

There are those people who are able to bring out the best in us, because they had high standards for us, whom we remember with appreciation, and then there are those whose unreasonably high expectations only brought us suffering. Most of us have encountered people in our lives who demanded the very best from us, and people who were simply impossible to satisfy. Maybe a teacher, a coach, a boss, or a romantic partner comes to mind. And at first glance, in this passage, Jesus sure comes across like he's one of those unfair, unreasonable, demanding people, the kind we hope we never see again.

So I say this as much to remind myself as to explicate this Gospel reading: keeping high standards for behavior can be a good thing, but only if you keep them in a context of forgiveness, grace and love, and only if you keep the purpose those standards are supposed to serve front-and-center. While it's rare for a human being to achieve such a balance, God does it all the time.

By the time Jesus had begun to teach, the idea that keeping all of the 613 laws of the Torah was impossible had become widespread among Jews, and some speculated that the impossibility of keeping the Law perfectly was part of the point of the Law, for it showed that all people are completely dependent upon God, and on God's forgiveness and mercy. Which makes sense to me. Knowing that one could never be perfect, and always needs forgiveness, *should* make one humble, and ready to forgive others, and themselves.

However, some other Jews, like the Pharisees, took these ideas in the opposite direction, and devised an extensive code of behavior to make breaking one of the biblical laws less likely. For them, perfection was eminently achievable if people would just try hard enough, and the awed respect of many ordinary people encouraged them to pursue that perfection, even though it also distracted them from the underlying purposes of the Law and the Covenant, which are love and relationship, not the perfection of humanity.

Jesus, of course, was familiar with both of these schools of thought. In today's portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets out a vision that is informed by both of them, and responds to them, and transcends them. It sounds like Jesus is one-upping the most stringent of the Pharisees by condemning not just *actions* that could lead to breaking a law, but also *the thoughts and the feelings* that could lead to such an act. The standard Jesus sets out sounds hopeless. Most people will make it through life without taking the life of another, but who among us will avoid getting angry, making an insult, or feeling desire or disrespect for somebody else? Yet we should not just dismiss what Jesus is saying. Deep down, we know these thoughts and feelings diminish us, but then we justify ourselves by saying "I didn't really hurt them." We may even congratulate ourselves for our self-control.

So we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus was doing more than simply outdoing the Pharisees at being impossibly stringent. Jesus knew that evil actions don't come out

of the blue; they come out of human hearts. And it's a lot easier to harm another person if you already think or feel that they are less worthy of respect or consideration than you are. (Incidentally, that is why it's not just "love your neighbor," but "love your neighbor as yourself.") But the one who made us all, and the one through whom we were made, know perfectly well that we are all equally, fully human. When we think less of another person, we dehumanize them. Even if they are unaware of our feelings towards them, we not only injure our own souls, we also damage the fabric of Creation, creating a rift where God intended continuity.

So Jesus sets out God's vision for humanity, and of course it is quite above our ability to achieve. That's why those lofty standards are presented interwoven with powerful words of forgiveness and reconciliation. Be reconciled; come to terms; accept that you cannot change so much as the color of one hair. The God whose respect for us allows us to make mistakes is the same God whose love for us brings us forgiveness and healing. God never gives up on us, but continually reaches out to us, offering opportunities for spiritual growth.

Likewise, we are meant not to ignore our faults nor the faults of others, but to seek forgiveness for even the secret sins of our hearts, to forgive ourselves, and to be ready to offer forgiveness to others. Remember that despite our faults we are still made in the image of God, and God's mercy endures forever. And God's purpose in setting out such high standards for us is not to alienate us, but to reconcile us, by reminding us of our need for humility and reconciliation — ultimately, reminding us of our need for God and for each other.

St. Paul was very much on board with this line of thinking. Poetically he wrote that we are God's field, and so God is with us, offering rain and sunlight that we might yield the good fruits of the Spirit. Paul said we are God's building, and so God is with us, building us up and strengthening us, giving support and making repairs. He also understood how susceptible people are to focusing on their relationship with individual church leaders, and how dangerous that can be. People sometimes resist this teaching, but the fact is that expecting from one person the relationship that God intends for us to have with Christ and his church is just another form of idolatry, not to mention an unreasonably high expectation.

In my last parish, well-meaning parishioners would occasionally say that they loved me so much that they only wanted to come to church when I was going to be there, or didn't want to listen to anyone preach but me. I know they intended those sorts of statements as a compliment, but I saw them as evidence of my failure to form them as Christians and a threat to their spiritual health. And then there was the one who left the parish because something about me just rubbed them the wrong way. The underlying problem was the same: no priest can ever take the place of Christ or his church, and anyone whose primary sense of connection to God is through the character or personality of one priest will end up disappointed, unfulfilled, and alienated. Next

week I'll be out of town, and Fr. Jim May will be back to fill in for me, and I expect that attendance will be just as good as it would be on any other two-service Sunday.

But we don't have to look ahead to next week; we only have to look at the beautiful, joyful children visiting from the Matsiko World Orphan Choir. They certainly didn't form an opinion about me before they decided to come here, and despite all they have been through, they manifest the joy of community that God intends for all of us. Thank you, beloved guests, not only for singing for us, but also for giving us a glimpse of heaven.

Whether in the words of Jesus or in the music of this exceptional group, a vision of divine perfection is meant to inspire us, not discourage us. Remember who God is: a God of love. God doesn't expect perfection from us, just that we stay in relationship with God, desire sincerely to do better, and be willing to forgive and be forgiven. And so God sent Jesus not to add to humanity's suffering, but to proclaim the good news that divine forgiveness is abundant and close at hand. Jesus brings that forgiveness to us, and calls us to be more forgiving, in order that there might be less suffering in the world. While we look forward eagerly to see him again, Jesus in turn sent the Holy Spirit to continue the work of grace in the world, bringing us ever closer to the only perfect heart, the all-loving and gracious heart of God.