

Circumcision and Name of Jesus (January 1, 2023)

Text: Philippians 2:1-13

“How to Have a Perfect Church”

It is difficult to find a really good church . . . much less to find a perfect church. Some years ago a couple from the church I was then serving in New York took a trip to California during their summer vacation. When they returned, the wife told me how they had visited “the most perfect church.” It was a lively, exciting, welcoming group of people with tons of children and programs for every age group in the church. There was something going on every day of the week and the staff of almost 100 people made sure every one found a sense of belonging. *“Why can't we be more like that?”* she asked. Seriously.

Her idea of a perfect church included a church with a mountain of money, an army of paid staff, and a weekly schedule that wore me out just reading the Sunday bulletin she brought home. It wasn't my audible response to her question, but I was thinking, *“Well for one thing, we are 99 people short of the paid staff to be more like that!”*

I like to believe that my wife's idea of the perfect church is a church where no one ever criticizes the pastor. Others see a perfect church as a place where there is no fussing and fighting; a community free from political infighting. Sometimes the search for a perfect church boils down to the fact that the perfect church would be a place where people think like me, worship like me, and share my religious views.

Of course, it may be that the perfect church is a church that has a perfect pastor. There is a tongue-in-cheek chain letter about the perfect pastor that has made the rounds via email and internet and has circulated all over the world. This version came to me in an email from a friend:

“The results of a computerized survey indicate the perfect minister preaches exactly fifteen minutes. He condemns sins but never upsets anyone. He works from 8:00 AM until midnight and is also the janitor. He makes \$50 a week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a good car, and gives about \$50 weekly to the poor. He is 28 years old and

has preached for 30 years. He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all of his time with senior citizens. The perfect minister smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. He makes 15 calls daily on congregation families, shut-ins and the hospitalized, and is always in his office when needed.”

It goes on to say: “If your minister does not measure up, simply send this letter to six other churches that are tired of their minister, too. Then bundle up your minister and send him to the church on the top of the list. In one week, you will receive 1,643 ministers and one of them will be perfect. Have faith in this procedure. One church broke the chain and got its old minister back in less than three weeks....so don't break the chain.”

Let's suppose there was a perfect church close enough for you to attend. What would you do? Would you worship there and even more, would you join that church? There is a poem that has been around for some time and I am not able to give proper attribution because it is always listed as "author unknown." The last time I saw it was in a church bulletin where I was visiting in worship. It goes like this:

*If you should find the perfect church without fault or smear,
Please, don't join that church; you'd spoil the atmosphere.*

*If you should find the perfect church where all anxieties cease,
Then pass it by lest, joining it, you mar the masterpiece.*

*If you should find the perfect church, then don't you even dare
To tread upon such holy ground. You'd be a misfit there.*

*But since no perfect church exists . . . made of imperfect men,
Then let's cease looking for that church, and love the one we're in.*

*Of course it's not a perfect church, that's simple to discern,
But you and I and all of us could cause the tide to turn.*

*So let's keep working in our church until the resurrection,
And then we each will join God's church without an imperfection.*

We need to be aware of the temptation here to cop out by simply

repeating the mantra, *"Nobody's perfect and there are no perfect churches."* The fact that there are no perfect churches should not keep us from earnestly doing all we can to strengthen and build up the Body of Christ any more than we should not work to improve our Christian lives because there are no perfect Christians.

Our Second Lesson today is a great encouragement to work to make the church all it can be. Indeed the passage actually tells us how to have a perfect church — if only we can put into practice the principles given here. There is a three-pronged message in the text: First of all Paul tells the congregation how they can bring joy to his heart. Secondly he encourages them to have the mindset of Christ. Thirdly — recognizing the very tall order the first two items call for — he explains to them how this perfect church can come about.

I hope you will agree that this is something very much worth looking at. There is no question that our world today could use a church where these qualities are at work.

When he wrote this letter to the Philippians, Paul was in prison and this congregation was worried about him. They had a deep love for him as he did for the church. Paul's strong feelings for the flock of Christ are more evident in Philippians than any other letter. When he gets to our text, Paul says, ***"If there is anything to this Christian faith of ours at all, make my joy complete..."*** Of course, under the circumstances, they would want to try everything they could to bring joy to Paul. With everything he was going through, he was in need of good news about the church he had started in Philippi.

The central lesson here is that a church which is functioning as it was intended to not only brings joy to the apostle, or to a pastor who labors to build up a church — it brings great joy to the heart of Christ. There are two central characteristics that make for this kind of a church. ***"...be of the same mind..."*** and, ***"...have the same love..."***

Having the same mind means that the congregation has a single mindset

which is centered on Christ and the good news. Having the same love is simply following the command of Christ to, ***"...love one another as I have loved you..."*** As they live out these two key qualities, they translate to the very practical issues of humility and compassion. ***"Don't live out of your own ego and personal agenda,"*** Paul enjoins them, ***"But look out for others, and defer to others before you seek gratification of your own interests."***

What would happen if we were to do everything in our power to integrate just these two things into every aspect of our life as a congregation? We would center our thinking on Christ and the good news and we would absolutely commit ourselves to having the love of Christ for each other.

Paul takes this all a little deeper when he grounds it in the mind of Christ. This common mind he is searching for in the congregation is actually the mind of Christ. Literally, this means the *"mindset"* or *"basic attitude"* of Christ. That mindset was made up of absolute humility and striking obedience.

"Christ," Paul says, ***"even though a part of the Godhead and reigning right there with God, did not insist on his rights, but instead took on humanity and came to us as a servant. He gave up everything, including his life."*** It is God who finally exalted the name of Christ and every knee shall one day bow to Christ.

In light of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, Paul enjoins the Philippian Christians — and by virtue of the scriptures enjoins us — to live these things out in our life together as a church. His point is this: Christ did it for us — we live it out for him!

Frankly, this is very tough stuff. Putting aside our own egos and embracing the humility and love of Christ is a radical way to live — for everyone, not just some, within the congregation. No wonder there aren't any perfect churches! Yet — there it is right in front of us in the scriptures. This is not one of those esoteric, difficult to understand scripture lessons that needs the wisdom of brilliant scholars to explain.

This is not spiritual brain surgery. *"Get your act together! Think like Christ! Love like Christ! and Be humble like Christ!"*

That's "all" there is to it. Easy to understand. Darn near impossible to accomplish. Right now, most of us are probably thinking along the lines of the disciples' words to Jesus when he turned a rich young man away from traveling with them: *"...they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "Formorals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."* [Matthew 19:25-26]

Today's Second Lesson concludes with the secret to how we can have a perfect church. This secret is not so secret after all — it does, however, call us to open our lives more fully to the work of God's spirit in our lives. It is impossible to become a great (much less perfect) church in our own strength. It is difficult to even think about saying no to self and yes to loving absolutely everyone in the church. (Who can do that!)

Nevertheless, it becomes possible because, *"...it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* If we first receive this and then believe it, we have made the first powerful step toward becoming the perfect church. On our own we can't do it. But God can. The task is to get out of the way within our own lives and let God do the attitude changing and loving action. So you see — the old poem was right. If you find the perfect church, don't join it — you'll wreck it! On the other hand you can start with the imperfect church you've got, and write a blank check for God to work in your life to work in the church to perfect the one you're in.

For sure we will not get this done in our lifetime — but we can certainly (as a different member in that previous congregation loved to encourage) "fail gloriously" as we make a huge impact on the present condition of our church . . . and on the world around us that is dying to find the perfect church!

Amen.