

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 3, 2023 (Proper 17, Year A)
Matthew 16:21-28
Romans 12:9-21

Have you ever wondered what a perfect Christian looks like? St. Paul gives us a pretty good description in our reading from Romans today. Listen to it again.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Wow! Pretty nice, huh? I think EVERY Christian is TRYING to live their life like that.

Now let me ask another question. By a show of hands, how many of you think this description ALREADY describes YOU? None of you? No, me either. This is a description of the type of person we would LIKE to be. We're not THERE yet. A Christian is ALWAYS in the process of BECOMING a better person, of RECEIVING new life. This is the process that God is WORKING in our hearts.

So, you know, I heard it again this week, and frankly, I'm getting tired of it. I heard someone say that they don't like the church because it's full of HYPOCRITES. Have you heard that before? Well, OF COURSE it is! And there's always room for one more. We're SINNERS – that's why we're HERE. We KNOW that we NEED GOD. That's why we START church EVERY Sunday with the confession of our sins— because we KNOW we're sinners and we ADMIT it, and we do confession FIRST so we can be HONEST with God in our worship. The church isn't a museum for SAINTS or a social club for PERFECT people; it's a HOSPITAL for HURTING people.

There's NO SUCH THING as a PERFECT Christian, and I have proof. Let's take the best example the Bible has to offer – Peter, the rock. Last week we heard him say WHO Jesus is, "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," and Jesus announced that his confession is the ROCK the church is built on.

But even the BEST disciple sticks his foot in his mouth. Jesus wanted to teach the disciples what FOLLOWING the Messiah would mean. It says, "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Now this is pretty IMPORTANT STUFF! But what does Peter do? He takes Jesus aside and rebukes Him—REBUKES JESUS! "Forbid it, Lord, that these things should happen to you."

Jesus' response to Simon Peter is as harsh as any words in the New Testament: "Get behind me Satan! You are not on the side of God, but of man." For Jesus, the path to glory goes THROUGH the CROSS. "If any want to become my followers, let them DENY THEMSELVES and take up their CROSS and follow me." Ignore THAT, avoid the CROSS, and even the most vocal, well-intentioned disciple can become a STUMBLING block, even one who, just VERSES BEFORE, had been PRAISED and called the ROCK.

AND YET, AND YET (and this is the amazing part), Jesus didn't take BACK his promise. Poor, imperfect, always saying the wrong thing, Peter was STILL the rock on which he would build the church.

And you know, I think many people have a hard time ACCEPTING that – that Jesus built, and CONTINUES to build, the church with IMPERFECT, sinful human beings. They keep looking for the PERFECT church, and the perfect PASTOR. The problem is, a PERFECT church wouldn't need JESUS.

A seminary classmate of mine wrote this brief autobiography about himself. He wrote:

For the record, I am 45 years old, three times divorced, four times married, a convicted felon, a biker and a former businessman. I struggled for nearly fifteen years with my sense of call, asking what congregation in their right mind would call ME as a pastor. The answer from a pastor friend of mine was that the ONLY kind of church that would CALL me would be one that had REAL sinners in it, people with REAL problems who wanted to see the Lord at work in the lives of REAL people. In other words, the Body of Christ.

We might push it FURTHER: What congregation in their right mind would want SIMON PETER as their pastor? Most of the time when he spoke, he said the WRONG thing. Jesus even called him "Satan!" and a "stumbling block." He publicly denied even KNOWING Jesus THREE times. And yet, he's the FOUNDATION on which Jesus built the church.

A certain congregation was in the call process, and the call committee was having trouble finding a pastor that could MEET their STANDARDS. One day the chairman brought the following LETTER from a pastor who asked that his name be CONSIDERED for call. The chairman read the letter to the call committee:

I am not considered a good preacher, though I consider myself a strong leader. I have also done some writing.

I am over 50 years old now, and while my health is not the best, I still manage to get a lot of work done.

As for references. I have never preached anywhere for more than three years. And most of the churches I have preached in have been small, even though they were located in rather large cities. I had to leave some places because my ministry caused riots and disturbances. I also did not get along too well with OTHER religious leaders. I have also been threatened and physically attacked. I have even gone to jail several times for my preaching.

I am not particularly good at keeping records. I have to admit I don't even remember all those whom I've baptized.

However, if you can use me, I should be pleased to be considered.

When the chairman finished reading the letter, the committee members were AGHAST. How could ANYONE think that a church like THEIRS would consider a man who was nothing but a troublemaking, absentminded, ex-jail bird?

"Who is this man?" one demanded.

"Well," said the chairman, "the letter is SIGNED, PAUL."

There's NO SUCH THING as the PERFECT pastor.

There's no such thing as the "perfect CHURCH" EITHER. It's made up of people, which means there IS SIN, there are flaws and faults. One time I was struggling with something happening in my church, and one of my mentors, an older pastor, said this: "Reggie, the church is kind of like Noah's Ark—if it wasn't for the raging storm outside, we couldn't handle the smell inside." Unfortunately, because we are a gathering of people, sometimes we do hurt each other in the church. But we can forgive each other, and that's better than the alternative.

There's a poem that says,

If you could find the perfect church
Without one fault or smear,
For goodness sake, don't join that church.

You'd spoil the atmosphere.
But since no perfect church exists
Where people never sin,
Let's cease looking for that church
And love the one we're in!

Sure, the church is made of IMPERFECT people, but God's USING us anyway. God's BUILDING the church UPON us. No matter WHAT our skills, God USES us to BUILD the church. And PERFECTION ISN'T in the job description.

As the saying goes, "Be patient, God's not finished with me yet." We know what a perfect Christian looks like. "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." And all the rest of those beautiful traits. But we're not THERE yet. If we were, Paul wouldn't NEED to GIVE us that goal. But it IS our GOAL. We're a work in PROGRESS.

The Bible is FULL of people who were NOT QUALIFIED for the job. Jacob cheated, Peter had a temper, David had an affair, Noah got drunk, Jonah ran from God, Paul committed murder, Gideon was insecure, Miriam gossiped, Martha worried, Thomas doubted, Sara was impatient, Elijah was moody, Moses stuttered, Zacchaeus was short, Abraham was old, and Lazarus was DEAD.... God doesn't call the qualified; He qualifies the CALLED!

Today, it's our turn. God calls us, and DOESN'T ask if we're SUITABLE...only if we're AVAILABLE. God KNOWS you're NOT PERFECT, but you ARE the "perfect" PERSON for the JOB.

Jesus said, "If ANY want to become my followers, let them DENY THEMSELVES and take up their CROSS." DENY YOURSELF. DENY your DOUBTS about your WORTHINESS, deny your CONCERNS about your BUSINESS, deny YOURSELF.

The cross of our LORD is a SACRIFICE for the sake of the world. YOUR cross is what YOU sacrifice for ANOTHER, for SOMEONE ELSE.

So DENY YOURSELF, deny ANY STUMBLING block that would GET in your way, and TAKE UP your CROSS.

If Peter and Paul could do it, so can YOU. Amen.