

October 24, 2021 | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Matthew 5:38–48](#)

TITLE: Intervals of Faith: Perfect 4th – Loving Perfection

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I love the fact that when considering the interval of a perfect 4th, the three commonly known songs that use this interval are “O Tannenbaum,” “Amazing Grace,” and the Bridal Chorus from Wagner’s Lohengrin. The first one reminds us of Christmas time, decorating trees with ornaments and the birth of Christ in a manger long ago. The second song provides almost instant comfort—“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” We sing it when we’re troubled, when we grieve the death of a loved one, or when we need to be reminded that we’re not alone in this world. And then there’s the third option—Wagner’s Bridal Chorus. It’s been sung as “Here Comes the Bride” on playgrounds as children pretend to get married. It was played in a classic Looney Tunes cartoon when Bugs Bunny married Elmer Fudd. It’s a melody associated with weddings and marriages even to this day and it opens with a perfect 4th.

Perfect: it’s both a noun and a verb. Something without flaw or blemish is perfect. Or we perfect something by improving it, by moving it from a lesser state to something ideal. But this work is also an adjective, as in “It is a perfect day”; “in the football game he threw a perfect pass”; or in the words of Jesus, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Perfect as a noun we understand; perfect as a verb is quite clear. But perfect as an adjective—and as an adjective applied to us—that’s troubling on many levels.

Only an absolute narcissist would look in the mirror and think “I’m utterly perfect!” We all have flaws; we all make mistakes. Paul famously wrote, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Last week we heard Jesus say to the rich young man, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18). Is perfection something we attain or only something for which we strive? I would say it is both, but that double answer takes some explaining.

St. Dmitry of Rostov was a 17th century saint in the Orthodox Church tradition. Someone wrote to him about how to pray properly, to which he gave this reply: *Never go back and repeat prayers done poorly. [It is far better] to put ourselves at the mercy of God and to try to do better the next time. This method reduces the possibility of thinking that God hears our prayers according to the perfection of our performance and not according to the greatness of God’s mercy. [This] gives humility and hope and keeps us always moving forward.*

I think that is very wise advice. If you pray poorly, stumbling over words or getting mixed up in your thoughts, notice that fact and strive to do better next time—but remember it is never about you. It is always about the one listening to you, caring about you as you pray. And that one is perfect—perfect in being, perfect in love. Which moves us to the next point—namely that perfection is not a quality we possess but something better located in the relationship between two people.

Today we are recognizing ELPC couples who got married during this crazy pandemic season. The list isn't very long because quite a few wedding plans were cancelled or postponed because of Covid. But some did get married, although I'm not sure if any of them used the bridal march from Lohengrin. Another place where we see the adjective "perfect" is in the phrase, "Oh, they have the perfect marriage!" Now every couple is familiar with this tension between the ideal of a perfect marriage and the reality of their relationship—which invariably is always less than perfect. We have good days and bad days. There are times of intimacy and times of disagreement. Couples learn to navigate these ups and downs—that is what makes a successful marriage, even if it is not a perfect marriage.

Do you see the pattern that is emerging here? Perfection is never an individual quality. It is something that emerges in a relationship between two people – like partners striving for a perfect marriage—or in our relationship with God—offering our flawed prayers to a God who hears, loves, and intercedes for us perfectly. If our goal is perfection, it is something that always needs more than just us.

People have been trying to set records for running a mile ever since the 1850s. For the longest time, the barrier to break was the 4 minute mile. Roger Bannister famously did this in 1954. It is a marvelous achievement—almost sheer perfection for its day—but Bannister did not break this barrier by himself. Bannister was studying medicine and only trained as a runner on the side. He knew he was fast, but in order to try and break the record, he needed to be paced by faster runners who were experts at distances shorter than the mile—in this case Chris Brasher and Chris Chataway. On May 6, 1954, the trio gathered as part of a race being held at Oxford. Bannister decided the conditions were right to try and set a record, so Brasher took off and led the field, including Bannister, through a 57 second first quarter. At the halfway point of the race, Chataway took over and led Bannister through a three-quarter pace that was just around 3 minutes. During the backstretch, Bannister swept by Chataway, accelerating through the final quarter to break the tape at 3:59 seconds and collapsing into the arms of track officials. It was an amazing accomplishment, but Bannister required others to reach that level of perfection.

So if we're going to hear Jesus' words about perfection, before we are tempted to try and measure how close any one of us alone is to standards of perfection, we need to think about our relationships first. To do this, it helps to be guided by other words of scripture - words like Galatians 2:20—*It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.* Or I Corinthians 3:16—*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?* Or the comforting words from Philippians 3:12—*Not that I have already obtained this or reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* Christ has made us his own; Christ lives in us; God's Spirit dwells in us.

Jesus invites us into the type of relationship I just described—one in which we are like branches grafted onto a strong vine, vessels into which God's spirit of love and justice and grace is poured into, filling us to overflowing. Jesus calls us to be holy, to be

perfect—never expecting that such qualities are attainable on our own. Rather, it is part of what it means to be children of God our Father in heaven. It is part of turning the other cheek, of giving to those in need, of loving even our enemies, of being salt and light and a witness to God's perfection even as it shines dimly through our own lives. Such is God's design—and such is Christ's intent when he calls us to be perfect AND provides the indwelling grace of his own perfection.

Perfect fourth intervals are funny. Unlike most of the other intervals, you can't make a perfect fourth minor or major by moving the top note a half-step up or down. If you try to add or subtract from a perfect fourth, it becomes something else entirely. That's part of what makes it perfect. We too are called to live out faith that is like a perfect fourth. We are called to be as consistent as we can in our thoughts and deeds, going beyond what the world believes is right to exhibit a righteousness that is not of our own making or choosing, but a righteousness literally given to us by God in Christ. It is a perfection made real in us in love—a loving perfection, as it were.

So may we love as perfectly as we can—by God's grace—and by doing so fully become the children of our heavenly Father and Mother. For such is Christ's command for us this day.

AMEN