

Haydenville Congregational Church

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Matthew 5:38-48

“Be Perfect??!?”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Leonardo da Vinci was an Italian painter, sculptor, architect, musician, scientist, mathematician, engineer, inventor, geologist, cartographer, botanist and writer. He has been described as the archetype of the Renaissance man—a man whose unquenchable curiosity was equaled only by his powers of invention. Not only is Leonardo considered to be one of the greatest painters of all time, but he is said to be perhaps the most diversely talented person to have ever lived. According to art historian Helen Gardner, the scope of da Vinci’s interests were without precedent and “his mind and personality seem to us superhuman.”

Because Leonardo is such a well known and well loved artist, I think I could ask you to name your favorite da Vinci painting and you would probably be able to rattle off a few of his masterpieces. Perhaps you would mention “The Last Supper,” maybe you would say “The Mona Lisa.” Maybe you would mention the “Annunciation,” or “St. Jerome in the Wilderness,” or the “Adoration of the Magi.”

You might mention any of those da Vinci masterpieces...or others on the list of da Vinci’s fifteen remaining paintings. That’s right, only 15 of his works of art remain today. Leonardo was so fond of experimenting with new techniques in painting that he actually destroyed a number of his own paintings by accident.

But the most remarkable da Vinci painting—the one known for its power and intensity—is one that has not been seen for almost 500 years. This dramatic painting, “The Battle of Anghiari,” is a mural three times the size of “The Last Supper” and is believed to still exist—BUT it is hidden underneath another mural

painted by the artist Giorgio Vasari.

“The Battle of Anghiari,” often referred to as “The Lost Leonardo,” was never finished because da Vinci was a chronic procrastinator. He completed the middle panel, depicting a furious tangle of men and horses frozen in the fever of war, but he abandoned the project in 1506, never finishing what would have been his most substantial work. The half-finished mural, on a wall in Florence’s City Hall, was finally “painted over” by Vasari who was hired to renovate the room and create a new mural.

However, it is now believed that Vasari, an admirer of Leonardo’s, did not actually paint over da Vinci’s masterpiece, as scholars had lamented for so long. Italian Art Detective Maurizio Seracini is convinced that Vasari preserved the da Vinci mural by building a brick wall in front of the mural before applying his own new fresco.

Seracini, a high-tech art sleuth, has used various instruments to examine the building where the “Lost Leonardo” was painted and he believes he has discovered the wall, with a hollow space behind it, and Leonardo’s artwork hidden there intact. In fact, a flag in the Vasari painting has provided a clue. Written on the flag are the words “Cerca Trova”—Italian for “seek and ye shall find.” It is as if Vasari wanted us to know that there is more to this wall than meets the eye.

Seracini believes he has perfected the techniques needed to safely uncover the da Vinci without destroying the Vasari. When interviewed about his work in 2007, Seracini said, ***“I don’t reveal anything. I just show what is already there.”***

Jesus saw the crowds gathering and he went up a mountain with his disciples

around him and he preached the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” he told them, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “You are the salt of the earth,” he proclaimed, “You are the light of the world.”

As the Sermon on the Mount continued, Jesus discussed the law and the prophets, he addressed anger, adultery and divorce. Near the end of the sermon, Jesus said, “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth...’” and then the whole passage from Matthew 5 that is our Scripture reading for today.

Today’s reading is a difficult text.

Jesus is telling his followers: you have heard it said...ah-h-h-h-h-h but I am up-ing the ante. You have heard it said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” but I say to you, “Do not resist an evildoer.”

Jesus then continues with a litany about what his followers should and should not do and it is a litany that makes us squirm. How can he expect us to be that good?

Jesus may be fully human and fully divine but we’re mere mortals, how can we do these things?

The list is quite intimidating:

If anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other also...

If someone wants your coat, give them your cloak also...

If you are forced to go a mile, go a second mile also...

Give to everyone who begs from you...

Give to everyone who wants to borrow from you...

You have heard it said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy but that’s not right....LOVE your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

And then, as the topper, Jesus ends this discouraging list of instructions with a final command: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

What unwelcome words. Be perfect?! That’s an impossible goal.

Being perfect does seem unachievable and so over the years scholars and preachers have tried to interpret Jesus’ message in ways that made it manageable and doable....implying that IS what Jesus said but NOT quite what he meant.

Theologian Fred Craddock sums up the response of the Church over the years to Jesus’ intimidating command...listen to Craddock’s words: “Through the years the church has sought to interpret the demand for perfection in ways that relieve it of the despair of ethical failure: the language in this command is hyperbolic, says the church, and not to be taken literally. No, says the church, the language is literal, but since perfection is impossible, the command compels us to throw ourselves on God’s mercy. Yes, says the church, the command is impossible to achieve, but we should try anyway. The call to perfection, says the church, is not for all disciples but only for those very few who are able to form that inner circle around Jesus. Actually, says the church, “You must be perfect” is not a command at all but a promise to be fulfilled in the life to come.”

This summary of the church’s response to Jesus’ command shows how uncomfortable Christians have been for years hearing that simple sentence in the Book of Matthew: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The church has tried to rationalize, minimize and dismiss what Jesus is saying.

