

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Year A

Flawless

[RCL] Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23; Matthew 5:38-48; Psalm 119:33-40

Most people are not as lucky as Beyoncé. Instead of waking up feeling “flawless,” most rise from bed a few minutes late, somewhat dehydrated, and in great need of a tissue. Certainly no one removes a sleep apnea mask to declare, “I woke up like this.” So why is it that we are willing to suspend reality for Queen Bey persona of perfection but find Jesus’ high expectations so impossible to grasp?

“Be perfect.”

While perfection might be achieved before breakfast for Beyoncé, it is a far cry from normal *human* capability. Jesus himself pushes against what we imagined perfection to be when he upsets the social order and religious customs. He touches those he shouldn’t, heals when he’s not supposed to, and dies without leading the violent takeover that many of his followers might have preferred. Jesus, in many ways, did not live up to expectations, but in his imperfect life and violent death he shows us a better meaning of perfection.

There is a temptation to characterize Jesus as one who completely dismissed the Jewish pursuit of piety, but as Sheldon W. Sorge points out in *Feasting on the Word*, “The Leviticus account of the moral law strikingly shapes the teaching of Jesus.” Rather than throwing out the law or the prophets, Jesus insists that he comes to fulfill them (Mt. 5:17). He does this not by following every rule but by calling his audience deeper into understanding the heart of the law.

When Jesus reads the commandment against murder, he sees beyond the rule and finds encouragement for people to work through their conflict in ways that respect each other’s life. Anger is, for Jesus (Mt. 5:22) and the author of Leviticus (19:17), an emotion that misguides us and causes us to act out violently instead of constructively. When Jesus reads Leviticus, he interprets God’s commandments to love as being all-inclusive. Jesus does not turn the law upside down at all. Instead, he persuasively argues that the law has always been there to turn *us* upside down.

When our personal finances and professional integrity rely on making profit from a good harvest, God says to gather the portion that will assist those who cannot afford to play in the economy on the same level (Lev. 19:9). When we want to define who is “in” and who is “out” of our local communities, God says to treat the alien as a citizen (Lev. 19:34). God tells us to live in a way that does not reinforce the gods of achievement, control, and popularity. God invites us to live in perfect, loving, unity.

And not only does God instruct that we should live in a different way than the world expects, God insists that someday we shall. We shall not have hate in our hearts or take vengeance and bear grudges

(Lev. 19:17-18). We shall live together in perfect unity—this is God’s promise for our future.

If we reevaluate how we read the “you shalls” of Leviticus in this way, we might begin to imagine a future when God’s people refuse to steal, lie, or act unjustly just because they want to love one another fully. This is a future when our desire for equity surpasses our love of larger profit margins. This is a future when our unquenchable yearning to achieve is replaced by our deeper desire to be known by one another as children of God.

The holiness codes of Leviticus are not about setting God’s people up on a pedestal, out of reach of everyone else. Rather, God calls on her children to be set apart in their recognition that the world’s habit of turning people into commodities is no way to operate.

In the age of social media, treating each other as commodities is as easy as hitting “like” or swiping right (or left). Kevan Lee, a contributor for Buffer, writes that, “You’re a brand. I’m a brand. We’re all brands, whether we aim to be or not.” As soon as we decide to fill in your “about me” sections on Twitter, Instagram, Tinder, etc., we decide how we want the digital world to see us—we brand ourselves. With every picture, article, or video posting, we put out a product that we hope will be accepted by our audience. We participate in self-commodification, which, while not exclusive to social media, is made much easier in this era perhaps than ever before.

When we fall into the trap of online self-commodification, we might look in on the profiles of former lovers and feel jealousy for their “perfect” lives, “perfect” new beloveds, and their “perfect” children and puppies and kittens. It can be tempting, even for the most well-adjusted among us, to compete with others to enhance our sense of self-worth. In sensing a lack of self-worth, we might try to improve ourselves, striving for a misguided notion of perfection. In doing so, we separate ourselves from one another in some not-so-healthy ways.

These divisions lead to exclusion, to intolerance, and to the anger God in Jesus Christ calls us to replace with compassion. God calls us back together. God calls us to live in our diversity, seeking unity under the umbrella truth that each one of us is a beloved child of God.

As Jesus toured around from town to town, he embodied God’s call to come together. He reminded the people that holiness is not about achieving a standard of perfection but about all kinds of people embracing a perfect, unified love.

The meek, the hungry, the poor and oppressed—Jesus calls them “blessed.” He even calls on them to love their enemies. He practices what he preaches, and because Jesus is an effective teacher and the incarnate revelation of God, people still respond as only people do when they recognize Truth.

Jesus helps us realize that God’s kingdom is not an exclusive perfect people club with a privacy gate and a bouncer at the door; the kingdom of God is what we live when we choose to see each other as beloved children of God instead of as commodities to be bought, sold, judged, and discarded. Living in

God's kingdom is like awakening from what Thomas Merton called a "dream of separateness," which is much more nightmare than dream.

We follow Jesus not only because he appeared to be an exceptional human, but because of his truly divine ability to birth the kingdom of God in every given moment. And we can participate in this kingdom, here and now.

When we wake up in the morning, we might say our prayers or just pause for a moment to watch the sun creep above the horizon. Whatever our spiritual practice might be, it ought to include God's timeless affirmation that we are beloved.

We were born like this.

We woke up like this.

Written by The Reverend Curtis Farr. Farr is the Associate Rector of St. James's Episcopal Church in West Hartford, Connecticut. Match strikes flint for Farr in the pulpit, where he approaches scripture playfully seeking to inspire greater participation in God's mission of reconciliation. Farr is from the Pacific Northwest and loves hiking in the woods or kayaking on a secluded river. He can often be found impersonating Neil Diamond at your local karaoke bar.

Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.