

God Rested ... Can You?

Genesis 1:27 – 2:3

Colossians 3:12-17

Labor Day Weekend 2006

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

This morning, I'd like us to meet a woman named Jacqueline. Physically, she's not present here in this sanctuary. But after I introduce her a bit I suspect you may feel as though she is, for her story may well mirror that of many of us or people we know and love.

The good news is that Jacqueline took her pastor's advice and attended a spiritual Sabbath retreat. The bad news is that prior to the retreat she was a candle whose wick had long since flamed out from fatigue. The hard wax of her work life had melted her from the outside-in.

Jacqueline's job is a very important one. She is an aide to a state legislative leader. She "writes bills, lobbies, meets with constituents, soothes egos, puts out fires, and quells the inevitable flaring angers and frustrations that saturate the legislative [jungle.]" Being readily accessible for such tasks is part and parcel of her life. She's very good at it. Her reputation sparkles. Friend and foe alike affirm that she is skillful, kind and well respected by her peers.

After hours -- that is, when she is finally able to leave work -- she goes home to three children. She does so with a "mixture of weariness, need and guilt ... she is drained and depleted." At the retreat she speaks candidly, as if the melting pot of other momentary escapees from the daily grind gathered there are some sort of private confessional. By speaking to them, she hears her deepest prayers to God.

She says, "I am so tired. I am with people all day and night, but I still feel so lonely. My soul feels dry. Even when things work well, when I can break away from work and spend some time with my kids, nothing seems to heal the fatigue, this sense of guilt and duty and responsibility. It all feels so heavy." Having set these words free from the professionally polished defensive cage that held them captive, Jacqueline sits back and quietly weeps.

Back to the good news. Intentionally making the time to attend the retreat allowed Jacqueline to pause her well groomed but gut-wound grinding lifestyle. The Lord led her to that place where she could become acquainted, perhaps for the very first time, with the true meaning of Sabbath rest. I do not have an account of whether or not that

retreat had a powerfully positive, lasting impact on the balance Jacqueline desperately needed to find between her personal and professional life. In faith, I'm certainly praying that it did, so that she could sparkle from the inside-out with the Light that heals and upholds instead of melts.

I've introduced us to this struggling saint because her story is far from unique. The heaviness upon her that is like a rusty hinge on a door leading to a place called "burnout" has been felt by me, and I'm going to assume many if not all of you. What we share with her story is the naked need to define the meaning of Sabbath and God's constant calling to integrate it in our lives.

Much has been written on this subject from antiquity through today. So much so I could spend a year preaching on it all! I'd rather repeat segments of the Sabbath summary I'm about to offer you throughout the coming year much as composers weave variations on a great theme. So stay tuned soul friends!

When you hear the word "Sabbath," chances are you immediately think of Sundays. On behalf of our Jewish brothers and sisters, you may also think about Saturdays. Either way, we find ourselves revisiting this morning's key verses from the Book of Genesis. What we have in these verses is the end of the Creation narrative that has stirred so much debate between some strict Creationist Christians and many Evolutionists. As is my personal preference, I'm less interested in debating something I deem quite unresolvable in this life and far more interested in promoting the common heart pulsing through the words that I pray all persons of faith will affirm. That pulse can be stated in two simple words – God rested. Since God doesn't adhere to our sense of calendar and clock, I can't precisely say when or where or how. But the words are there to imprint on our hearts the supreme example of what we, who are created in God's own image, male and female, are never to forsake ... rest from laboring.

Even more than an example, I want to remind all of us that this is a command.

Because God rested and hallowed – that is, God made sacred – Sabbath time, we are likewise divinely commanded to rest and keep sacred, Sabbath time. Need we be reminded that keeping Sabbath rest is one of the Ten Commandments? We wouldn't forsake the command against killing ... but we can and do forsake the command against laboring in such a way that we neglect to set specific time to rest in the great arms of God's gentle, restorative care.

I realize, of course, that by your being here this morning, I'm preaching to the choir. And, for a few more fleeting moments, the choir is not behind my back! But here's the thing – Sabbath is not something to keep just for one day of the week, or, perhaps more

accurately, one hour or even 58 minutes of a specific day in the week. I have to ask -- would you only eat one big, satisfying, truly nourishing meal a week? Would that alone be able to give you strength for each day? Would you sleep only one hour or one eight hour stretch per week? Would that be enough to refill your reserve of energy and intelligence? Would you wash up your body only once week and call yourself clean? (Well, you may call yourself clean, but other might respectfully disagree.) You know the answer to these rhetorical questions!

