

“No Perfect, but Trying”

Ephesians 4.25–5.2

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One of the real strengths of Christianity is that it doesn't demand perfection. None of us has to get it all right, all the time. Of course, you'd never know that from the way some people characterize our faith. A cornerstone of Christian spirituality is the concept of grace: that we are given the opportunity to get as many “do-overs” as we need and that even if we don't think we deserve God's love and forgiveness, it is there in abundance.

Each of us is a work in progress: we each have different life lessons that we are trying to learn. And sometimes it is difficult to let the all-encompassing love of God be the dominant force in our lives while we're trying to learn the lesser things that cause us concern or anxiety.

One of the ways I answer people who ask if I am a Christian is that I'm trying to be. I'm still learning what it means to live a life that conforms even remotely to the models God has set before us, or as the writer of Ephesians says, as “imitators of God.” Being a Christian is not as conclusive as running as football across the goal line...it's more akin to gaining some yardage and then losing a few yards and then gaining a few more. And the cool thing is that it's always the first down.

The problem I think some of us have is that we forget that we're even in the game. We tune out the idea that we are on a journey of transformation and movement, thinking erroneously that everyone we know is already in the end zone. Truly, all of us are still out on the playing field, and none of us has made a touchdown yet.

Going way back into our history, in some Congregational churches in the late 1700s and early 1800s, in order to join a church in full covenant, a prospective member had to show a visible sign of conversion, of having changed their way of life in a very significant and noticeable way. I'm sure that the word “conversion” sets some people's teeth on edge, because it has taken on a strange meaning: for us, it can denote someone who has either lived a really crummy life and then suddenly found Jesus or someone who lived a not-so-crummy life and become frightfully self-righteous. But what it meant to those early Congregationalists was that they had abandoned some of the less-admirable aspects of the culture at large and instead adopted new and better ways of living.

Think for a moment about your own life: is there anyone here who has some aspect of their personality or the way they live that they wouldn't like to have transformed into a more positive expression of life?

If each of us has it all figured out, then we don't really need to work on our “stuff.” We don't need others around us to hold us accountable. And we certainly don't need clergy people challenging us to think about how we might deepen our faith and improve the way we live.

Here is the really cool thing: **none of us is perfect**...none of us has “arrived”...none of us is so cool that we are flawless...none of us has all the answers...none of us is beyond improvement. And God still loves and accepts each of us!

But, it isn't enough to rest on our laurels and say, “Why should I change if God loves me just the way I am?” I don't think stasis is the way life works: we can't stand still without ossifying and becoming lifeless. And that's a great and wonderful challenge in life: there is always room for movement and transformation. And we don't have to get it all right...but we do have to try.

One of the things my son Cameron said rather pointedly after I told him that Jane Anne and I were planning to marry was, “How are you going to keep from screwing up this time?” I didn’t appreciate the tenor of this question from my 16-year-old, but it is something that I have considered long and hard. And after reminding him that it takes two to tango, I acknowledged that I still have a lot to learn not only about marriage, but about nearly everything. And that learning process is transformative; it’s okay not to have it all figured out ahead of time...you just need to start taking steps on the journey. I guarantee that I will make mistakes even though I will try to avoid them, but I’m not going to let the fear of making mistakes paralyze me.



The text from Ephesians provides a list of ten principles we can use to guide our decision-making – or the playbook, to continue with the football analogy. It isn’t an exhaustive list, but if we worked well on these, the world certainly would be different:

speak the truth
 let go of anger (*Anger is okay, but you have to release it.*)
 labor and work honestly
 give generously
 speak gracefully
 put away bitterness and malice
 be kind
 forgive one another
 be imitators of God
 live in love

You can look at that list anytime you want to...it’s in your Bible and the reference is in this morning’s bulletin.

These are fine guidelines for us as individuals, but the context for them is a church community, and as you may know church communities can embody both the best and the worst of human behavior...because the church is a human institution: flawed, but not beyond redemption.

I’ll tell you a quick story about the church I grew up in. It was a large, well-educated church with members who cared deeply about their faith and their church. When I was about 15, I was really involved: as the youth member of a pastoral search committee, part of Pilgrim Fellowship (PF was the youth group), a member of the church council, and I even had a photographic darkroom in a janitor’s closet in the Christian Ed. wing (which was also the first place I ever kissed a girl...but that’s not part of this morning’s story). I loved the church...I basically lived there...I idolized our associate minister.

And then something happened. I don’t even know what the issue was, but the members of the church became polarized. They chose sides to support and then it was as if collective amnesia set in and they forgot how to treat one another with love.

