

NOTHING SHORT OF PERFECTION

BACCALAUREATE SERVICE

LaGrange College

May 20, 2011

Matthew 5:43-48

It is impossible to begin this message to you tonight without first offering a word of deep gratitude to Dr. Quincy Brown. The highest honor that one United Methodist minister can bestow upon another is to invite a colleague to be a guest preacher in one's own setting. I realize, of course, that we are in the sanctuary of the First United Methodist Church, where Dr. Harold Lawrence is the senior minister. But for purposes of this evening's service, we are gathered as the community of LaGrange College under the leadership of President Dan McAlexander. And, for tonight, this is Dr. Brown's pulpit. So I want to thank him most sincerely for the invitation to be with you.

There is a little secret that he and I share with all ordained ministers in The United Methodist Church. Before we were received into the clergy membership of our respective annual conferences and before anyone laid hands on our heads in ordination, we had to answer a set of questions. They are the same questions that have been put to Methodist preachers for nearly 250 years, since the days of John Wesley. Some of the questions are personal, like one that asks "Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?" Some of the questions are practical, such as: "Will you diligently instruct the children in every place?" But three of them are morally and theologically intimidating: "Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Are you earnestly striving after perfection in love?"¹

¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2008*, ¶330.5d, page 235

I can assure you that Harold, Quincy, and I answered “yes” to those questions on the matter of perfection. Frankly, if we didn’t, our progress toward ordination by the church would have been stopped in its tracks. So now you know we believe in perfection.

Of course, the overwhelming majority of you in the graduating class might say that you have no plans to pursue a career in the ordained ministry, so you will never have to answer the questions about perfection. And many of you in the graduating class might say “I am not even a Methodist, so I am off the hook for answering Methodist questions about perfection.” Some of you might even say that you are not Christians or believers of any kind, so the questions of Christian perfection are irrelevant. Well, stay with me for a minute, because there is a chance that you might want them to be relevant for your life.

Almost everybody gets at least a few moments of perfect freedom in life, and for you graduates in the room this weekend might be one of them. You have completed all of the requirements for your degrees. You have no more assignments to read, or papers to write, or exams to take. The faculty has already recommended that you be graduated, and the Board has already voted its approval. Everything has been completed. So you can allow yourself to savor an exhilarating taste of perfect freedom as you celebrate what is truly complete.

Anyone who has ever won a championship in any sport has experienced that same feeling. There are the minutes after the final seconds of the final game have ticked away, when the new champions exuberantly hug their teammates and cut down the nets or bring down the goal posts or kiss the trophy and hoist it high. For those few minutes of ecstasy, there is the perfect feeling of freedom for celebrating that no more work has to be done, no more challenges have to be faced, no more adversaries have to be defeated. In the

glow of an athletic championship, one feels perfect freedom—not that every game has been won, but that the ultimate task has been completed.

There is another group of people in this room who have experienced a kind of perfection. I am referring to the mothers and the fathers of the graduates.

Those of you who are the parents can look upon your sons and daughters in this graduating class and recall another moment of perfect joy. It was perhaps twenty-one or twenty-two years ago. It was the moment when your now robed child was born. Months of pregnant preparation had passed. Hours of painful labor had ended. Perhaps too many minutes of purposeful pushing had taken all your strength. And then there was that first gasp of life-giving breath, followed by that first full cry of living and breathing freedom as your son or daughter arrived in the world with perfectly unlimited possibilities. For a few minutes, at least, everything was perfect because everything was possible. Only you know if, in the years since the perfection of that moment, your children have achieved what you hoped, or disappointed your dreams, or surpassed your circumstances, or managed at various times to do all three. But you know what it was like in the moments when the birth process had been completed, to feel the joy of celebrating perfect freedom.

So whether or not you are headed to the ministry, whether you are a graduate or a parent or a friend, whether or not you are a Methodist, I want to ask us to ponder merits of perfection. Let's think about the word of Jesus that His followers are to "be perfect,"² and realize that living with a goal in mind that is nothing short of perfection may be the most liberating way to experience complete and utter joy.

² Matthew 5:48

Of course, if we are going to understand what Jesus meant when he advised His followers to “be perfect,” we will have to remember the mindset of the world when Jesus was speaking and when Matthew was writing.

There were two prevailing views on understanding “perfection.” One came from the traditions of Greek philosophy, which cherished the separation of the physical realm from the spiritual realm and which interpreted “perfection” to mean “untarnished by concrete involvement with the material world.”³ The other came from the traditions of Jewish legalism, which were in place in the community called Qumran and which said “perfection” meant obedience to all laws.