My point – and it’s hardly my point since every teacher of Christian disciplines I’ve read emphasizes this -- is that Sabbath rest needs to be habitual. It needs to be part of the rhythm of our daily hours, not just a soothing song listened to or played once per week. I compare Sabbath rest to song because song is ... here’s a bad pun ... very instrumental in my daily Sabbath keeping. One of the strongest points of connection I have with my Creator is the gift granted me for singing, songwriting and playing the guitar. So I try to be very intentional about taking at least twenty minutes every day to be alone with my innermost rhythm. Sometimes a song will pour out of me; other times I just strum random chords with no particular purpose in mind. And when I’m not making the music to honor the rest I need to keep balanced, I’m listening to other people’s music. This is especially true when I’m in the car, which functions like a moveable sanctuary full of all sorts of faithful music.

Even still, I know that there are times when I’ve got to turn-off the tunes. And no, not just when I’m talking on my cell phone. If you listen to music or Mike Savage or NPR often while driving alone ... just turn it off and see what it feels like having to listen only to the hum of your vehicle and whatever sounds are whizzing around it. For me, it is simultaneously uncomfortable and liberating. Uncomfortable because I’m forced to really focus on my surroundings. Liberating because it also forces me to listen to God’s whispering in my heart and mind.

Nearly the last words – before his death -- written in the journal of Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard has him professing “If I could prescribe only one remedy for all the ills of the modern world, I would prescribe silence. Even if the Word of God were proclaimed in it’s fullness, it would not be heard ... there is too much noise.” Put another way, the way the narrator of an excellent new DVD called “Be Still” puts it, “The weapons of mass distraction are everywhere.”

Again, Sabbath rest is a command – not just a lifestyle choice -- that glorifies God and honors ourselves as God’s most intimate creation. We who profess faith in God through Jesus Christ must cultivate time every single day to observe it, for we have been

designed to experience fullness of joy, not just fullness of schedule. Protecting your time with God is up to you ... don't strive for perfection, just faithfulness.

As your pastor, I could easily build in more times of silence each Sunday. I've often asked myself why I don't. My conclusion? It would make you all too uncomfortable and what happens during that time would be beyond my control. An unsatisfactory conclusion it is ... for it begs the question how comfortable I am keeping the focus firmly on God's actions through the Holy Spirit. I'll have to reflect on this more during Sabbath times to come. It'll probably turn into a song.

For today, I'll leave you and exhort you to discern and construct your daily Sabbath times with this image from writer Beth Moore – "If Christ showed up right on the other side of the table and said, 'go ahead, don't let me disturb you,' how differently would [you] pray? How differently would [you] respond to His Word?"

Amen.

"We Are ... Spoken To"

Genesis

Hebrews 1:1-4

The First Sermon in the Series:

WHO ARE WE? COMMON HOPE, COMMON TRUST

September 10, 2006

Have you heard the one about the greatly alarmed burglar? After breaking into a home and shining his flashlight around looking for valuables, he found a CD player he thought a good score. The moment he put it in his pack, however, he heard a strange, disembodied voice say, "Jesus is watching you." Nearly jumping out of his skin, he clicked off his light and froze in the darkness. After a bit, he heard nothing more, and counted it an auditory hallucination due to stress. So he continued his search, finding another item of great interest. But placing it in his sack summoned the voice once again, "Jesus is watching." This time, totally freaked out, he wildly flung the light from this flashlight all around the room. That's when the parrot cage in a corner came into view.

Relieved, and chuckling at the homeowners ingenious theft-deterrent idea, he spoke to the parrot in a mock-squawk way, saying, "Did you say that?" Surprisingly, the parrot

replied by confessing, “Yep. Just trying to warn you.” Continuing the conversation, the burglar retorted, “Warn me, huh? Who in the world do you think you are?” “Moses,” asserted the bird. Letting loose a good laugh, the burglar shouted back, “What kind of people would name a bird Moses?!”

From the beak of the bird flowed the words, “The kind of people who would name their Rottweiler Jesus.”

