

## Teleology and Perfection

February 20, 2011

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

When I was in Tucson, my friend was catching me up on her family. “You remember my brother, she said, the one for whom the motto ‘He who has the most toys when he dies, wins’?”

Right, I remember hearing about her brother. “How’s Ron doing?” I asked.

He seems to be okay, but I was really struck by what she had to say about his life. Now mind you, this was the brother who decided he didn’t want to have children “because I don’t want to give up five years of my life.” (I guess once they’ve gone to school, we parents don’t need to concern ourselves with them anymore.) But since the last time I’d heard about Ron, he’s come up with a theory of “fun units,” and it’s by fun units that he measures his days.

We didn’t get into it in too much detail, but here’s what I’m imagining. It’s the end of the day, and Ron sits down to calculate his fun units for the day. Breakfast with his girlfriend: 1 fun unit. Cross-country skiing: 5 fun units. Cocktails with friends: 2 fun units. Time spent paying bills: negative 2 fun units.

Nah, I don’t know exactly how these fun units work, but I do know that his goal is to have more fun units each day than he did the day before. Think about it. Every day he needs to find a way to have more fun units than yesterday. So ... yesterday there were 5 fun units from cross-country skiing but a negative 2 from dealing with finances. Today he needs to scrub the toilet (negative 3 fun units), so he needs to go cross-country skiing and snow-shoeing (7 fun units). And tomorrow ... and next month ... The more fun units, the better his life. (And I hate to think what he’ll do 20 years from now when he’s in his 80s and his body won’t cooperate with all that rock-climbing and motorcycle-riding and deep sea fishing that have given him his fun units all these years.)

Well, I told Ann that her brother and his fun units just might make it into a sermon. I didn’t realize, though, that it would be so soon. But look at these texts. These texts are all about how to live the lives God has given us, the lives we are called to. In Leviticus we hear about how our lives are not to revolve around ourselves, but that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. I don’t hear anything about fun

units there because, essentially, fun units are all about ourselves. *Me, me, me*. How much fun can I have? But Leviticus talks about giving, generosity, love.

And Matthew! Turn the other cheek! Give your cloak as well as your coat! Really not fun units! Love units. Really almost impossible love units. And then Jesus says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Perfect? Are we talking perfection units?

It’s really easy to read these texts and think, *This is impossible. This is setting us up to fail. No human can manage all this. Be perfect? Are they kidding?*

But we need to understand the nuances of the word that’s translated as *perfect* here. The word is *teleioi, telos*, meaning

- 1) brought to its end, finished
- 2) wanting nothing necessary to completeness
- 3) perfect

It’s a goal, a purpose. “Teleology” is the term theologians use to talk about the end times, and *teleioi* can be translated as “be what you are meant to be.” Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* translates this verse like this: “You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity.”

To be perfect is to live out our God-created identities, to become the people God means us—calls us—to be. To be perfect is to live lives that reflect God’s goodness, God’s greatness, God’s beautiful complexity.

Did you notice the cover of the bulletin? It’s a little hard to see it as nicely in black and white—it’s a picture of slabs of pavement puddled with water—and the water reflects the intricacy and beauty of the world around. “The mundane slabs mirror that which is around, beyond and within the present moment and become a platform to an altogether different journey.” That’s what we are meant to be—we the baptized, the Walking Wet, God’s children. We are meant to be reflections of something altogether beyond ourselves.

What would our lives look like, if we reflected God in everything we did? We would make sure the needy in our lives had plenty, we would not cheat anyone in any way, we would not make fun of the

handicapped or leave the deaf and the blind out of our endeavors. We would not gossip about anyone. We would not hate or gear grudges. We would return unkindness with kindness. We would go the extra mile to help even our enemies. We would pray for those whose politics or lifestyles are abhorrent to us.

Reflecting God—not just on the surface but throughout our very selves—is the purpose of our lives. It is what God created us to be. And when we live that way, being generous and supporting others and loving our enemies—they're not onerous. They're (dare we say it) even fun! Not fun that revolves around ourselves as when the purpose of our lives is to amass fun units, but fun in the joyful, right-with-God, living the life I'm meant to live sense.

But there are many things that get in our way of living the lives we are called to. Past disappointments or hurts that still haunt us. Old grudges and wounds that are a long time healing. Painful memories that are slow to fade. Fears of abandonment, of not having enough, of being left out.

What are the things in your life that keep you stuck, that keep your life revolving around yourself, that hinder you from reflecting God's love wherever you go?

Here's what we're going to do this morning. I'm inviting you to write down—on the gray piece of paper in your bulletin—a memory or fear or hurt or feeling or disappointment—something in your life that you know keeps you stuck in selfishness, in a “me me me” life. And then when you come forward for communion, you can bring that piece of paper and drop it in the basket there.

When you partake of communion, I invite you to think of the words St. Augustine used when he presided at the Lord's Supper: “Receive who you are. Become what you've received.”

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And after you've partaken at the Table, you will receive a card like this. It says “You are a child of the Kingdom, blessed and beloved by God, called to be salt and light in the world. Go: be who you are!”

You, my friends, are blessed and beloved by God. You, my friends, are salt and light in the world. You, my friends, are reflections of God. Go! Be who you are! And may you be joyful in it.

Amen.