiti. After the near collapse of the global economy. And in a period where our public political discourse has become toxic and many people wonder if our system we've been so proud of may in fact be broken. . . . It is no wonder that sometimes our anxieties and fears get the best of us. The places we once looked for meaning and nobility just don't seem to provide it anymore.

Which is one reason I perked up last week when I heard NPR review a new book entitled *Reality is Broken*. Its author, Jane McGonigal, is a video game designer and she asserts that video games have become so successful and absorbing because of a simple experience – they

make us happier. But she doesn't think that games are simply escapist fun. She thinks that the things people learn in video games are making them better problem solvers and that game-playing may actually be the solution to solving our biggest global problems. I'm not a gamer. I still own my original Atari's and Nintendo's from the 1980's. I still haven't seen Super Mario Brothers 3 and the highlight of my gaming years was sitting around our dorm our senior year avoiding homework by competing with each other in Super Mario Kart on the Nintendo 64. However, I look forward to reading this book.

In her on-line lectures, McGonigal discusses four skills which she thinks are developed by gamers. Four skills which she thinks will help to save the world. These are:

- 1) Urgent Optimism – which she characterizes as a willingness and ability to act immediately to tackle an obstacle with a feeling that one has a chance to succeed if one works hard enough
- 2) The ability to Weave a Tight Social Fabric – games build connections and relationships and research shows that playing games with people builds trust.
- 3) Blissful Productivity – gamers realize that people are happier when they are working hard than when they are simply relaxing
- 4) Epic meaning – They take on awe-inspiring missions of planetary risk.

What intrigued me about this list of gaming skills was that they sound a lot like what the church ought to be – a hopeful community where you can build relationships, enjoy your service, engage in awe-inspiring missions, and develop a sense of epic meaning for your life. Living out our faith within the context of the congregation ought to engage our deepest passions, ought to be a way that we tackle global problems and change the world. The adventure of the Christian mission ought to be addressing that fragmentation we are experiencing in our culture.

So, I want us to keep these ideas from popular culture in mind as we engage this most challenging section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Here are six paragraphs wherein we get teaching on anger, lust, divorce, oaths, non-retaliation, and loving enemies. Clearly the few minutes I have to talk this morning will not exhaust those topics or even explore all the various possible interpretations of these paragraphs. We could have entire sermons or even sermon series on each one of these themes. My objective this morning is to give some sense of how we might interpret and apply the overall meaning of the passage.

First off, I don't think we should read this sermon as a list of rules or a finely argued ethical treatise. Instead, I think Jesus is trying to get us to think. To use our imaginations. To picture some of the scenarios he presents. In his sermon here he engages in some rhetorical devices, such as using hyperbole, so we would wildly misinterpret if we took everything literally as some absolute rule for behavior.

But that is not to let us off the hook. This passage of the sermon challenges us. It confronts us with topics we might otherwise like to avoid. In some places it presents that moral ideal which we are always aiming for.

So, one thing I think we should do when reading this passage is to relax. We should particularly let go of any guilt or shame that might arise in us. I think part of what Jesus is telling us here is that we've all done the wrong thing at some point in our lives. To borrow a phrase from St. Paul, we have all sinned. And in doing so we have fallen short of what God has

hoped for each of us.

But I don't read this message from Jesus as one of commendation. Rather, what I hear is more, "We've all done wrong, now let's figure out how to get better. How can we help each other to heal and live in peace together?"

Anna Wierzbicka interprets the key message of this passage "God wants more." Jesus builds upon the moral teachings of Judaism and the Greco-Roman culture and in every instance tells us some way that "God wants more." But, she is clear, Jesus doesn't expect some sort of super-human ethical achievement on our part. Quite simply, Jesus is inviting us to live with God. And part of living with God is learning to see and treat other people the way God does – with love. The core message, according to Wierzbicka, is that the more that God wants of us is to learn how to treat one another with love.

And it does so in some important ways. She lists three. First, Jesus is concerned with more than our behavior toward others – our thoughts and desires count as well. Second, if we learn to treat other people with love, then we can be set free from some of our most destructive and aggressive impulses, like anger and lust and lying. Third, Jesus is quite clear that absolutely everyone comes into the scope of those we are to do good things for and refrain from doing bad things to.

The Medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor developed a similar interpretation to the Sermon on the Mount. He believed that when all human goods and blessings are loved as gifts from God, then our soul remains centered, and we experience freedom. But when our desires become distorted then we experience a "despoiling" of our human nature. Part of loving another person is learning to enjoy the blessings and gifts they have received. But pride, envy, and anger begin to distort that, as we desire another's goods for ourselves.