Today I begin a sermon series on what, according to the Bible, makes for our core identity as Christians. And I begin this endeavor by affirming first and foremost that as people of faith, we need to confess that we are spoken to by God! Sometimes the way God speaks to us and holds us accountable for our actions and our thoughts can be quite surprising, as this little opening bit of humor illustrates nicely. Jokes aside, just check in with good ‘ol Moses (the man, not the bird) who had simply been out for a stroll when a shrub started speaking to him!

Yes, God speaks. The printed word that is Holy Scripture, our Bible, is very emphatic about this.

In the book of Genesis, every time we read about the unfolding of God’s creative power, we overhear God pleasantly affirming, “It is good.” Then, as God realized that the man and woman created in his image had abused their free will, we hear him ask the rhetorical question, “Where are you?” (as if they could be anywhere but standing there naked in the Garden with the skin of forbidden fruit stuck between their two front teeth!) When God decides to start over again as a means of salvaging what was intended to be good and harmonious, we overhear a nuts and bolts conversation with Noah about how to build an ark of salvation, a conversation nicely concluded with a rainbow-hued covenant promise. This promise is repeated over and over again to many different members of the faith family as Israel suffered the tension between trying to live out their divine destiny and fooling themselves into believing they were more wise and powerful than their Almighty Creator.

Many of these persons were spoken to from on high as a summons to deliver a prophetic message they knew well very few wanted to hear. I guess that’s why they needed to put on some rather drastic demonstrations to get people’s attention. Consider Jeremiah.

This prophet was instructed to tell people that God could not be proud of them anymore. How'd he get this message across? By taking a new pair of underwear, wearing it a long time without washing it, then burying it in wet river sand only to later dig it up, put it on, and go around shouting that this is what God thinks of people he is no longer proud of!

In what we commonly refer to as the fulfillment of time, God chose to speak very directly and in person through the person of Jesus. The Four Gospels record his words against many prevailing political and religious ideologies of his day as well as his words offering comfort, healing and true shalom to many who were bruised and broken in mind and body. Twelve people in particular were chosen to take God's direct Word and put it into action. And beyond them, as the first century unfolded following Jesus' death, resurrection, and gift of the Holy Spirit, God spoke to the likes of the apostle Paul with a radical message of grace for all. And, though we do not know exactly what and to whom it was spoken, God also spoke to author of the Book of Hebrews, summoning this saint to write about the ultimate supremacy of Christ and the meaning of faith.

Hebrews 1:1-4, which in the original Greek language is one complete and very eloquent sentence, offers a summary of this movement from God speaking to our faith ancestors to God speaking to us through the person of Jesus. The authority of Jesus' words is weighted by the wonderful description of Jesus as the "exact imprint of God's very being." Of all the things we should know about our identity as Christians, we should believe wholeheartedly that God speaks to us of holy truth and above all, holy love, through the words offered in both the Old and New Testaments.

In Jesus, there was a physical body with vocal chords. But what about those who heard God's voice before and after Jesus walked the earth? And if what our faithful ancestors heard was an audible voice, what did it sound like and how come we don't really hear it today? Did the voice sound like Charlton Heston or like Maya Angelou? I mean, maybe some today believe they do hear an actual voice like yours and mine, but I haven't personally met anyone claiming this. And if someone were to mention they are hearing God speak to them in the voice of, say, comedian Jim Carrey, then I regrettably confess my initial thought might be that they could possibly need psych meds.

I haven't any simple answer to the questions I just listed up. But this I know ... when we

talk about God speaking, what we are talking about is *revelation*. Revelations are intimately wed to beliefs. So, if you believe God has a physical body it's natural to assume that "hearing" God speak would only make sense if it sounded like a human voice. God speaking would have to, if you'll recall a classic movie scene with me, take the form of George Burns sitting in a bar talking to John Denver. If, however, you believe God is more of a disembodied spiritual force, then the ways of hearing God's speech are not bound to human voice. You may, for instance, conclude that the sound of the wind rustling through the trees at a given moment was God revealing something you needed to hear.

It's a "both-and" in my book, not an "either-or" (my book being my experience of the Bible as a living Word instead of a dead letter document). I believe God speaks through human voice – be it the one in our heads or that of another -- as well as through other sorts of sounds God has created, especially those found in nature. So I believe God spoke to King David through prophets, through a still, small voice in his mind that was at once his own yet somehow holy other, and I also believe God spoke to King David through green pastures and still waters, with deer gently panting nearby, as well through the majesty of mountain ranges whose peaks echoed joyful proclamations of God's love and abiding presence.