But Jesus said, “Be perfect.” And I think he meant it. And I love that he did.

Jesus saying directly, in a straight-forward fashion, without mincing words, “Be perfect,” reminds us that we are told in the Bible that we are made in the image of

God, which means we are in fact made in the image of one who is perfect. Psalm 139 says, “For it was you God who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.” **We are made perfect and whole, in the image of God. When Jesus says, “Be perfect” he is remembering that. And he is reminding us.**

I think the key to understanding Jesus’ command is to appreciate what “perfect” means when used in the Bible. Fred Craddock shares his insight into this question in an article in *Christian Century* called “You, Therefore, Must be Perfect.” Craddock says that in the Bible the word “perfect” does not mean flawless, it means *mature, complete, and full grown*.

We find the word “perfect” throughout the New Testament and it does not mean faultless, without blemish. Luke uses the word perfect to speak of fruit *maturing* (8:14) and a course being *finished* (13:42). John uses perfect to describe the *fully realized* unity of Jesus’ followers (17:23). James employs the word perfect to characterize works as the *completion of faith* (2:22). And Paul’s favorite use of the word perfect is to portray the quality of *maturity* among Christians (1 Cor. 2:6, Eph. 4:13, Phil. 3:12).

Let’s sit with the understanding of “perfect” as used in the Bible...meaning *maturity, completion, fully realized*.

Let’s hold that vision for a moment...because maybe in some ways we are like the “Lost Leonardo.”

We are born perfect and whole, made in the image of God, knit together in perfection by God in our mother’s womb, fearfully and wonderfully made.

Maybe, like the “Lost Leonardo” we come into this world vibrant and dazzling, filled with color, movement and energy, alive with creativity and the brilliance of God. But then as we live in this world, as we experience hurts and wounds, slights and disappointments, prejudices and assaults, losses and sorrows our perfect and beautiful selves are covered over, hidden behind a wall of defenses, masked by coping mechanisms, and the masterpiece that is each one of us cannot be seen.

Maybe we are, in some ways, like the “Lost Leonardo.” Born perfect and whole, we are then bruised by life’s injuries, distress, fears, crises, failures and grief.

And so we retreat, build a wall, and our perfect selves are protected but hidden from view.

Maybe Jesus is saying you can remove that false wall. You can recover the original masterpiece, you can regain what was once abandoned, you can be whole, beautiful and perfect. All of you can shine through.

Remember that high-tech sleuth Maurizio Seracini who researches and reclaims lost art...remember what he said about his work, “I don’t reveal anything,” he said, **“ I just show what is already there.”**

I think Jesus sees in us what is already there. I think we are born perfect and whole and Jesus is saying reclaim THAT self. You are a walking masterpiece. Dismantle the wall. Let the world see your full beauty.

We are people of faith. And as we grow and mature, our faith develops into its fullness, it approaches completion, it becomes perfect—the way “perfect” is used in the Bible. As we grow and mature as people of faith we essentially come full circle. We come back to that infant place of perfection. As our spiritual journeys deepen over time, we are able to recover from life’s injuries, we are able extend

and expand our connection to God, we become saturated with a sense of the divine, we become steeped in the presence of the holy, and our truest, finest, most perfect selves re-emerge.

My beloved brothers and sisters, each one of you is a masterpiece of beauty, goodness, and compassion—you are Spirit-filled, peace-building, justice-seeking, radically loving, deeply generous works of art.

All those qualities are inside you, all those qualities are you. You don't need to add anything, you just need to show what is already there.

Just as Seracini wants to reclaim the “Lost Leonardo,” Jesus wants to help you reclaim your beautiful inner self. You need to dismantle the walls that keep your radiance from being evident to the world. You need to let go of the fears you are holding, the wounds that have scarred you, the misinformation you carry around about yourself, and the defenses you created to keep yourself safe. For when those walls are gone, the work of art that is you will be shown to the world and the perfection inside you will be evident.

Think of perfection the way Craddock defines it: maturity, completion, a fully realized self. Think of the development of that perfection being the culmination of a lifetime of faith and service. And then remember that behind the walls you have built to protect yourself from pain and sorrow lies a beautiful and perfect self waiting to be shown to the world.

Seracini believes he has developed the technology to show the da Vinci mural hidden behind the wall. Jesus believes we can achieve perfection—completion, maturity and a fully realized state by letting the essence of who we are shine out from our inner being.

For people of faith, perfection is not out of reach. We are made in the image of God, knit together by God in our mother's womb.

Our work as we grow into mature spiritual beings is to take down the walls that have both protected us and prevented us from letting our beautiful inner selves be fully expressed and fully seen.

Remember what Maurizio Seracini said about his work uncovering the da Vinci behind the Vasari, "I don't reveal anything. **I just show what is already there.**"

We were born perfect and whole. We can let ourselves grow and mature back into that state. We just need to show what is already there.

Without the walls to defend and to hide us, we can let the masterpiece that is each one of us shine out through our being for the glory of God.

Amen.