

“Better Than Perfect”

Rev. David Gregory

August 14, 2022

10th Sunday after Pentecost



Readings

Luke 12:54-56 from the New Revised Standard Version

Jesus said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain,’ and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

“God Broke In Last Night”

a poem by Chelan Harkin in her book *Susceptible to Light*

God broke in last night
and what once used to be
my put together soul
has now become a holy mess!

Thank God, the Great Scrambler,
the Ransacker of Every Bit of the Small-Self,
the Demolition Artist of the Best Laid Plans,
the Intolerant of Too Tidy
the Frustrated with Façade,
the Broken Pot!

I’ll pray to you in a new way now—
it no longer seems perfection
is what we’re getting at.

A few years ago I had in my possession a small planner, with a calendar and a journal. I'm not sure where it came from or where it went. But on its front cover was the phrase "Done is Better Than Perfect." The phrase has stayed with me much longer than the planner itself. The act of calendaring is probably the one thing I have not been able to translate into the digital world, and so I always have a calendar planner each year that is THE calendar. I always use pencil, so when someone says, "Pencil it in," that's no problem for me because I only use pencils on my calendar. Penciling is one of my more moderate religions. So the reason I do not have this other calendar I was talking about is because it was not THE calendar, and so it fell by the wayside. But the phrase on the front cover has been something of a guidepost ever since.

I suspect there are many of us here today with perfectionistic tendencies. In American culture we often apologize for our perfectionism, but underneath the apology we're really just bragging about it. It proves to others—at least in our minds—that we are earnest, that we work hard. We're dependable. We don't give up. Over the years, I've had the opportunity to work with or at least follow some really wonderful writers, mostly memoirists, who often say that "writing is rewriting." I remember a writers' group back in Woodstock where one of the participants, when called upon to read one of her pieces, would read from her laptop instead of paper, and she simply could not read anything without editing as she went. It was excruciating. "Just give us what you've got!" the teacher said. Done is better than perfect.

At some point every creative person has to give in and let the piece stand for itself. You stop painting, you stop sculpting, you stop arranging. You just step back and say "It is what it is." One of the great gifts of my vocation is that each week I have to stop the preparation, the consideration, the honing of phrases, and just present it—whatever it is—to the congregation. Sunday sermons are never perfect, because when it's time to go, it's time to go, and as soon as it's done there's another Sunday coming. What I'd really like to do is apply this urgency to some of my other writing projects. I might actually get something done, which I'm told is "better than perfect."

Poet Chelan Harkin helps us apply this phrase to our spiritual path or the "path of soul," which we often approach with the same perfectionism that we've been talking about. For example, recently I set the timer for exactly twenty minutes so that I could meditate that long, and I got distracted after fourteen minutes, and I felt "now it's all ruined." I thought I'd messed up, when in actuality I had meditated, which was the point in the first place.

Harkin speaks of her soul as a "holy mess," and if we're at all honest, this is how we may feel about our souls a good bit of the time. Things aren't very tidy; we had a plan that didn't work out, or it didn't turn out the way we wanted; we had things in certain categories and those categories got scrambled; now our minds are askew. We can't find anything; we want it all back in the rows and columns, as if our spiritual lives could be contained in an Excel spreadsheet for future reference. This is where our poet comes up with some brand new names for the Holy One of Many Names:

the Great Scrambler,
the Ransacker of Every Bit of the Small-Self,
the Demolition Artist of the Best Laid Plans,
the Intolerant of Too Tidy
the Frustrated with Façade,
the Broken Pot!

Have you ever experienced God as the “Demolition Artist of the Best Laid Plans”? Have you ever felt the energy of the “Great Scrambler” in the course of your life? Have you ever become aware that you were carrying some sort of façade that everyone but you could see through? God, apparently, is frustrated with that. Hence the holy work of scrambling. Don’t let these names for God be an excuse to view the Divine as some capricious deity who enjoys messing with our carefully crafted ant hills and then watching us squirm. There’s nothing divine in that. No, what we’re hearing in this poem is that the “holy mess” is the best thing that could ever happen. Perfectionism is the great destroyer of all that is holy. It causes us to surrender the great broad strokes of life-force energy at the altar of the minute. It prompts us to strain at gnats and swallow camels.* In the broader culture it leads to posturing, polarization, and extremism. Our earnest activism leads us to demand that our leaders provide what we want in exacting detail, and when they make compromises in order to get something done, we criticize them as having failed. But actually, done is better than perfect.

The words of Jesus in today’s gospel call for us to understand and interpret the present moment. He says that we can look at the sky and see the weather that’s coming, so why can’t we look at the bigger sky of our lives and take a wiser path? It’s our own hypocrisy and the hypocrisy of others that leads to these stand-offs of extremism. This week in Cincinnati, an Ohio man tried to attack an FBI office which led to a car chase and a standoff in a cornfield just outside my hometown of Wilmington, Ohio, not far from where my sister lives. Seeing one’s small hometown on the national news is a surreal experience for sure, but what went through my mind that day is “It’s come to this!”

All the posturing, the fundamentalist tendencies which we all possess, all the unkind, uncivil, and uncivilized rhetoric is leading our nation and our world into some serious territory. It’s time we started looking at the consequences of our intolerance and learn to talk with people who think differently from how we do. It’s time to build bridges instead of walls. It’s time to share food instead of weaponry. It’s time we stop thinking of life in red bubbles and blue bubbles and start reaching across the table to find people just like us on other sides of the aisle: people who are frightened, people who love their country, people who want to succeed. I’m not inviting us to tolerate extremism in any of its forms, but rather to recognize our own perfectionistic tendencies and to drop our guardedness enough to figure out a way to talk to the people around us in human terms, to find common ground, to show them pictures of our grandchildren while we ooh and ahh over theirs. We usually read the words “Love your enemies” as some impossible ideal. But it’s actually a way to get stuff done. And done is way better than perfect.

* To “strain at gnats and swallow camels” means to resist, criticize, or bemoan something minor or inconsequential while ignoring or overlooking something much more serious or important. The expression originated in the Bible, in Matthew 23:24.