

Perfection really is overrated

It is the ultimate in human foolishness when we think we need to be perfect in order to earn God's love or anyone else's.

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If there is one thing I have always yearned for, it is musical talent. I have none. Now before all you music teachers out there rush to tell me that anyone can sing or anyone can learn to play an instrument, I assure you that I have tried. I spent my childhood singing in church and school choirs. I took flute, piano, and guitar lessons. I sing along to the radio when I'm alone in the car and I sing only so God can hear me when I'm in church. The honest truth is that I cannot sing well enough to make anything other than a joyful noise and I will never be able to play an instrument since I cannot keep a beat to save my life. It's just the way it is no matter how much I wish otherwise.

While in seminary I lamented this lack of musical ability often enough. It seemed to me that the vast majority of seminarians had musical talent. And there I was with my specialty in youth ministry without capacity to sing or play guitar. Unheard of in those days. How could anyone be a youth pastor and not be able to lead songs around a campfire or at youth group devotions time? I was cured of this lamentation when a friend asked me what talent I would give up in order to be able to sing. I could think of nothing I would give up. I was being greedy. I wanted to be the perfect seminarian, the perfect youth pastor, and the perfect Christian, but I'd learn to let go of my musical yearnings and be content with the gifts I had.

It was the desire to be perfect that was my personal demon. If I'm honest, it still is on occasion. During my teen years, I was so enamored with the idea of perfection that I nearly traded my life for it. I was driven by the idea that if I were perfect, then I would not feel pain and I would be loved. While I was quite good at a lot of things, I

didn't stand out. I was a good student, but not the best. I had some artistic capacity, but I was not the best. I wrote poetry and stories, but they were the fancies of an adolescent. You see where I'm going. I was good at a lot of things, but I wasn't perfect at any of them. And I really believed I needed to be perfect at something. Even God expected perfection, or so I thought.

My mixed up understanding of perfection was all about performance and appearance. I became obsessed with the number 100. It was the only acceptable score, the amount of calories I could eat in a day, the number of repetitions for any exercise, and it was my desired weight. I utterly failed to grasp that my body was a temple of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, holy unto itself. In my desperate attempts to alleviate my own pain, I did not hear the message of love in Jesus words, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

This does not mean that we have to match the perfection of God at all. It does not mean that we have to perfect our performance or appearance. It means that we have to seek the fullest, most complete love, love that is mature and unconditional. Jesus was calling us to live into God's gift of agape. We are called to embody this unconditional, unlimited love for self, for neighbor, for creation, and for God. Of course, we cannot do this alone; this kind of love is only truly possible in community. This is how we are church—we love without condition and without limit.

The kind of perfection I sought in my adolescence was anything but this. It was not life-giving in any way. The perfection I thought I wanted and needed was life-destroying. It is the ultimate in human foolishness when we think we need to be perfect in order to earn God's love or anyone else's. God's love is freely given. We can't earn it—or lose it, for that matter. We can be unable to see it or accept it and we can deny it. We can also refuse to live into the fullness of our abilities. All these things are sinful in one way or another as they hinder relationship to self, neighbor, creation, or Creator.

The whole Sermon on the Mount is a call to live into the limitless love God has for us, to use all that we have and all that we are to bring God's realm into the now. It is a call to embody divine love to those who are most vulnerable. In these days of uncertainty and public displays of racism, Islamophobia, Xenophobia, transphobia, homophobia, and so many other fear-informed bigotries, focusing on perfection is foolish; not one human being is perfect nor will any ever be. However, we can be agents of God's grace. We can commit to loving to the fullness of our capacity, using

all of our gifts to ensure that there is light and salt enough for all.

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