

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
Matthew 13:24-30; Colossians 3:12-17

This summer we saw Armando Galarraga chase the perfect game for the Tigers. Football fans want to see their team make the perfect play tonight. Students want to get a perfect score on a test. Artists want to create the perfect expression of a landscape or idea. Politicians want to forge the perfect policy. Automakers want to manufacture the perfect engine. As human beings, something in us longs for perfection, and in some areas we perhaps can attain it. The student can get an A+. I've seen some pretty perfect plays. I've seen some paintings that came close to perfect in expressing something. There's one thing you never will find, though, and that's a perfect church. Don't get me wrong, it might have the perfect location with a perfect building with a perfect parking lot and a perfect sound system, but once you step in the door, there it goes: there's no perfect church.

Am I picking on you? No, the same is true for me. Any church any of us belong to will fail to be a perfect church because we are imperfect people. And we need to remember that when we look around us as well. We shouldn't be shocked when we find imperfect people. That's the whole reason for the Christian Church's existence. As Christ Himself commanded in the Sermon on the Mount, we are called to be perfect, just as our heavenly Father is perfect, if we want to earn heaven. Obviously, our accounts fall woefully short. We are in need of assistance. Even more, we are in need of complete rescue and renewal. And so Christ founded His Church not upon our merits but His, and not upon our perfect lives but upon His perfect life for us.

But some people are really bothered by that fact, aren't they, that God's people aren't perfect, and that there is no perfect church? Just before our Holy Gospel today Jesus told the parable of the sower, who tossed his seed onto various soils, and whose seed produced different results in those soils. There are some churches that teach what is called the perseverance of the saints. What is that? That means that they teach that once a person comes to faith he or she can never fall from faith. The parable of the sower is a stern rebuke to such a teaching. Some of the seed did indeed grow in that parable, and yet its roots were shallow, or it was choked by the cares of this world, or it withered when it faced obstacles and persecution. Not everyone ever baptized or confirmed here at Christ Lutheran still believes. And that is the same for any church. Maybe you've heard the joke about how you get rid of bats in the church? You confirm them, and then you'll never see them again. It's a sad fact that in many instances that is true.

The churches the apostles would plant would not be perfect. Read their letters to their churches in the New Testament and you will quickly learn that. They would be imperfect because some who professed the faith in them would eventually fall away entirely. But that wasn't all. With this parable, Jesus taught the apostles that their churches they would found would also be imperfect because some who remained in them throughout their lives would not truly be believers. They would sing the hymns, listen to the sermons, say the prayers, but take none of it to heart. And even more, they might even be some of the most active members. Yes, they would be hypocrites in the actual biblical sense.

Many people think that a hypocrite is someone who is a Christian but still sins. No, even the apostles were hypocrites then. A Christian who never sins is a dead Christian. No, a hypocrite is someone who confesses the faith but does not believe it, who wants to appear religious with his or her works, but doesn't have real convictions in his or her heart. In fact, oftentimes the biggest hypocrites are those who claim not to go to church because there are hypocrites there.

What does such a statement betray? That person is implying that he or she is better than those people at church, isn't he or she? What they are hiding behind that good work, that is, not going to church because of the people there, is a lack of convictions. If they truly believed, they would be where God says believers will be: hearing the Word, at the font, at the altar, and from the pulpit. True hypocrites in the church are not those who still sometimes stumble and sin, but those who profess a faith they do not truly believe, who are members of the church simply because that's what they think good people do, or to feel better about themselves in comparison to others, or to lift up their works for praise, or to help their social standing. No, the best Christians are those who in fact flee to God's house precisely because they are aware of their great need, of how far they have fallen short of God's grace, of how much they need Christ's help if they are to grow in their daily walk in Him. And those same Christians are the ones who will display patience, mercy, and genuine concern with their brothers and sisters in Christ when they sometimes struggle to grow in grace as well, to overcome temptation, to quickly attain a fuller understanding of the law and the gospel.

Does that mean that the Christian should never call sin sin when a brother or sister commits it, should never point out if a dear fellow Christian is doing wrong, should never warn about the danger of disobedience with respect to God's commands? No, nothing could be further from the truth. Sin damns, not in theory, but in reality. Sin sends the impenitent not to a possible but a real hell, which is no walk in the park. What kind of love would it be to let someone come into destruction without so much as a word. You'd try to talk someone down from jumping off a bridge, wouldn't you? How much more shouldn't we try to talk them out of plunging into hell! The Lord disciplines those He loves, and He also calls His beloved to admonish one another in love. They are to do so, however, with the same measure they use for themselves and in order to win a brother or sister back, not to teach them a lesson or get one over on them. And so Abraham prayed for any believers in Sodom and Gomorrah while not justifying their iniquity. And so St. Paul urged the Colossians in our second lesson to ***teach and admonish each other in wisdom as they let word of Christ dwell in them richly.***

We are justified, declared righteous, the moment we are brought to faith, by Baptism or the preaching or teaching of the Word. And yet like toddlers, as newborn children of God, born in sin but now declared righteous and made right with Him, we slowly learn to walk a straighter line. And we are called, not to make that more difficult for each other by making a competition of the Christian life, by setting obstacles in each other's way, or by frustrating them with our impatience. No, we are called to encourage one another, to model the Christian walk for those younger in the faith, to lift them up when they teeter and fall, and to humbly instruct them in how to keep a better stride through God's Word and personal experience.

St. Paul wrote in our second lesson: ***Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*** There may be no such thing as a perfect church in this life, but what Paul has described is a Christian Church, rooted in the undeserved love of God and determined to reflect that love, even with occasional smudges, as best as it is able in its common life. And yes, even such a church will have its hypocrites—and one day the hypocrite may be me and another day you—but those hypocrites, Lord willing, will find there strong medicine for what ill them and all who gather: the perfect Savior, His perfect patience, and His perfect grace. Amen.