Jesus spoke in antithesis to both prevailing traditions. He began, “You have heard it said...but I say to you...” and offered a radical new way of understanding perfection. In contrast to the philosophy that stressed separation from the world, Jesus said that life was complete only when we engaged with the world in an effort to change it. In contrast to the legalism that stressed merely obeying the law, Jesus said that a complete life meant we lived with integrity—otherwise, one could obey the rules and still have a self-centered soul. That would be a long way from perfect joy. So, from the perspective of the New Testament, to “be perfect” is neither to stay away from the hard realities of the world nor to be obedient to the hard regulations of the world but to live a life completely devoted to freedom and integrity and wholeness and joy.

That’s the perfection I hope you get to taste—not only this weekend but for the rest of your life. Pursue nothing short of perfection by seeking complete and utter joy.

³ M. Eugene Boring, “Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), page 196

It will not be easy. If you stay engaged with the world in order to change it, there are forces that will resist. In the words of the Roman orator Seneca, who lived during the time of Jesus, when you enjoy the brightness of the sun you have to remember that “the sun rises also upon the wicked” and when you sail upon the seas you have to remember that “the sea lies open also to Pirates.”⁴

This week, Americans are being invited to remember the folks who rode on buses fifty years ago from all the compass points in the nation as Freedom Riders in search of complete social justice for all Americans, regardless of race. They rode through Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Some were arrested. Some were beaten. Some died when their buses were firebombed. And some who survived the Freedom Ride, like my wife’s pastor from her Methodist church in Pennsylvania, made it back home only to be ridiculed for leaving town and going to a part of the world where it was said he had no business. But Jesus said it is the business of believers to arise and transform the world. So they rode those buses to complete the journey toward freedom. That is what we do when we are called toward the integrity and wholeness and joy that are the stuff of perfection.

Then Jesus added one thing more for those of us who will settle for nothing short of perfection. He said, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”⁵ Any of us can rise to the level of loving family members and friends, as complicated as those relationships can be. But finding complete joy in life will also require loving our enemies and praying for them.

⁴ Donald Senior, *Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), page 80

⁵ Matthew 5:44

Last month, I attended a meeting in Atlanta of international theological educators and church leaders. One of the participants was a native of the Philippines who is now a Methodist missionary in Cambodia. He gave us some details about the tough tasks facing the church in that country. When the Khmer Rouge ruthlessly ran Cambodia, they killed their enemies. Among the persons whom they identified as enemies were any people who wore eyeglasses, because eyeglasses indicated that one was a reader. And if one read, one would be exposed to ideas that could promote freedom and joy. The missionary said that, as a result, the Khmer Rouge murdered most of the priests and ministers in the nation. In the whole country of Cambodia today, he said, only three Methodist ministers remain alive.

It is tempting to build the political systems of the world on the kind of justice that seeks revenge for such atrocities. Or, we can seek nothing short of perfection, and love our enemies as well as pray for those who persecute us. Why do that? Because, as the first New Testament letter of John says, “perfect love casts out fear.”⁶

In the domestic politics of the United States these days, and in the international environment dominated by religions we may not understand and languages we do not read, it is tempting to make choices on the basis of fear. But, as Raymond Brown put it, when we are perfected by God’s love, “the evil of fear has been cast out.”⁷

Can you remember with me some of those great moments when God’s people were told not to be afraid?

One night, on a hill outside the Palestinian town called Bethlehem, shepherds were watching their flocks when they saw something they later described as an angel,

⁶ I John 4:18

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1982), page 530

they heard something they later described as music, and they were told not to be afraid. One morning about thirty-three years later, some women went to a tomb near the holy city of Jerusalem, where they saw a stranger near an empty grave who told them they need not be afraid of resurrection to new life.

In the greatest moments that have shaken the ways of the world, people have been given an invitation not to be afraid—not be afraid to love enemies, not be afraid to pray for adversaries, not be afraid to trust that life is stronger than death, not to be afraid to taste perfect joy, not to be afraid to celebrate perfect freedom, not to be afraid to pursue the transformation of the world. To live without fear is nothing short of perfection.

Now I have a confession. Some weeks after Dr. Brown contacted me about plans for tonight and tomorrow, I began hearing some religious broadcasters make predictions about this weekend. Lately these predictions have become quite widespread. They have formed the story line all this week in the comic strip *Doonesbury*. Jon Stewart has given them attention on *The Daily Show*. And they were the topic of David Letterman's Top Ten list two nights ago. The predictions are that Commencement Day, May 21, will be the day when Jesus returns to the world and that five months later, October 21, will be the end of the world.

Such predictions have been made many times before. There is no more credibility to them this time.

But whatever else we think of them, they need not make us afraid.

For the Bible tells us that fear is imperfect and that perfect love casts out fear. So I trust that the Lord wants us to pursue nothing short of perfection. And I hope you settle for nothing less than perfection on your journey, from this weekend forward, to find the

freedom, the integrity, the wholeness, and the perfect joy that will not only make your life complete. It will transform the world with love.

AMEN