Pope John Paul II caused a controversy in 1980 when, referring to this passage on lust in the Sermon on the Mount, the former pope said that a man could commit adultery in the heart if he lusted after his own wife. The public controversy failed to note the nuances of the pope's position, which William T. Cavanaugh clarifies:

Adultery in the heart can take place even within marriage if the man treats his wife 'only as an object to satisfy instinct.' Lust is the objectification of the other and is therefore the opposite of true desire. True desire seeks to unite, rather than to divide into relations of objectification and domination.

The former Roman Catholic priest and liberation theologian Leonardo Boff described the Christian view of desire as positive, joyful, and creative because it is directed toward "union with God, with others, and with all of creation." For Boff, what Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount was liberate our creative energies, not to be burdened by the hindrances that had denied our freedom.

So, when we read these challenging passages on anger, lust, and how we should treat our spouses, God does want something more of us than what our human nature might normally want to do. God wants us to become more like God. To view other people the way God does. To treat them the way God does. We should refrain from doing bad things to people. We should do good things for them. We should not treat them as objects of our own pleasure. We should not use other people to advance ourselves or get our own way. We

should treat other people as beings with worth and dignity possessing their own desires and gifts. And at the core of all of these paragraphs, that is the message.

Jesus also says that the more we treat other people this way, the more we will be set free from our destructive and aggressive impulses. For example, I believe that Jesus doesn't condemn anger itself. I believe that Jesus condemned the desire to do something bad to someone because you are angry with them. This is very different from seeing someone do something wrong or unjust or violent and getting angry and wanting to do something about it. I think God does want us to get angry in those situations and want to do something about it. God just doesn't want us to do something bad to that person in return. Learning to train our anger and our actions in this way takes time, maturity, and spiritual formation.

Dale Allison takes this one step further and says that the point of Jesus' teaching on anger isn't for us to learn how to subdue our passions. It is, rather, about the formation of a people who go about the "often awkward task of trying to right perceived wrongs." He writes, "Anger should . . . be dealt with – by becoming the opportunity for repairing broken relationships. It is when rapport and harmony are established with the objects of anger that anger disappears."

I would only disagree by saying I believe it is both. Jesus is talking about how we form our own desires to become more like God. We do that, however, in a group of disciples, the church, who are committed to following the way of life Jesus taught us.

This is the position theologian Stanley Hauerwas takes, and I find his interpretation the most engaging and challenging. Here is what Hauerwas writes,

Anger and lust are bodily passions. We simply are not capable of willing ourselves free of [them]. . . . Rather, [Jesus] offers us membership in a community in which our bodies are formed in service to God and for one another so that our anger and our lust are transformed. . . . [He] is not recommending that we will our way free of lust or anger, but rather he is offering us membership in a people that is so compelling we are not invited to dwell on ourselves or our sinfulness. . . .

Jesus offers us participation in a kingdom that is so demanding we discover we have better things to do than to concentrate on our lust. If we are a people committed to peace in a world of war, if we are a people committed to faithfulness in a world of distrust, then we will be consumed by a way to live that offers freedom from being dominated by anger and lust.

Using Hauerwas' wonderful interpretation is how I think the Sermon on the Mount addresses the concerns of popular culture that I opened this sermon with. Many people today experience fragmentation. Like the characters of Jonathan Franzen's novel, they have no center, no source from which to make decisions, and they experience their freedom as emptiness rather than joy or meaning. And, according to Jane McGonigal, thousands of people are turning to video games because they provide the hope, adventure, community, and meaning that is lacking from reality.

What Jesus offers us in the Sermon on the Mount is not a difficult set of moral rules. Jesus offers us a challenge. An adventure. Something that requires more of us. Something that requires hard work. But hard work done in relationship with other people. And the payoff

is a life of hope and joy and epic meaning.

Jesus calls his disciples, us, to be people who treat our enemies with the same goodness as we treat those who are closest to us. To be a people who subvert oppressive and violent situations with the possibility for another way of living. Who speak truthfully and plainly at all times, because that's what people deserve. Who engage in spousal relationships of mutual respect. Who don't treat others as a sexual object existing merely for our own pleasure. And who seek reconciliation of broken relationships rather than satisfying our own desires for revenge. To become a people developing these habits with one another. And that is what it means to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is.