

“Completely Grounded”  
1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23  
Matthew 5:38-48

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Okay, I admit it. I’m a perfectionist. I don’t know when it started, maybe when I was a kid and I really took it seriously to color inside the lines. Or perhaps I was the thrill of getting those 100% on the top of the worksheet with a little sticker that said “perfect!” When I’d practice pieces on the piano and make a mistake, I’d start the whole piece over from the beginning. “Practice makes perfect,” the old saying echoed in my head. Well, it wasn’t long until I had a full blown case of perfectionism, I worried over papers and was haunted by my mistakes. Adults and teachers were so pleased when things were done right, in my mind that was surely the way to be accepted and liked.

Then when I was in seminary, during one summer, I was part of a chaplaincy program called Clinical Pastoral Education in which we students were gathered into small groups to reflect on our pastoral visits and become aware of our selves and gifts for ministry. Our supervisor, a gracious and gentle spirit, and also a Presbyterian minister, called me on my perfectionism one day, by saying, “Jenny, as Christians we are called to be faithful, not successful. It is not our perfection, but our vulnerability and our shared humanness and brokenness that tie us together.”

Huh. In my quest to be perfect – in my worry and anxiety over perfection – I’d missed the point, that is, being who I am, and being truly present with people in need.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthian community in the midst of quarrels and disagreements, writes that there is only one foundation to build upon, and that is Christ. Therefore, our foundation is not our perfection, or our righteousness, or even our wisdom (because as Paul reminds them and us, even our wisdom is foolishness with God!) Who we are and what binds us together, isn’t about what we do, but is based on the very truth Paul recites, “you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.”

I like how one of the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians, Paul Tillich, put it when he described God as the “ground of being.” God, Creator, and source of our existence, made us good in God’s own image. If we remember and recognize God as the ground of *our* being, we realize our common humanity as children of God.

And we’re not perfect! And apparently we’ve never been perfect! In the very beginning, it seems, we humans make mistakes, and not just little mistakes, HUGE mistakes. Even in that idyllic garden, good and evil are somehow already wrestling with each other, and our first parents – tempted by the prospect of knowing like God, of becoming like God – chose the alluring prospect

of God-like perfection, and then hid and lied about it. In fact, God's people are glaringly and embarrassingly *imperfect*. The Israelites upon being delivered by the hand of God from slavery in Egypt start whining that there isn't any food to eat; they meet God's numinous presence on Mount Sinai, then get tired of waiting for Moses to come down and build a golden calf.

So what's Jesus talking about? Be perfect? As God is perfect? Unfortunately, as is often the case, there has been something lost in translation. It is helpful to remind ourselves that Jesus didn't live in our success-driven, magazine-cover flawless culture. Whereas we think of perfect as flawless, the Greek word and concept that Jesus used carries the notion of maturity, completeness, wholeness, the end-goal.

Live into your "end," be completely who you are, who God created you to be, that is, a loved child of God. I like how another great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Fred Rogers, "Mister Rogers", a Presbyterian minister, put it when in one of his episodes he talked about making mistakes. IN the Neighborhood of Make-Believe a puppet who was reciting a poet at a recital messed up and forgot the words. As the Trolley came back into the little house, Mister Rogers turned to his children and adult audience and said, "Think about the people who love you and take care of you, even though you do make mistakes once in a while, even though they do too. It's such a good feeling to know that people can love us even when we're not perfect." That is how God loves. And that is how we are called to be.

Sounds pretty good: be us, be complete, live into who we are. But how do we do that? Jesus finishes by exhorting us to be complete, grounded in our identity as God's own, to live to that end. He lays out what that looks like in the sentences that come before. "Do not resist the evildoer, turn the other cheek, give to those who beg, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you." We must listen to how this whole passage works together. Because we can't have one part without the other. We can't love our enemies unless we are grounded in God's love and find our foundation in Christ. And we can't be completely grounded in God – that is, we remain broken and divided – as long as we let hate live in us. The destructive power of hate doesn't allow for constructing on Christ the foundation.

I admit, however, it's hard to see how these ancient examples might be lived out. You know, I really can't remember a time that anyone struck me on the cheek, or sued me for my coat. But maybe we can think of things that are similar in our lives. Since I don't have anyone slap me on the cheek, for example, I must think instead of someone whose words were a slap to our ego. Since I don't have anyone suing us for our coat, perhaps I should think

of someone who is so demanding of our time and energy. And since no one is asking us to carry their belongings one mile or even two, maybe we could think of people who interrupt our day and who seem to have no regard for other demands on our time.

As Linda Taylor says, “Loving our enemies means recognizing them as children of God, as people made just like us. And that means something even more difficult: acknowledging that we are made just like them. The decision to love our enemies means that we acknowledge that we are capable of the same things we hate in them. Loving our enemies means admitting we have done hateful things in the past. Loving our enemies means admitting that we might possibly do hateful things in the future.

Praying for our enemies means to go with them into God’s presence. We can’t simply send them there, and we can’t just send God after them. We can’t sic God on our enemies like we sic a dog on an intruder. Praying for our enemies means going with them into [God’s] Presence—being part of the healing—seeking healing for ourselves just as we seek healing for those whom we see as evil. Above all, the decision to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us means opening our deepest selves to transformation—daring to take one step out of the familiar into the places where we have yet to go. It means letting go – *of the illusion of our own perfection* - of the notion that we have been in control of the world around us. It means releasing our hold on the anger, fear, pride and judgment that keep us captive and paralyzed in the face of change. It means relinquishing the known life we have for new as-yet unknown life in Christ. Most of all, it means trusting God’s grace to be with us: guiding us on the Path of Change—nourishing us on the journey—and giving us companions on the Way.”

The point is we have to live out these commands together. We can’t do any of the things Jesus is telling us by ourselves. Perfection is not about being perfect in isolation from others. Because being perfect, is about being made complete through relationship in community. We are not complete until we are joined one to another, and grounded in God.

There is a neat illustration about the Redwoods in California. These trees apparently have very shallow roots systems but their roots extend over a hundred feet from their base and intertwine with roots of other Redwoods to make them stable, so that they can withstand wind and weather. And that stability of shared roots is their foundational system, which is what ours in Christ, In Christ, we

interlock in Christ, and we are grounded and rooted in the witness and love of Jesus Christ. Therefore we are tied together.

Just in the past couple weeks, some stunning images have been broadcast around the world of the unfolding events in Egypt. There have certainly been images of protest and violence, but also some powerful examples of lived reconciliation, of loving others, of working for a new future with those of different viewpoints and even faith traditions. One image in particular stood out, that reminded me of the Redwoods. As various and diverse peoples gathered to lift up their voices for a new future and government, it came time for one of the five Muslim daily prayers. The Muslims stopped, and knelt to begin their prayers, there in the midst of the crowd. So that the crowd would not press in on them and overwhelm them, a group of Egyptian Christians joined hands one with another around those who were praying. Their witness, to stand up, surround and support even people who are different than themselves, was truly a living prayer in itself. Indeed, they were rooted in the foundation in Christ, and demonstrated the reconciliation and peace that comes as a result of living out Jesus words. Turning our faces away from the cycle of violence and persecution, and digging deep into selfless love, completely grounded, and made whole.