Some of them stopped speaking the truth.
 They held onto their anger.
 They forgot how to speak gracefully to or about one another.
 They allowed bitterness and malice to be the norm, not the exception.
 Cynicism replaced kindness, which was in short supply.
 They couldn’t seem to forgive one another.

And rather than imitating God, they adopted a take-no-prisoners mentality.

This stuff happens in churches, not because people are bad, but because sometimes they forget. They lose track of how we are meant to treat each other, especially

when we gather in Christ's name. I was a kid at the time, and because I was so entrenched in the church and because I used developmentally appropriate black-and-white thinking, I concluded that every one of them was a hypocrite. The political turmoil in my congregation helped me find the way out of the church for more than a decade. Sometimes kids pick up on things that we adults are oblivious to.

Nobody expects churches to be perfect...at least they shouldn't expect that. But we can and ought to expect churches to be on a journey of transformation together. Churches should always be working to live more faithfully and look at their "stuff" and deal with it lovingly and openly. And sometimes feelings get hurt, but in a healthy church, we are able to forgive and move on and grow and learn from the experience.

One of the ways that I have seen Plymouth grow is our ability to address tough issues fearlessly and with love. This is not true in every congregation. During Rick Riddoch's ministry, Plymouth dealt openly and honestly with the issue of becoming Open and Affirming: including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons in every aspect of our life as a community of faith. Yes, some people initially felt hurt, but they eventually felt heard as well. And we are getting a lot better at talking with each other respectfully about the things my mom taught me were impolite dinner-table conversation: politics, sex, religion, and money.

The experience of moving through discomfort and conflict, if done well, can help a congregation to grow stronger and more loving. It is act of living in community and working through "stuff" that helps congregations along a journey of transformation. And it is this kind of positive spiritual transformation that the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians is addressing.



What is it in your life that is still in need of conversion? What are the aspects of the way you live that are still stretching toward wholeness, but haven't quite gotten there?

Conversion isn't about living with the values provided by Madison Avenue or Wall Street...it's about finding patterns of life congruent with the life and teachings of Jesus. It is not an easy path, but one that demands discipline and commitment – not perfection, but working together and relying on God's grace. But, that is what transformation – conversion – is about: lives turned upside down: made whole and holy. May we walk together and discover new ways of continuing to be beloved community for one another and for God's world.

And I have one more thing to tell you...and I'll say this only once: "The Messiah is among you."*

Amen.

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*Children's sermon based on Francis Dorff's story, "The Rabbi's Gift."

*This story has become popular and many of you know Scott M. Peck's version as recounted in his book **The Different Drummer**. However, the earliest version I have been able to trace was penned by Francis Dorff, O. Praem, of the Norbertine Community of Alberquerque, New Mexico, and was published in **New Catholic World** 222 (March-April 1979), 53. **The Rabbi's Gift** has by now appeared in many books, been adapted and gets told in numerous ways. Here is the version that to my knowledge goes back to Francis Dorff.*

A famous monastery had fallen on hard times. Formerly its many buildings were filled with young monks, but now it was all but deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer, and only a handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters serving God with heavy hearts. On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there, from time to time, to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would be passed from monk to monk: 'The rabbi walks in the woods.' And, for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and open his heavy heart to him. So, after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, as if he had been awaiting the abbot's arrival, his arms outstretched in welcome. They embraced like long-lost brothers. The two entered the hut where, in the middle of the room, stood a wooden table with the scriptures open on it. They sat for a moment in the presence of the Book.

Then the rabbi began to weep. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and began to cry too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their shared pain and tears. But soon the tears ceased and all was quiet. The rabbi lifted his head. 'You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts,' he said. 'You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can repeat it only once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again.'

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, 'The Messiah is among you.' For a while, all was silent. The rabbi said, 'Now you must go.'

The abbot left without a word and without ever looking back. The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room. He told them he had received a teaching from the 'rabbi who walks in the woods' and that the teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at the group of assembled brothers and said, 'The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah.' The monks were startled by this saying.

'What could it mean?' they asked themselves. 'Is Brother John the Messiah? Or Brother Matthew or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah? What could all this mean?' They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching, but no one ever mentioned it again. As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a new and very special reverence. A gentle, warm-hearted, concern began to grow among them which was hard to describe but easy to notice. They began to live with each other as people who had finally found the special something they were looking for, yet they prayer the Scriptures together as people who were always looking for something else.

When visitors came to the monastery they found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Word spread, and before long people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks and to experience the loving reverence in which they held each other. Soon, other young men were asking, once again, to become a part of the community, and the community grew and prospered. In those days, the rabbi no longer walked in the woods. His hut had fallen into ruins. Yet somehow, the old monks who had taken his teaching to heart still felt sustained by his wise and prayerful presence.