

For most of my life I have been plagued by something that has affected every area of my life. I have been plagued by an incessant urge and need to strive for perfection. About fourteen years ago, I had to take a very good look at myself. I had to face myself to understand why I was so driven by this need and I began to fully realize how harmful this striving had been not only for me but also for those around me. So, today, I stand before you and openly acknowledge my struggle as I say my name is Ellen Schoepf and I am a **recovering perfectionist**.

I say this to you now because, when I read today's gospel and hear Jesus say, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect," my gut reaction is to say, "Jesus, I have struggled most of my life to be perfect and it was so very unhealthy! Now, you are saying, 'Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect?' I cannot go back to living like that again! I know from experience that, in our hectic, ego-driven world, you giving us such a directive not only creates great anxiety but also legitimizes all sorts of unhealthy Type A behavior."

Well, what Jesus means by "perfect" in today's reading is not a command to be *flawless*. The word translated as "perfect" in today's gospel comes from the Greek word *telos* and it implies less a moral

perfection than it does reaching one's intended outcome. For example, the *telos* of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach its target. The *telos* of an apple tree is to yield apples. And, the root meaning of the word also means *undivided, whole, complete*. As theologian, Fred Craddock, suggests "perfect" might better be translated as "complete" or better yet, "mature."

Ronald J. Allen writes, "It means perfection in the sense of treating people in the same way that God treats people in the divine realm." Perfect "is not here referring to moral flawlessness but to love that is **not** partial or immature." You see, as Jesus continues to preach, addressing us as a community, he is saying, "Be the person and loving community God created you to be, just as God is the Three in One God who is all about loving relationship. Be the community of loving relationship that we know God to be." To be perfect is to love in the way God loves, to practice the way of compassion and giving as God has demonstrated to us in Jesus. This perfection is all about love, a love which is self-giving, self-emptying. It is a love that is always geared toward the "other," and has little to do with our concepts of perfection. It is a love that takes us **out** of our nervous, narcissistic self-concern and **into** relationships within the community and with all those we consider "other." Following the teaching of Jesus, then, leads to wholeness and completeness in all aspects of life and in all

people, not by focusing on self but by focusing on our living and loving the other.

Jesus' words about being perfect are not words of command to us. They are words of promise telling us what community shaped around him looks like. You see, in the life and ministry of Jesus, God is about the business of creating a whole **different** kind of world, a new world called the kingdom of God. He is about the business of creating a new community in the midst of an old one. From the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount which we began hearing three weeks ago, Jesus has been telling us in a variety of ways just what this new community looks like. And, when we understand what he means by "perfect," we can better understand what he is saying to us in the first part of our gospel reading for today.

In today's reading, Jesus deepens both the meaning of the Law and the obligation of the hearers. He addresses this new community **not** as a place where retributive justice renders an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" even though this interpretation is more appealing to **our** need for a swift, concise, sense of justice. Jesus says our obligation lies **not** in retribution against another but in requiring more from the **self** and from the redeemed community he is creating. He says, "If anyone strikes you, turn the other cheek, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you."

Jesus' admonitions are **truly** more difficult to follow because they lie **not** in retribution against another, something that is our knee-jerk reaction, but in requiring **more** from our very **selves**. Jesus is creating this whole new community where the love that is given and shared is not one of vengeful retaliation but a love that even extends to our enemies. This is love in action.

Jesus does not call us to an easy life that is drenched in fuzzy warm feelings. No, Jesus calls us to discipleship and that always means not just mingling with those we consider "other," but **embracing** them. Jesus calls and challenges us to enter into a way of life that is sometimes uncomfortable. You see, the Christian life is not a passive life. Discipleship is a very active and intentional way of living. It means seeing God in the "other," as God sets **no** bounds in loving. Quite honestly, we would rather stay inside the boundaries we create because that is where we feel comfortable. However, if we stay inside those comfortable boundaries, wars, racism, ageism, sexism, and prejudice of all kinds will continue.

We live in a world that is an "all about me" world. And, Jesus comes into our lives and offers an alternative that we find difficult to imagine and embody. Can we really turn the other cheek, love our enemies, and pray

for those who persecute us? David Lose, when blogging about today's reading says:

No, not perfectly. On some days, maybe not at all. But that's not really the point. It's not our job to **bring** in the kingdom; Jesus does that. It's our job to live like we really **believe** Jesus actually **is** bringing in God's kingdom, and to realize that we get to **practice** living like Jesus' disciples and **citizens** of this new kingdom in the meantime.

This approach doesn't forget or even minimize the presence of sin in us or in the world. But neither does it assume God is limited by our sin. Rather, it takes seriously that we are always being called by Jesus to be **more** than we thought we could and invited to claim our identity as God's chosen and beloved people as we live in the world. Jesus' message here – returning hate with love, turning the other cheek, praying for those who stand against us – is incredibly counter-cultural. I mean, this will **not** win you an election. But it may help change the world for the better. Change, not save. Again, that's Jesus' job.

Jesus is bringing into being a new kingdom and shifting all authority from what **was** and had been to something new, to **himself** – God's word made flesh and dwelling in our midst. Because of Jesus, God's realm is already present and moving toward fulfillment. Within us already are the marks of those fully embraced by God and empowered by God's will. Jesus calls us to **maturity** that results in more Godlike behaviors and motivation.

With the words of today's reading, Jesus seeks neither to set impossible goals nor to shame people who cannot reach perfection.

Instead, he sets forth God's vision of God's world where genuine and unconditional love reigns. The reign of God is inaugurated in the person of Jesus, and we, Jesus' followers, are empowered by his witness to **live** the reign of **God's values**.

Yes, I am a recovering perfectionist, and no, Jesus is not calling me to be flawless. "Be perfect" is not an indictment; it is a **promise** that carries the possibility that we may love the world as God has loved us – fully, richly, abundantly, and completely.