When I reveal to folks that I did not grow up going to church, it's usually followed with the question about how I came to know the Lord in such a transforming way. How, exactly, did I hear my calling to follow Christ? To be a minister? My reply is always the same – it was through both the singing and studying and witnessing and conversing and struggling of the people I met at Camp Johnsonburg as well as through the Hemlock trees and lilly pads and campfires and various small and large critters I'd encounter there. My life of listening to God today isn't much different, except that it is through singing and studying and witnessing and conversing and struggling with all of you, with family, and even strangers, as well as through our beautiful everyday surroundings, amazing nearby parks, and visits to the ocean that I most clearly hear God speaking.

How about you? About your loved ones and fellow spiritual sojourners? How is the voice of God heard to you, to them? We *are* spoken to by God – in whispers, in shouts, through written word, through panoramic as well as polaroid perspectives on life. Having the prayerful discipline to hear God speaking to us is the faith challenge we all

face daily. I invite you to explore this in the coming week as preparation for the next part of this series where we'll consider how we are all attuned to angels.

Most often, I believe, God speaks through people who have an awareness of heavenly reality firmly in heart. And I'd be remiss this morning not to mention one such spokesperson on this, the day before the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 national and, moreover, human, tragedy.

Her name is Lisa Jefferson. Perhaps you've read about her or seen her interviewed by the likes of Oprah and Larry King. She was the 911 operator on 9-11 who spoke for fifteen minutes with United Flight 93 hero Todd Beamer. Most likely not wanting to upset his pregnant wife, Todd decided instead to call a trained stranger for what would be his last conversation before shouting "Let's roll" and leading the revolt against the hijacking enemy. As he listened to Lisa's voice, he made a specific request to also listen with her for God's voice in prayer. She recalls that for part of the frantic fifteen minutes, they recited the Lord's Prayer together. Perhaps that was the means through which God spoke to him about not passively submitting to a force of evil. Perhaps he met his maker there and knew there was more time with God ahead. As for Lisa, it took a solid year for her to conclude that it was not a mere coincidence that Todd's 911 call was routed to her. She now says, "God orchestrated that. I prayed with Todd. I know that gave him peace." Her voice was, in a way, God's voice, for it was infused with the responsive, calming, sustaining Spirit of the Risen Lord.

We come from a long line of holy listeners and mouthpieces. God speaks no less to us. In a grand myriad of ways, divine counsel and comfort hums everywhere around and within us. May we also train our hearts to listen to and our mouths to convey God's truth in a myriad of prayerful ways.

So listen up fellow Christians! We are being spoken to. Amen.

September 17, 2006

We Are ... Attuned to Angels

Hebrews 1:5-14

The Second Sermon in the Series:

Who Are We? Common Hope, Common Trust in the Book of Hebrews

Communication options change with every new twist in technology. And we've seen some considerably big twists over the past twenty years, haven't we?

Take the telephone as an example. My childhood home, for most of my years growing up, had only one phone. It was solidly constructed, wall-mounted, banana yellow, and had push buttons that, if we wanted, we could get to sound like a click-clacking dial. Personally, I preferred to make songs out of the tonal beeps of people's phone numbers. We didn't own this phone – Ma Bell provided it. It had one ring only, but we could adjust the volume. We didn't have an answering machine or any voicemail options. If someone called and we weren't home, they'd just have to try and try again.

These days, however, I have a slim, sleek cell phone on my hip at nearly all times. It can sing my favorite songs to me instead of just ring. It's got a colorful screen that, if I want, also functions as a portable video game console or as an internet information hub. It's also a calculator, alarm clock, calendar, photo album, and more. Having this cell phone makes me accessible almost 24-hours a day, almost anywhere I go. This provides me with a strong sense of security, as well as helps me be efficient in keeping in touch for church and family matters. And as for home, well, Jenny has a cell phone just like it and we have a digital phone in the kitchen and a slightly older (but not banana yellow) phone upstairs.

While cell phones can create some headaches, and they are not cheap, nor are they edible (a point I want to make because of all the ads for the latest cell phone craze called 'chocolate'), what I most appreciate is that they help me bridge the communication gap between *here and there*.

