

Texts: Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145:8-14; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

When I was in high school, I sang and played guitar in my church's youth choir – what nowadays would be called a praise band. We had a dress code for Sunday morning; the girls had special dresses that were all different colors, but all the same style. The boys had to wear a shirt with a collar and a tie. We sang and played for the 8:30 service, so those of you who have raised teenagers can imagine what it must have been like for our parents to get us out of bed, dressed and out the door for early church every Sunday.

Add to that -- we weren't always good kids on Saturday night. You parents might relate to that as well. My friend Val, who is now a physician in Albuquerque, put it this way: "I might be out all night on Saturday, just as long as I'm in my choir dress at church by 8:30 on Sunday morning."

I tell this story not to excuse my trouble-making on Saturday nights in high school, but to reflect with you on how when we come to church, we often try really hard not to let who we really are show. We want to display our best side to God, the side of us that took a shower and put on clean clothes, maybe even special clothes. The side of us that wants to prove to God that we have followed all the rules, that we are good people. The side of us that wants to be perfect.

We hear Paul admit to his Roman congregation that he, too, struggles: "...when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand." We have a tendency to hear this passage as condemnation, and when we hear it we tend to remember all the ways that we fall short, how we are not perfect. And all too often, the church has had a tendency to promote that pursuit of perfection – even to the point of telling you that there was some way that you weren't worthy of God's grace.

Perfection is often held up as a virtue, not as a sin. And the messages begin early: Color inside the lines. Children should be seen and not heard. Never let them see you sweat. In the years I worked at Duke University, there was a concerted effort to help students overcome their drive for “effortless perfection.” That’s the notion that you have to get top grades in every class, be an outstanding athlete, join several clubs or activities, have a ripped, beautiful body, and make it all look like it just comes naturally. That kind of pressure is a path to burnout, or worse.

In the Gospel reading this morning, Jesus himself talked about the way we make judgments:

“John [the Baptist] came neither eating nor drinking (in other words, he led a life of self-denial and asceticism) and they say ‘he has a demon.’” But Jesus himself did the opposite. He ate and drank with all kinds of people and they claimed he was a glutton and a drunkard. That picture of Jesus is a threat to those of us you are trying to keep up our perfect facades, those of us who have worked hard to craft our resumes and our reputations, those of us who are trying to prove our worthiness to God. We don’t want to associate with tax collectors or sinners of any sort, and we certainly don’t want our Savior to be seen with them, either. No wonder those Pharisees grumbled. They weren’t out on Saturday night getting in trouble. Jesus threatened their image of religious perfection.

Right now I bet you are thinking, “Wait a minute, Pastor. Didn’t Jesus also say, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) So let’s think for a minute about what divine perfection looks like: It’s all about love. God loves you so much he bears your burdens. God loves you so much that he shows up in your need. God loves you so much that he is present in every moment of joy and sadness. God loves you so much

that he came to you in Jesus himself and gave his life on the cross to embrace all of your life, all your need, all your suffering.

God always shows up where we least expect God to be: in the need of our neighbor, in the person that doesn't look anything like us, in the person who believes and thinks and acts differently than we do and, just as importantly, how we think they should. To be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect means that in all these circumstances, our call is the same: to love them, to care for them, to meet them where they are, to accept them as we are able.

Jesus doesn't require you to be perfect. Jesus calls you to be faithful. To be Jesus' disciple means to learn from him. It means to love deeply. It means to live generously. It means to accept the gift of God's grace and mercy so fully that you are willing to put your reputation on the line. It means to know yourself as a recipient of that amazing grace; to ask yourself, as Paul puts it, "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7) To be a disciple of Jesus means that you have been freed from the punishing glare of expectations in order to live freely for your neighbor.

When Jesus calls you to be faithful, he is not talking about conforming to other people's expectations or demands. When Jesus calls you to be faithful, he is not talking about a set of rules of conduct that you to try to follow perfectly and then feel guilty about failing. Faith is about hearing Jesus' voice and following Jesus' path. Jesus, who was a "radical, justice seeking, law-breaking, love-giving man of ill repute." (Joann H. Lee, *Living by the Word, The Christian Century*, June 21, 2017) Jesus, who challenged unfair systems, shook up the authorities, touched and healed people who were considered

untouchable. Jesus, who ate and drank and laughed with everyone. Especially those who weren't perfect.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” says Jesus to us today. What a life-giving promise that is! Jesus frees us from the shackles of having to be perfect. He frees us from the pressure of trying to maintain a façade. Jesus frees us to live in a new way. Jesus allows us to rest in him today and tomorrow and the next day.

The life to which Jesus calls us is not necessarily one of ease. It can be full of risks and challenges. Yet the life to which we are called is one of freedom to serve others. It is freedom from the burden of sin. It is freedom from the slavery of needing to prove our perfection. It is freedom to rest deeply and securely in God's grace. We can be confident that Jesus walks with us. He offers us a yoke that is life-giving. We can place our trust – our faith – in that promise.