

‘Foolish Perfection’
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based on 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 and Matthew 5:38-48

Please pray with me:

Amazing God, we seek your blessing in offering and receiving these words. May they be a reflection of your grace; a testimony to your power; and a way for us to move forward into the days and weeks ahead.

Amen.

Today Jesus has some amazing and challenging advice for us wayfaring Jesus followers. He says: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

How many of us feel like we are able to live into that level of God perfection? Me either.

Yet Jesus seemed to think we are capable of it.

Jesus draws the circle of law wide and wider still. The laws Moses wrote for the wayfaring Hebrews, Jesus expands. The law said, “²³If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, ²⁴eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

Jesus preached it was no longer enough that retribution of this sort was ok. God expected more!

Why? It wasn’t because human beings didn’t need laws, but it was because Jesus said God didn’t behave that way.

God’s level of perfection expands our human laws in order to embrace God’s signature law: grace.

Last week there was an article in the NYTimes called, “The Age of Rudeness” by Rachel Cusk...a woman from Britain who has encountered a higher level of rudeness in people since the Brexit vote and considers the whys and how comes of Britain’s new reality.

It’s a very good read and one that is helpful for many of us here in the U.S. who see a similar rise of rudeness in our country.

Rudeness, Rachel says, is “like a narcotic, offering a sensation of glorious release from jailers no one else can see.”

She sees rudeness as a way to release pent up frustrations, fears and anxiety.

Some 2000 years ago a similar fear and anxiousness must have held captive the people. Jesus could see it ... even when those locked in an ethic of fear could not.

Jesus said the best way to overcome fear was to stop fueling it. If someone slapped you on the cheek, turn and offer your enemy the other cheek.

What better way to dismantle your enemy than to not acknowledge the power of the enemy!

What about going the extra mile?

Imagine a bully, rude-ish, Roman soldier who didn't want to carry his own bag on a long march and so (by law) was able to get a local person to carry his bag for a mile.

Jesus says, after you've carried his bag for a mile, look that big bully of a Roman soldier in the eye and offer to carry the bag a second mile ... and remove the source of power from the rude soldier.

In the first mile you were bound by law; in the second mile you were only bound by love.

Dismantling power with generosity. Is that the answer?

Dismissing fear with love. Is that the answer?

Jesus did say we were not to hate our enemies, but love them.

So 'who are our enemies?'

People who don't agree with us? People who threaten our sense of well-being?
People who threaten our lives? People who are rude?

Perhaps our enemies aren't people? Maybe the true enemies are within us: rudeness, fear, and anxiety?

It's not easy to define accurately who our enemies are.

We go back then, to rudeness, fear and anxiety.

Jesus was all about dismantling fear and anxiety. Why? Because it is fear and anxiety that create alternative gods to worship ... and as Jesus reminded us last week, the very first commandment or law is to love the Lord your God and to have no other gods before him.

Worshipping fear and anxiety as a god creates a new law ... one which gives a person permission to retaliate in rudeness.

As far as I know there is only one way to challenge fear and anxiety which creates rudeness ... and that is with the power of humility and self-sacrifice.

Humility and self-sacrifice is politeness ... the opposite of rudeness.

Humility and self-sacrifice should remind us of something critical in our faith as Jesus followers. It was Jesus' death on the cross that was the ultimate act of politeness that abolished the fear and anxiety of death.

Jesus' act of humility and self-sacrifice was to say that fear is not of God.

Rachel said in her article about rudeness, "What Jesus did was sacrifice himself, use his body to translate word to deed, to make evil visible. While being crucified, Jesus remained for the most part polite. He gave others much to regret. Their regret sustained 2000 years of Christianity. Is regret, then, the most powerful emotion after all?"

My insight into these scripture readings (as well as prior readings from Matthew) is that it isn't so much that Jesus is teaching human beings how to behave ... or what to regret ... but Jesus is teaching us about the nature of God!

When Jesus lists off the commandments that govern social behavior (murder, adultery, divorce, lying, or retaliation) and makes us reach far beyond our comfort zones in confronting rudeness ... what Jesus is really doing is revealing the perfect grace of God!

Do we want to worship a God of revenge that justifies an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth? Or do we want to worship a God of grace, and generosity, and patience, and politeness?

Revenge is easy to attain; grace is perfection.

Jesus is telling us to reach for grace. Engage in acts of humble self-sacrifice. Be polite!
Battle rudeness with politeness.

“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

I’m becoming less and less a fan of Facebook, but this morning I saw a sign that said, “Have you ever wondered why it was a road to hell, but a stairway to heaven?” One is an easy path; the other is a steep climb.

If we truly believe in God’s perfect grace, as a grace of love, justice, peace, reconciliation and politeness then we have to believe perfection is possible ... no matter how foolish a goal it may seem.

Saint Paul tried his hardest to get those unruly, easily distracted Corinthians to follow Jesus’ ethic of love over hate; trust over fear; and politeness over rudeness.

It was a hard sell! Paul’s argument was because love, trust and politeness seemed foolish to most, that was exactly why Jesus demands it!

Rachel concluded her article by saying, “It strikes me that good manners would be the thing to aim for in the current situation. I have made a resolution, which is to be more polite. I don’t know what good it will do: This might be a dangerous time for politeness. It might involve sacrifices. It might involve turning the other cheek.”

Look back at Jesus’ sayings ... he used examples of how God is generous, forgiving, patient and loving. Even though the challenges seem foolish, Jesus insists God’s grace is perfect.

Jesus says, “Give to everyone who begs from you???” My head tells me that’s not feasible. It even sounds a bit foolish.

After all, one of the basic tenants of Christian missiology (the study of mission) is to do good without creating dependence.

Try this: ...

Rather than imagine giving a piece of clothing or money to everyone who begs from you... imagine a person was begging you to be polite? Begging you to be humble? Begging you to not stoop to rudeness, but embrace the foolish and loving way of Christ?

Would you then be more inclined to give to everyone who begs from you?

Do we want to live in a spirit of revenge, fear and rudeness or live in a spirit of grace?

Do we want to strive to be made perfect, like God’s grace is perfect?

Yes!... Because that is God’s most perfect way; foolish or not.