I bump into quite a few congregation members when I'm out grocery shopping. It's something I enjoy doing, but I have no idea how I'd ever get any of it done if I didn't have a cell phone! When I'm there and have a question for Jenny about which product or quantity to buy, I can call her at home within seconds and get an answer. Her "here" and my "there" are very directly and easily linked. We can talk immediately, making for clear communication in a timely fashion.

Clear, efficient and effective communication is very much what this morning's lesson from the Book of Hebrews is about. But instead of technological advances, it speaks of spiritual growth. Instead of electronic tools, it speaks of the heart. And

instead of “here” being the grocery store and “there” being home, it speaks of “here” as life on earth and “there” as heavenly life. Instead of immediate communication between husband and wife, it speaks of immediate communication between believers and God.

When Hebrews 1:5-14 was written, the writer was greatly concerned about how people perceived the best way to communicate with God. To continue with my telephone imagery, the writer sensed that people had begun to distrust the new advances in direct, mobile communication and instead returned to believing that the old, switch-board operator method was best. Biblically speaking, the old method was to rely on angels to carry messages between earth and heaven, between our hearts and God’s ears. The new, direct method, the one that the writer was vigorously defending, was the one proclaiming we can talk directly to God through Jesus Christ, who is completely and unalterably at one with God.

Imagine for a moment that the only way for me to ask Jenny a question from the grocery store was to tap the shoulder of an entry level employee of the big supermarket corporation (someone, say, stocking the shelves) and asking them to leave the store immediately, find transportation to my home, ring our doorbell, ask Jenny the question, speed back to the store, then find me in whatever aisle I’ve moved onto. Pretty ridiculous way to bridge the gap between here and there, huh? But thanks to new advances in communication, I don’t even have to find a payphone ... I can dial up and close the distance directly. Well, the writer of Hebrews was preaching, in effect, not to work through lower-level “employees” to communicate with home, that is, angels, but to talk to home without delay by calling Jesus.

More on this in a moment. For now, let me ask ... what do you believe about angels? And do you think more about angels than you do Jesus?

I enjoy a good bit of artwork depicting angels. I enjoy television shows about angels, and I dearly miss having Michael Landon and Victor French in my home once a week. Stories about angels in “Chicken Soup for the Soul” styled books can make me smile. When it comes to singing about angels we have heard on high, I sing loudly and joyfully. When I read in the Bible about angels making great, eternally important announcements I feel awed and inspired, drawn to contemplate their messages deeply and sincerely.

But, otherwise, to be honest, angelology is not a particularly central part of my daily belief system. This is curious to me, though, given how prominent a part they play throughout the Old and New Testaments. So I do often wonder if I should have a stronger belief in the presence of angels, if I should be more attuned to angels. I’ve

concluded that what short-circuits my ability to do so, however, is that some part of me needs something to believe about angels beyond the images of pudgy, winged cherubs and dazzlingly-robed figures flitting about in the heavens or descending on biblical times to summon faithful servants and herald Good News to shepherds.

Turning back to Hebrews as our guide to what we Christians can and should hold in common trust, we learn two very important things about angels that help us move beyond cute and right into relevancy. Chapter one, verse 14 affirms that all angels are “spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.” Then, in chapter 13, verse 2, we read that we must be careful, for we just might be entertaining these spirits in the divine service without knowing it. Angels, from this biblical perspective, are divine messengers that can take different forms. We can thank the late great television show “Touched By An Angel” for helping us understand what Hebrews is talking about. And, yes, if you listen to one another’s faith journeys closely, I’m guessing you’ll hear stories of possible encounters with angels – people who suddenly appeared to help or give a much needed message seemingly out of the blue. I’ve got a story or two for sure, and I know I need to be more mindful of such witness as a way of remembering that Christians are indeed attuned to angels.

But back to the bigger point we need to hold fast to in common trust ... we can faithfully affirm that angels are the messengers, but this must not become more important than confessing that Jesus Christ is the message! Angels offer words in their own ways, but Jesus is the Word! People forgetting this central truth is what alarmed the writer of Hebrews. The spotlight began to shine too brightly on angels as the envoys between us here on earth and God there in the eternal realm. If this went unchecked, the entire Gospel message about Jesus being *here and there* might well have been forgotten. That God came in the flesh and remains with us in resurrection Spirit, might have drifted out of view.

