**Matthew 5:42-48** November 27, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Thanksgiving Eve

*42“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. 43You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Walking in the Father’s Footsteps**

People ask, “What it’s like without kids at home?” One of the things I miss are the conversations with kids—some fun, some serious—conversations that we adults are far too busy and serious to have. A few times I remember talking with one of our children about the single digits, 0 to 9. We talked about how each number has its own feel. We were agreed that even numbers are round and smooth, except for the number 2. And the odd numbers, all of them, are pointy. Some numbers warmer, others cool. She (now you know which child), she used to say that each number had its own color, too. One was brown, another blue, and so forth.

Words are often like that. They have a feel. Oh, sure, they have a dictionary definition. Just Google it, or if you must, fetch the fourteen pound Webster’s Unabridged and there you will find it: defined, explained, as precisely as possible. But words also have a feeling that you can’t put down even in an unabridged dictionary. I say this by way of introduction because there is a certain word I want to bring to your attention. Is it rough or smooth, spicy or bland, fun or sad? The word I am going to give you a few seconds to think about is this: “perfect”. Not, what does “perfect” mean, nor even examples of “perfect,” but how does the word “perfect” feel in your mind? [Wait 5 seconds. If reading, think of at least one “feeling”.]

One woman said, “When I hear the word ‘perfect,’ I feel stress.” One man said he sees a blinding brightness—like the sun, only ten times brighter. I would love to know your feelings about that word. “Perfect.”

When our reading says, ***“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,”*** we have a woman who gets stressed out, a man who covers his eyes because he can’t bear to look at it. I think those are pretty standard reactions to “perfect”. “Perfect” is a word that in our optimistic youth may seem just around the corner. But in our early middle age we realize that this praiseworthy goal is unattainable; in later middle age the frustration of mediocrity runs up hard against “perfect”; as our faculties decline, “perfect” is a frustrating reminder that however close we once were, we are getting ever farther from it.

I don’t think that is how Jesus meant us to feel when he said, ***“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*** In fact, I am quite sure he did not want us to be frustrated and desperate.

In thinking about these words, we remember that they are from the Sermon on the Mount. The setting of the sermon is this: *“Now when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.”* There were crowds, but his disciples came out of those crowds to him. That is very important. Jesus is *not* telling people how to get into heaven. He is talking to people who have heaven. Jesus is *not* talking to those who hope to become children of God, but to those who are. He is *not* instructing people how to apply for the visa and the green card and take the citizenship test. He is telling citizens of God’s kingdom how they can do right by their citizenship in God’s kingdom.

The way to do that, Jesus says, is ***“Be perfect.”***

“But Jesus, I hear that word and I despair!”

I am not a top drawer Greek linguist, so I hope and pray (and I mean that honestly, I prayed about this), I pray that I not mislead you. But I think that our feelings about the word “perfect” mislead us on this Thanksgiving Eve. The Greek word what we translate “perfect” has, in Greek, a feeling of completeness. That Greek word, here translated “perfect,” is behind Jesus’ cry from the cross, *“It is finished.”* Yes, his sacrifice was perfect. But that was not his cry. His cry was, “It is complete.” His one-time sacrifice for sin was complete, finished, successful, mission accomplished. It wasn’t just that he did it right, but that nothing is lacking; that sin is completely paid for.

In our reading we do well to take the stress and terror out of this Bible verse, because Jesus is talking to his dearly beloved. He speaks as a parent giving loving advice to children, *“Be complete, therefore, as your heavenly Father is complete.”* This perfection is not a cold, hard Puritanical morality, so severe and strict that it wraps the cold knuckles of hands playing wrong notes on the piano. Maybe that’s what we thought ***“Be perfect”*** meant. No. It is a loving generous Father, who loves to give and smile and most of all to see his children gathered around the table content and cared for and thankful for what they have. *“Be complete as your heavenly Father is complete.”* Perfect, yes, but a happy, kind, warm perfection.

How can we be “complete” like our heavenly Father? Verse 45: ***“Your Father in heaven causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”*** God is so good! Not only does he favor his people, he is gracious to those who are not his people. He gives breath to the convicted inmate as well as the self-sacrificing mother. God sends rain to the farmer who generously cares for family, friends, church and society just as he sends rain on the selfish miser who is cruel to man and beast. He lets the drug dealer wake up in the morning, just as he allowed you to safely reach church this evening. Everything is God’s grace, his undeserved smile.

But why? Why in the world is God kind to the unkind? I can’t look into all the mysteries of God, but this is what I know: I was conceived and born a lost and condemned creature. And if God *would* *not* tolerate any evil, he should have smothered me even before my godly parents could bring me to Baptism. Perhaps some of you can remember a time, not just as children, but even as adults, where God not only tolerated you but even blessed you as you stubbornly walked the opposite direction from what God wanted.

God is generous and blesses those who curse and rage against him, who claim he is loveless, who hate his rules because they can’t do what they want, who defy him to stop them in their godless ways. He sends the rain, the sun, puts food on the table, gives them life, breath, and children to bring joy to their lives. They too gather around the table with the family on the fourth Thursday of November and count their blessings, even if they know not whom to thank. They too taste of God’s goodness, because he is good to all, even those who hate him.

So what does it mean to be perfect as our heavenly Father? It means to, in some way, mirror his completeness. To count up what it is he has done for us; to realize that he has done it graciously, just because he is a good God. And then to say, “I want to be like him.”

To people who have known God’s goodness, and like children want to mimic their awesome Father, Jesus says, “This is how you act: ***‘Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you… Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.’ ”***

“That you may be sons of your Father…” Not that you get to be, but that you act like you actually are.

Out on the sparsely populated plains west of the Mississippi River, where they still have gravel roads and wide open spaces there was a man. All 70 years of his life he had lived within 10 miles of the same place. Most of his neighbors too. They knew one another’s life stories. This man was talking about a neighboring farmer, now passed away, and his sons. That farmer and wife had been hard working and caring. There was no question about that. But their sons—every one of them—turned out bad: lazy, immoral, intemperate money wasters. Nobody could figure out what happened. How could such a respectable couple have had such disreputable sons? I suspect that it happens mostly when children don’t realize what their parents have done for them.

That’s part of why it is good for us to year-by-year have a thanksgiving day where we really just say, “Wow! This and this and this. So much to be thankful for!” But then you think, “Ok. I’m thankful. Now what?”

Now be like children. Prove that you are like your heavenly Father. Act like him. Be complete. Nice to the not so nice. Helping to the hurter. Pitching up even when there is nothing in it for you. Tossing the bottle holding a $100 bill into the great wide sea. Offering kindness that you know won’t be thanked, maybe not even repaid. Praying for those intent on harming you.

Why? Because that’s what your heavenly Father is like.

***“Be complete, as your heavenly Father is complete.”*** Amen.