

February 07 2010

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Imperfect”

If we were broadcasting this service on radio or TV, at this point I might be advising listener or viewer discretion. Why? Because I'm going to discuss a topic that may have caused you great anxiety as an adolescent. Your parents modeled it to you, but they may have felt unqualified and too embarrassed to discuss it with you. Some teachers have faced disciplinary action for violating school-district prohibitions against teaching it, with its tense and gender-related aspects and its involvement with moods. The way that foreigners go about it may have opened your eyes and influenced you. Your siblings and age mates misinformed you about it, and some of the people you dated may have infected you for a lifetime. Now, in the age of political correctness, it has gotten embroiled in ethnic, class, and other potentially discriminatory issues. Of course, I am talking about...well...you know...grammar.

I hope, then, that I don't raise anyone's blood pressure too much if I ask you how much you remember about the perfect and *imperfect* tenses of the English language. Perhaps those names never made any sense, especially if your English classes never explained the reasons for the names. When David took Discrete Math at Texas A&M, he found out why so much of the math he had learned before worked; he wished that he could have learned the why and how before the what. To avoid that problem, let's dig down one level into the word "perfect." Simply put, the "p-e-r" part means "through," and the "f-e-c-t" part just means "make" or "do." Put them together and we get "through doing," in other words "finished" or "complete." Remember now? Whether past, present, or future, a perfect tense indicates single or completed action, and an *imperfect tense* indicates ongoing or habitual action. Whew! That completes the grammar. I hope it didn't make anyone too miserable.

However, Isaiah's call to serve as God's prophet made him quite miserable. As we saw with Jeremiah last week, Isaiah complained that his *imperfection* disqualified him for the job. Nathan Nettleton's Ausie paraphrase put it this way:

"This is the end of me. I'll never get out of here alive.

*I can't open my mouth without exposing myself as a sinner
and the same could be said of everyone I know;*

yet I've stumbled into the presence of the Ruler of Heaven.

Here I am, {exposed} before the all-consuming holiness of the Lord."¹

God, though, didn't mind Isaiah's *imperfection*. Last week we read how God touched Jeremiah's lips to overcome his resistance. Now we see God sending an angelic being to touch Isaiah's lips with a burning coal held with a pair of tongs to burn away guilt, sin, and any other impediments. No, God doesn't let *imperfections* get in the way of putting Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or any of us to work accomplishing the divine tasks of proclaiming the good news of grace and of making disciples. None of those great prophets finished their jobs all at once. No, they had to work repeatedly, continually, and habitually at them over time, so we can only use *imperfect* tenses to describe the wondrous things that these *imperfect* men accomplished.

When Jesus got into Simon Peter's boat that morning by the lakeshore, both Peter's crew and the guys in the other boat had just come wearily in from an extremely *imperfect* night of fishing. Neither boat had netted even one fish. In a pattern that should sound familiar by now, Jesus had the no-doubt exhausted Peter keep on trying. When they came up with an overwhelming catch that time, did Peter brag and boast about his fishing prowess? No. He fell to his knees and confessed his *imperfection* and his unworthiness! Wow! Human employers don't give jobs to people who come to job interviews complaining about their own inabilities and faults, but Jesus sure did—just as God had always done. Looks like Jesus, too, prefers to call *imperfect*, but persistent workers. We have to use *imperfect* tenses to describe what they do, because they keep on keeping on, just like the Energizer Bunny®.

That doesn't mean that God in Christ calls us to keep on repeating actions that don't work and to expect different results. Some of our sister churches, including Covenant, have recently worked

through the "Acts 16:5 Initiative" from Stan Ott's Vital Churches Institute.² The pastors of these churches quote Ott as saying that all churches have structures and programs perfectly designed to keep on producing the results that you see in them. In other words, persistence doesn't necessarily mean keeping on doing exactly the same things. So, organizations and habits have to change in order to produce better results. Recognizing the *imperfect* makes improvement possible. Isn't that exactly what Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to do? He called them to leave behind their boats and fishing nets in order to catch people and make them into disciples—and they did!

We see that same thing once again in that passage from First Corinthians from which we derive the creed that we sang last week. Paul recognized and named what made him so *imperfect*. He had persecuted the church before he answered the call of the Christ who loves *imperfect* followers so very much. Paul even pointed out that Christ had died not for our strengths and for our righteousness, but for our *imperfections*, our sins.

Paul is saying, in fact, that God not only forgives our *imperfections*, but even uses them to transform us into effective servants. Ralph Miller forwarded a true, verified, heartwarming story Jasmine, a Greyhound rescued in England. After recovering from starvation, abuse, and abandonment, it seems that Jasmine spontaneously began repaying the kindness she had received by nurturing each new arrival at the shelter. For the past seven years, Jasmine has welcomed, comforted, and sped the recovery of orphaned and abandoned fox and badger cubs, chicks, guinea pigs, rabbits, fawns, and kittens, as well as puppies.² God has turned Jasmine's *imperfect* past into an ongoing, habitual, continuous life of grace and healing.

As sinful creatures, we will continue to live as *imperfect*, albeit redeemed and forgiven, people of God. So we need to learn to make the best of our limitations. I, for one, will always have to deal with my distractibility, but it also bestows creativity and humor. Whatever afflictions and losses we may experience can help us to support and encourage others who must endure similar situations after us. Since God made us *imperfect*, we need to listen for our calling to put our *imperfections* and the lessons that they teach us to good use in Christian service.

Thanks be to God for calling us to faith and discipleship in spite of our faults and failings, and let us celebrate that calling at this sacramental banquet that our perfect God keeps on habitually and continually throwing for us, the *imperfect*. Amen.