The reminder in Hebrews that Jesus Christ is superior to angels, that his name is more excellent than any of their names, is one we too need to hear and to heed. By and large, in the cultural contexts I most often find myself in, when I ask people to describe how they feel about Jesus, the reply is usually more academic than emotive. But when I ask about angels, sparks of light and life are frequently fired up from the heart. Nothing wrong with this, mind you, unless it is in angels that professing Christians are placing their innermost trust. Angels play an important role in the biblical worldview, but they do not, and are never to, supersede the significance and efficacy of Jesus’ intercession

on our behalf! In our prayers, we are to pray directly to Him, not to archangels Michael or Gabriel or Raphael or any of the other named and unnamed angels in the Scriptures.

Before I close out my privileged time in the pulpit this morning, I want to say that I hoped you've noticed how I do try my best to have some sort of visual compliment to the day's Scripture lessons on each bulletin cover. You might be wondering why, this week, on this topic of angels, I chose to put someone throwing a paper airplane! Well ... bear with me, but I'm hoping it will remind you that angels are just the messengers. They are like someone floating God's Word out and about. But the Word taking flight is Jesus Christ. If it helps you be more attuned to angels and even more so attuned to the Gospel of our Lord and Savior, then amen!

So stay attuned until week, when part three of this sermon series will consider what perfection means to us ...

Amen.

September 24, 2006

We are ... Perfected

Hebrews 2:5-18

The Third Sermon in the Series:

Who are We? Common Hope, Common Trust in the Book of Hebrews

Rev. Richard K. Gelson, Fairmount Presbyterian Church

He won't ever reach perfection and that is more or less something he can live with. This doesn't mean his desire for it is anything less than insatiable. He's voluntarily silenced himself to only whispers. He's practiced snorting out loud like a bull. He's endured and even sometimes preferred tiny venues featuring zero amplification and unnervingly clear acoustics. He's put up with 40,000 schoolchildren going crazy when a baby elephant to stage left cried bombastically because it lost its mother. He's done everything possible in a quest for perfection, yet he knows he will never be able to achieve it.

His name is Bruno Sebastian, an Italian operatic tenor. He's performed lead and other significant roles in most every major Opera House across the world. His intense commitment to sing the likes of Puccini to perfection has given him enough success to build up an unhealthy ego. But despite his charisma – he's been quoted saying things like "Tenors are like living crystals, and their bodies are two-legged instruments in the service of music" – he remains very humble. Instead of boasting that he's going to one day be the best, the most popular, the most respected tenor on this spinning globe we humans call home, he is quick to tell people that "You never have real perfection; your effort simply goes on and on. As soon as you have it, that proves you don't."

How about you? Have you ever been, or are you presently on, a quest to be perfect at something? I know, outwardly you'd probably never admit this. No one wants to be regarded as pretentious or even the least bit delusional. You've had enough of pompous athletes and celebrities and politicians and the like who come across as if they are somehow perfect enough to call all the shots or hog the spotlight or rule the world. If you are like me, you've especially had enough experiences of charismatic or dogmatic Christians who handsomely and repeatedly assert that they've got this salvation thing perfectly figured out but then are too blind to see the hypocrisy in their mirrors or in the wake of their actions.

You know ... I know ... nobody's perfect. And while any of us can reach a high level of skill and success at this or that if we work hard for it, deep down no art is ever going to be our exclusive domain. Records are made to be broken. The greats lose their edge and eventually retire or die trying to preserve something everyone else knows they've lost. Those with great power and influence always have to look over their shoulders for the next upstart in the block. For every ounce of intent to be perfectly the best there is counterbalancing perspiration.

Too much realization of this, of course, is disabling. That's why I like the balance Bruno Sebastian seems to have struck within him. He affirms, "Your effort simply goes on and on ... [being] grateful to God for the gift you have." The closest to real perfection any of us can get, then, is to stay focused on our God-given gifts and to be willing to make sacrifices in support of them for the greater good.

This balanced, spiritual perspective is great counsel. But it's not enough. We need something more to grow and sustain hope in this culture where we are consistently pressured by peers and colleagues and family members and advertisements to have more perfect performance, more perfect grades, more perfect skin and body weight and

teeth, more perfect mental health, more perfect religiosity. And the Good News is that we do have something more to hang our hope on, to help us navigate the narrow straights prodding us toward a perfection we never really feel we've arrived at.

