

“Perfect Love” Dr. Mack Sigmon Preached 02/19

One of my favorite movies is an action/comedy film from 1987 called “Running Scared.” Billy Crystal and Gregory Hines are two unconventional plainclothes detectives in Chicago trying to chase down and capture a notorious drug dealer, and the chemistry between the two actors, along with some great comedy writing, yield some truly funny moments.

In one of those moments, Hines and Crystal have requested a decent looking unmarked car – one that will actually fool people – and the head mechanic of the police garage delivers to them what he proudly declares to be his greatest handiwork - the perfect unmarked recreation of a Chicago taxicab, yellow, shining and fully-equipped, including bullet proof windows.

Billy Crystal’s character is excited and wants to get going in it immediately, but Gregory Hine’s character keeps staring and shaking his head saying, “It’s not perfect. There’s something wrong.” Even as Hines climbs into the driver’s seat and starts the engine, he is still muttering, “I don’t know...it just doesn’t look right.” As the two are about to pull out of the police garage, two young, rookie detectives who are training under the two senior detectives pull up beside them in their beautiful undercover muscle car – a Firebird – and immediately make fun of Hines and Crystal’s “chicken-yellow” taxi. Hine’s response is to accelerate in a spin and slam the undercover taxi into the Firebird, leaving a massive crease all the way down the taxi’s side. “Now it’s perfect,” Hines proclaims, revealing the obvious fact that there is no such thing as a Chicago taxi cab without a dent.

That little scene reminds us of an undisputable truth – perfection is in the eye, and the heart, of the beholder. This past Tuesday was Valentine’s Day, and in the weeks leading up

to it you might have noticed that the word “perfect” was overused in all kinds of advertising. A box of candy might be, as described, “the perfect Valentine’s gift” unless, of course, your beloved is diabetic. Florists advertise that roses or bouquets are the perfect gift to express your love, unless your loved one has allergies or, like my Valentine, hates to see dried up, dead flowers in the house (because neither of us can keep them alive.)

I Googled “the perfect valentine’s gift” on my laptop, and there were thousands of results but my favorite one, a mail order gift, was titled, “Fundies...the underwear built for two.” I won’t go any further into that one, but I want to assure you that under no circumstances was that the perfect valentine’s gift – nor, I can assure you, were any of the others. Valentine’s Day is supposed to be a celebration of love, and advertisers idealize love as represented by some type of material perfection, but we know that our experience of love is neither material nor perfect. Jodi Picoult in her novel, “My Sister’s Keeper,” expresses love in a way totally opposite of the Valentine’s market when she writes, “You don’t love someone because they’re perfect, you love them in spite of the fact that they’re not.”

When it comes to love, is the definition of perfection any different when the eye of the beholder belongs to God? The ancient Greeks were fairly smart in their understanding that love cannot be expressed with just one idea, which is why the ancient Greek language, the language of the New Testament, had six different words for love. Eros was the Greek word for sexual love, which English adopted in words like “erotic.” Philia was the love of friendship, a sisterly or brotherly love expressed in a city name like “Philadelphia.” Ludus was the Greek word for playful love, sports, or dancing; the Greek word “pragma” meant long-term love and was specifically used for couples who were married many years.

“Philautia” meant self-love, in the negative form of narcissism or in the positive as self-esteem. The final word for “love” in the Greek is one familiar to most Christians, because it was the Greek word used for Christ’s teaching on love more than any other – agape.

One of my favorite explanations of the word “agape” is from contemporary philosopher Roman Krznaric in his book, *How Should We Live? Great Ideas from the Past for Everyday Life* when he writes: “...perhaps the most radical, was *agape* or selfless love. This was a love that you extended to all people, whether family members or distant strangers... C.S. Lewis referred to it as “gift love,” the highest form of Christian love... There is growing evidence that *agape* is in a dangerous decline in many countries. Empathy levels in the U.S. have [declined sharply](#) over the past 40 years, with the steepest fall occurring in the past decade. We urgently need to revive our capacity to care about strangers.”

Christ had his own definition of agape, which embraces the radical nature of such love in both action and attitude: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

I imagine that those words sounded as ridiculous to Christ’s audience then, as it does to the world this morning, and that would be correct, because Christ did not intend these words for everyone. Even though Matthew identifies these teachings of Christ as the Sermon on the Mount, he makes it clear that it was spoken only to his disciples – in other words, to those who had already committed themselves to the new way of life to which Christ invited them.

Has anyone ever asked you to do something that, in your mind, was impossible for you to do? Though it may sound like Christ is asking the same of us, he is establishing an important principle for all followers for all time. In the world of religion, all that is required of the adherent is to do no more than the religion demands. In the Judaism of first century Israel the only demand was adherence to the law, which viewed justice only as a matter of quid pro quo – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

In lifting the principle of selfless love, which is the very nature of God, Christ is challenging his followers to live out that love in their own lives. Christ is telling his disciples that if they wish to be children of God, they must place others ahead of themselves in all circumstances, because this is exactly how God loves the world. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The great monastic theologian Thomas Merton wrote, “The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them.” Merton understood that the world lets us choose gods that fit our image or meets our needs – that is the very definition of religion; but faith lets God choose us; we are chosen to reflect God’s image, the image of Christ’s agape love, and meet God’s needs as we live our lives in the kingdom of God.

Christ's call for us to be "perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," is not about how to live, because none of us can lead perfect lives, but it is about how to love, because we truly can love others as God loves us. We cannot be perfect, but we can be forgiving. We cannot be perfect, but we can be sharing. We cannot be perfect, but we can be compassionate. Being perfect as God is perfect is not a call to live by some legalistic standard that transforms us into paragons of virtue and righteousness, but a call to love in such a way that transforms the lives of others, and we can do this if we look past the mirror of self and into the hurting, hungry, and hopeless lives of those around us.

Thomas à Kempis wrote this sentence in his book "Imitation of Christ": "A wise lover values not so much the gift of the lover as the love of the giver." So it is with the gifts of love we give to others in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – the gifts themselves are not perfect, because we are a flawed and broken people, but the love that moves us to light candles in the darkness is a perfect love, and the light that it gives is a perfect light. Whose lives are we lighting this morning? Whose shadows are we driving away? Just as a dent can make a car perfect for the task at hand, so can our dents and imperfections make perfect the love of Christ in the hearts of others. That is agape – that is Christian love, and it is ours to give.

Amen