

*Texts: 1 Peter 4:1-19; Matthew 5:43-48*

*Subject: Stewards of God's Grace/Suffering as a Christian*

*Theme: Perfect in Love*

*Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 31, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friday night is movie night at our house. This week it was "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." The kids take turn picking what they'd like to watch - it has to be something family-friendly (or PG-13 at most) and everyone cuddles up on the couch together. After a busy week, it's how we come together and connect before a busy weekend. But when one gets to choose, not everyone else is thrilled. There is sometimes weeping and gnashing of teeth.

As parents, we're often required to intervene in disputes between siblings, to redirect behavior, and to be the enforcers of discipline. With four kids at home, it's sometimes a lot to handle. Our job is to do our best to teach them how to care for each other first, our neighbors, and the world around them. That's the beginning of it, I guess. But it's quite a mission. They're not perfect, and neither am I. We all make mistakes, and try to learn from them and do better. I think that's about all we can ask of one another. To hear Jesus' words then about being "perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" is hard to understand. I wish I could. I try and fail often. I think we all do. And maybe that's been one thing that has turned so many people off from religion altogether, and Christianity specifically - to see how we sometimes treat each other, our neighbors, and those we might call strangers. And loving enemies? That's a tough one. Anyone achieved a perfect score on that? Didn't think so.

If our spiritual lives are just about abiding by a new set of rules, and church becomes the place where we learn behavior modification, our joy will be hard to sustain. When we come together to worship, to hear the story of God's love for our world, to sing of Jesus' mercy and grace, to pray for one another and the whole creation, we are being formed and transformed. Yes, we used to act differently - I did. Maybe you used to think differently, or believe other ideas about who you were, about what matters in your life, and about our reason for living. When we heard the good news of Jesus proclaimed over us, when we were welcomed to baptism, and joined to Christ we were made new. You were changed. Then, and now, Jesus calls us out of the world - to be for the world. To be perfect not in every action, though we can try and fail as much as we need to, but to be perfect in love. Sounds good. but how do we get there?

Practice makes perfect, right? Maybe. It's worth the attempt anyway.

The 'churchy' word for this is discipleship - creating and living into the patterns and practices that keep us steady in an unsteady world, that open us up to what God is doing in us and through us, that turn our hearts from ourselves back to Jesus, and to the ones he loves.

When we were at the beach earlier this month, the kids and I, okay mostly "I" dug a big hole a few feet from the edge of the water. Each handful of dirt removed left a growing pit in the earth. Within the hour, as the tide edged higher, the waves would get closer and closer to my construction project. Eventually, as my hole reached a depth enough for a near teenager to fit in, the ocean erased it, filling what was my giant crater, with the freshest sand from the bottom of the sea. What was empty was made whole again.

Peter's first letter to the early church begins this section with Christ crucified - "since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh" and flows out from there. Beginning with an understanding of what Christ has done for us, the author encourages the community to know who they are - a beloved community, a people filled and forgiven, called out from what is considered 'typical' - made for more. For the sake of the sharing of the good news, the faithful are to live differently, not imitating the immorality of the world around them, but focused on loving one another.

The sense of urgency was real. The idea that Jesus was coming back soon was common. It was prominent in Paul's earliest writings, so we shouldn't be surprised to find this as an underlying belief. We might take it today as another way to say, life is short. We never know how much time we have together, so we ought to love one another as much as we can. So what should we do with our time? Eat and drink? Party like it's Y2K? Use up every resource on earth and run up our credit cards, cuz we'll be caught up in a holy tractor beam any day now? You never know - but I find this unlikely. But now, just like back then, we need to know what we're supposed to be about. We forget, and get distracted - it's just our human nature - we get caught up in other habits and patterns that are not helpful for us. We need a reminder about what our lives can be, that are more aligned with the teaching of our Lord.

We read scripture, we gather to worship and come for the Lord's supper, we give as we are able, we spend time in fellowship, building faithful relationships, and we serve together. This is the focus that this chapter of the letter calls the people to - loving service and hospitality. "Above all, **maintain constant love** for one another, for **love** covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). More than anything, we are to be focused on

love for each other. Our communities are torn apart when we fail to love each other, when we turn on each other, or are so offended by one another's faults that we can no longer be in the same place at the same time. Yes, we know we will never get it all right, but if we truly love one another, and then actively love each other, through serving, listening, trusting, and helping, we will be on the right track. When we are offended we can forgive, when we fall short, we can admit it, when we know someone is in need, we can help each other. That's what the body of Christ does - that's how we build up the kingdom. Not by being spiritual superhero or masters of Christianity - by humbling ourselves and lovingly serving one another.

I saw this kind of love in action this week, as over 15 adults and youth gave of their time to show up and teach our kids, to have fun, and share the good news of Jesus. This is what we're about. I see it when folks gather out front before our senior meal program and form friendships, share what they have, and we get to serve them in so many ways. I see it when neighbors fill and distribute sand bags after a flood, donate peanut butter and groceries for folk in need, and people give graciously and sacrificially so that others can start the school year on the right track.

The call to loving service here's especially given as instruction to care for strangers. The word for *hospitality* here in greek is *philoxenos* - the opposite of *xenophobia* - it is "stranger love." It is a radical love, that welcomes those who are of different tribes and nations - they would have been ones in the ancient world that did not have a place at the table, non-citizens, those without rights or access, those on the margins of the society. That's how these early Christians are directed to love and serve

each other. And it didn't require a great fortune to do so, but to use "whatever gift each has received." And haven't we been gifted to serve in so many different ways?

Some in *this* community serve with music, with voices that call to mind the heavenly choir. Others care for our church property, humbly, without complaint. Others focus on community outreach, and donate supplies for babies, students, and families in need. Others have gifts of visual arts, flower arrangement, decorating, planning events, and teaching youth and children. All of us get to share the hope that is in us when we use our gifts, share our stories of faith and the promises of God's love in Jesus. This is how we get to be "perfect" in love.

We know that our acts of kindness don't fill the holes that we dig in our lives and the lives of others, and our good deeds don't erase our failures, but that moving forward in love helps us, feeds us, and builds us up together. Proverbs 10:12 says, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses." Our love is not perfect, no matter how hard we try. Thankfully, the love of God in Jesus is all we need to cover our sins and selfishness.

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, died for us and rose again, and sent us the power of the Holy Spirit, *we are able* to put our trust in Him. Since Jesus took our failures and imperfections to the cross, *we are freed* to love in radical, counter-cultural, amazing and awesome ways. *We are set free* from our selfish ways to show hospitality, to welcome strangers, to love enemies, to forgive with all our hearts and to form faith-filled communities that share God's perfect love with others. Jesus is enough to cover not just a multitude, but all of our sin, so we might live in the newness of life he gives, that we could worship and praise Him, and be sent to share the blessings of this love and liberty with others, having been made perfect in love. Amen.