We have our belief that real and true perfection was achieved once and only once in the whole history of humankind and of all creation. And it was achieved for our sake, to shift our attention from feeling the need to be perfect to realizing – glory be to God -- that we have been perfected.

The way we have been perfected was achieved in a most unconventional way. It was achieved through enormous suffering and by what, according to our standards, looked at first like a totally failed attempt at greatness. The One who suffered is the One whom the Book of Hebrews insists was exactly like you and me in every respect, but who then “tasted death” on every human banquet table as a way of pioneering a trail that initially appeared anything but happy. This trail and the toxic smorgasbord lining it are a matter of eternal life and death. The One who blazed it on our behalf, who supped from that table, was Jesus.

All of our imperfections, all of our inner and outer blemishes, all of our failed attempts to be greater, smarter, more devoted, and so on, were perfected – that is, they were redeemed – through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. His perfect love casts out all our fear of falling short and of out and out failure. Especially given that our greatest fear – if we dig down deep enough in our hearts – is that we are failing God, the very source of our life. Our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and our honest, perpetual intent to follow His Way, His Truth, His Light, is a guarantee (of sorts) that we will one day arrive in the presence of the Almighty in perfectly pure condition.

But we needn't wait until that destined day to reap the benefits of being perfected by the Lord. It's a gift for today, right here, right now. It's the gift of release, of knowing that because Jesus was tested by what He suffered, He is able to help us in all the times we feel tested (Heb. 2:18).

When are the times you feel tested? Most all of the time, right? We are always keenly aware of the fact that some part of us is failing us – be it our mind, our emotions, or our physical bodies. Believing that in Jesus we are perfected doesn't mean our knees and our hearts won't ache. But it sure does mean we never need feel we are alone. It sure does mean that we never need to believe all is lost. It sure does mean we have a perfect friend always with us, empowering us to celebrate and use our God-given gifts unto the greater good. And this perfect friend rests a gentle hand on our shoulders

when we feel we've most failed ourselves, our loved ones and others, assuring us with whispers that say we are forgiven.

Do you believe He's there for you? That He has made you a better, more whole child of God in spite of yourself? That as you strive for the narrow gate of righteousness as defined by the Bible, that He is your gatekeeper, the very hinge of your hope?

One of the things that Jesus himself is reported to have said on this entire matter of perfection is found in Matthew 5:48. There, He says to us, "Be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect." To understand and not dismiss this exhortation as impossible, we need to keep in mind what "perfection" meant to Jesus. We keep this in mind by reflecting on how he handled his relationship with God, with Himself, and with others. And what we find when we reflect on this is summarized very nicely in an article entitled "The Disabled God" which can be found in print and on-line in it's entirety in the July 1992 issue of the magazine "Theology Today."

The author of the article concludes that perfection, to Jesus, and therefore for we who are His disciples, "is not first of all, or ever, a matter of independence or completeness." I find this is a striking point because it pushes us away from believing perfection is just a personal matter. Christ's perfecting love is indeed personal, but it is moreover for the communal purpose of building up the Kingdom among baptized believers.

The author continues, saying that to Jesus, perfection "means valuing others and attending to others simply because God values them and not because of their achievement or station in life or because of the group to which they belong. It means living out the tension, with all its inner anguish, of judging others by standards of justice and forgiving others by standards of compassionate love." Did you hear what this saint is saying? The standard is not perfection as we may feel pressured to achieve. The standard is justice, forgiveness, and compassion!

This challenging but inspiring article concludes by affirming that "There is no wavering in God's intent to love us, no matter what ... That means that we flourish most when we love and are loved ... It also means that the command to be perfect as God is perfect does not come to us from a reality whose being is totally alien to ours. For when we love and live in a community where love counts, we are at once ourselves and like God."

So, the word of common hope for us today is that nobody's perfect ... except for the Lord. Believing this means we can relax while striving to be our best. We can let go of our imperfections and let God. And it means we can love and serve and be, as the

old New Jersey slogan goes, *perfect together*. May we indeed be a community mirror to the perfect, perfecting love of God in Jesus Christ. Amen.