

“Perfect”
May 24, 2020
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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2 Corinthians 12:2-10

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

When I was twenty-five years old – still in seminary, still young, still eager, and still very inexperienced in ministry – I spent the summer serving as a hospital chaplain in Birmingham, AL. This work was through a pastoral training program called Clinical Pastoral Education (or CPE), and it was *intense*. I had five other colleagues working with me – also seminary students – along with our supervisor, a wise and judicious Methodist pastor named Jacque. At least three times a week, we would gather together, share our experiences, share our challenges, and try to learn from our mistakes.

One time, as I was telling the group about a visit I had made earlier that week where I had become frustrated when I had forgotten the words to the Lord’s Prayer (yes, I forgot the words to the Lord’s Prayer), Jacque interrupted, gently, sagely: “Mary Beth, I would like to take a step back and suggest here that you might struggle with perfectionism. Does that sound right to you?”

I looked at her like she was speaking Hungarian. “Well, yeah, I like to do things well, as perfectly as I am able. I don’t like to make mistakes, for sure. But I don’t see... I don’t see how that’s a bad thing.”

Jacque just smiled, tenderly, and offered, “Well, we’ll work on it.”

Maybe I was supposed to “work on it,” but I sure didn’t know how. And for months– *years*, even – after that summer, I would often look back on Jacque’s words, still puzzled, still wondering what exactly she was talking about, still doubting that perfectionism could ever really be a bad thing.

But just recently, I’ve come to see that Jacque may have really been onto something: *I* may want to be perfect, but God has got other ideas.

Have you heard of this thing called the humble brag? That’s where you brag about yourself without *seeming like* you’re bragging about yourself. I guess it happens a

lot on Twitter: “Can you believe they let me into Princeton?”/ “I’m just trying to understand why I would’ve won this prestigious award when there are so many other qualified candidates out there!” People probably think it’s a new concept – this humble brag – but it’s not at all. Clearly the Apostle Paul perfected it some 2000 years ago.

In our scripture passage for today, from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, Paul attempts a common variation of the humble brag: the let-me-tell-you-about-my-“friend” brag :“I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven.... On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast... so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.”

You see...I have this friend. And he’s really something! He’s seen things that most people will never see – my friend, I mean. Isn’t he something?

Paul is just a little too transparent here. You don’t have to be a Bible scholar to see that Paul is talking about himself and his own “exceptional” revelations. Paul wants to brag – but he doesn’t want to be *caught* bragging, so he tries to do it in a sneaky way, by talking about his “friends.”

And, friends, it doesn’t really work. We know what he’s up to.

It’s easy to poke fun at Paul, who is so clearly wanting to brag about himself ... but he’s a complicated guy, that Paul! Because I think that the Apostle Paul really *does* want to be humble, even despite his tendency – even despite his temptation – to brag.

In other words: Paul is human. And I think that may be the point. I don’t want to ignore the last part of this passage, where, after Paul gets his bragging out, he suddenly shifts, beautifully and movingly, into speaking about his struggle with this *very* thing:

“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.” Paul goes on to describe how he begs God – not once, not twice but *three whole times* – to remove the thorn. But of course, that doesn’t work. Instead, God says to him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Wow. What a concept. God’s grace is enough. God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

A few years ago, I read a wonderful book co-authored by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham called *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. I read a lot of books, and that means I *forget* a lot of books, but this one has really stayed with me. In the book, the authors argue that to be human is to be imperfect, and that this is not only a good thing, it’s a *necessary* thing for leading a spiritual life. Without our imperfections, in other words – without our cracks, without our broken places – we’d never be able to let God in. There would be no *room* to let God in. So, imperfection is the crack in the armor, the “wound” where God is able to enter.¹ Though this was written just 25 years ago, it sounds a heck of a lot like the Apostle Paul 2000 years ago.

Even imperfect, braggy, puffed-up Paul – he gets this. “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” For whenever I am weak, then I am strong. Yes, Paul struggles with himself, his humanness, his thorns; he struggles mightily with this stuff: *and this is precisely the point*. Without his humanness, without his struggles,

¹Kurtz, Ernest and Ketcham, Katherine, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*. (Bantam Books, 1992), page 28.

without his thorns, without his cracks and his broken places, there would be no way that Paul could ever really have a spiritual life.

Without these cracks, God would have nowhere to enter.

Speaking of thorns in the flesh, I've got a couple, for sure. And their names are Ellie and Wil. Now, don't get me wrong, I love my kids. But I don't have to tell you that parenting is hard. And for the last nine weeks or so, in the midst of COVID19, parenting has been *especially* hard. I know a lot of y'all know exactly what I'm talking about.

There have been a lot of times over these last nine weeks when I have felt like a complete and utter failure as a parent. I feel overwhelmed, I lose patience. How are we supposed to do our work, and teach our kids, all at the same time? There have been plenty of times that I really don't think I can do this at all.

And Church, it's at these very moments, if I can get still for just a breath or two, where I sometimes hear a voice say to me: "Mary Beth, my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness."

"The spirituality of imperfection begins with the recognition that trying to be perfect is the most tragic human mistake,"² write Kurtz and Ketcham in the introduction to that book I love so much. Now I'm begging to wonder if this is exactly what my supervisor Jacque was talking about so many years ago when I was in that CPE program. I didn't get it then, and I don't totally get it now, but maybe now, as I feel like a failure in so many ways, I am starting to get it just a little more.

What's been so hard over these last several weeks – heck, what's been so hard over my *whole lifetime* – is that I want so badly to be perfect, to not fail, to not fall. I want to be the perfect mom, the perfect pastor, the perfect wife, the perfect daughter, the perfect student, the perfect Christian. But God wants nothing to do with my perfectionism: "My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness."

In their book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Kurtz and Ketcham make the claim that, in admitting that we are imperfect, we begin the journey of truly connecting to one another. And over these last nine weeks, I have found this to be so true, as I've really had to lean hard on God, and on other people.

I am becoming better at admitting to myself, to God and to you that this stuff is hard. This time of COVID is especially hard. I am getting better at asking colleagues and friends for help, for guidance. "How are you doing this, or that, during this strange season?" I am getting a little better at saying out loud that I don't know what the future holds, so I'm not sure how exactly all this is going to work. Admitting I can't do it all, admitting I need help, admitting I'm not perfect... this stuff does not come naturally to me. But in these last weeks, if only for a moment, I am finding that God's grace *is* sufficient; that God's power is being made perfect in my weakness.

I'm not perfect, and I never will be. This is my thorn, and this is my gift.

May it be the same for you.

Thanks be to God.