

John Wesley “Christian Perfection”

Philippians 4:12-16

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once.

“Good Is Never Good Enough”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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So I'm doing these sermons on different thinkers and today it's John Wesley, and next week it will be Kierkegaard, and it will be Children's Sabbath. Yikes. Perfection. You know, we thought we had it here Tuesday. You know the second floor, the education wing? In the education part of the church, the second floor gets hot. Six years ago, we put in double-pane windows. We thought that would help, and it did. Then we put in an elevator, so people wouldn't have to climb the steps, and it made a difference. But it gets hot. August, July, September. How hot? You could sit down in a chair in the second floor of our building and breathe and you'd sweat. That's how hot. If hell is hot, it may be that hot. Or, as some have said, "It is hotter than hell on the second floor." But now, we have an air conditioned. We just put it in. Perfection. September. Little box on the wall of every room, you can reach up there, little arrow. You put the arrow down, it's going to make it cooler. Little button, little arrow. Perfection.

Tuesday, we attained perfection. The Senior Council showed a movie, filled the Cinema Room, one of the rooms upstairs. Had to get in extra chairs. The room was cool. The day was hot, and everything was cool. Perfection. The movie was about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the conspiracy that led to it. The movie had this drama, adventure, intrigue, and in the last twenty minutes it all came together. A room full of seniors watching the conspirator, and in a perfect movie air conditioned room, perfection, twenty minutes till the end. Who was guilty? Who was innocent? How does it end? Well, that room full of seniors will never know, because the television DVD player failed and they never got to the final act. But the room was cool, and they were comfortable, and the elevator worked, and the double-pane windows blocked out the sun. Perfection. It was good, but not good enough.

John Wesley preached this sermon on Christian Perfection. It was one of his favorite topics, because you know, John Wesley never liked the Calvinist view that everything was set. There were the elect and the doomed, and he said, "No, you can move on to perfection. You can do something about your life." He said, "I know that there's a problem with this. Talking about perfection, some people will object to is, but let me ask you a question," he said. "Is it not in the holy Scriptures, this matter of perfection? Did Jesus not say to his disciples, "Be ye perfect even as God is perfect"?" And he quoted

from Phillippians, "I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the heavenly call of God. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Perfection. Good isn't good enough, we strive for more, as one person described it, "Exhilaration comes in that feeling that you get after a great idea hits you. And just before you realize what's wrong with it." A great idea hits you.

A couple of weeks ago we celebrated the life and mourned the death of Dale Cavender. The service ended in the Columbarium area, where his ashes were put into the wall, and it was raining. It was raining pretty hard, and just at the right time a military plane flew over the church, and the Air Force honor guard played "Taps" without a flaw. Did you ever hear that played poorly? Oh, this was perfect. And then the color guard folded up the American flag, and the rain was coming down, and they folded it up and it wasn't right, so they unfolded it and they folded it up again. And the rain is coming down, the book of worship is soaked. And they unfolded it because it wasn't right, and they folded it up three times. Perfection. Good wasn't good enough.

Moving on to perfection. This morning, how do we get there? What does it take? Because we are called to perfection, and I think it takes three things to get us there at least, and I'll name three. First of all, something's got to wake us up. The Biblical witnesses reminded Sarah, who said, "What do you mean I'm going to have a baby? I'm too old for this," and she laughed. And Mary who said, "What do you mean, I'm going to give birth to Messiah? I'm too young for this," and she cried. And Paul, who said, "What do you mean I'm going to be a disciple. I'm a small business owner. I'm a tentmaker, and I don't even like Christians." And then there was this truth that was blinding, and then he could see, and he woke up to his mission. And Job, who had it all until he lost it, and then he realized what it meant to have it. There's nothing like bad luck to make you realize what good luck is. Abraham, who was not content to wander around in his tunic until something told him about the promised land, and Moses who saw the burning bush that wasn't consumed, and he became consumed, because it woke him up.

What wakes us up? Lou Holtz has been a success in every phase of his life except that brief time with the New York Jets. He was their coach, and it didn't go well. Football coach, TV analyst, published author, motivational speaker in great demand. Lou Holtz was a mediocre student. Parents never went to college. He grew up in poverty. Just before he went to Kent State to college, he was in a grocery store in his home town Follensbee, West Virginia, which is about a five-iron away from where I grew up. "I overheard a conversation. Two women in the aisle next to mine. They had no idea I was on the other side by the English muffins. They were chatting away. I'm not an eavesdropper, normally wouldn't have paid any attention to their conversation except one of them mentioned my name and said, "Isn't it a shame that the Holtzs are wasting what little money they have sending Lou to college." That's what it took, and that's all it took. Somebody telling you what you can't do, you'll show them. Or pushing you to do what you can do, but don't think you can do, committed to excellence, moving on to perfection, waking us up. Wake up.

The church received a valuable collection of books this past week on Methodism from the library of Mason Willis. He's a retired Methodist pastor, and he's a good friend, and he heard about our library and he wanted us to have them. Very valuable books on Methodism. Mason was the first to get his Doctor of Ministry degree at Iliff School of Theology. His advisor was Oliver Reed Wentley. Dr. Wentley was an extremely difficult human being. From Yale, which explains a lot. Mason said that he turned in portions of his dissertation and Wentley would call him in and he'd have this pile of papers on his desk and Mason would be on the other side of the desk, and Wentley would pound his fist on the desk and he'd say, "Willis, you can do better work than this and by God I'm going to make sure you do." Oliver Reed Wentley died very suddenly of a heart attack. When I got back from vacation there was a note on my desk. It announced his death and the time of the service, and no more details. I really thought, till I found out, that Mason had killed him. I asked Mason about that this week and he said he thought about it. Actually woke him up. Good wasn't good enough.

A twelve-year-old boy given a job by his father to work in the yard. Paid him a quarter. Told his six-year-old brother if he'd do the work for him, he'd give him the quarter which his father had given him to do the work. "If you do the work for me, you can have this quarter to hold onto until dinner. But then you have to give it back." And the little kid was pleased with that, and he did work all afternoon, and he got the work done. His big brother said, "You've got to give it back," and he would at dinner. His father came home, he was a hard-working businessman who wasn't around the house much. Worked seven days a week. Daddy came home and saw the little guy, the six-year-old, with his quarter in his hand and said, "Where did you get the quarter, son?" "Well, my brother let me hold onto it while I did his work in the yard." "You're holding it." "Yes, I'm holding it, but I have to give it back at dinnertime." "That's crazy. That's the stupidest thing I ever heard. You mean you worked all afternoon and really hard, and you've got to give your money back?" And the little guy looked at his dad and said, "But Daddy, isn't that what you're doing too? Working hard just so you can hold onto your money?" Woke him up.

Wake up to the way we live, to the things we do, to the facts. That there's more living than life is presenting us, and more living than we're living. More giving than the gifts we give. More to do than we've done. More that we can achieve, more that we can learn, more that we can risk. Making excuses, no. Moving on to perfection. Wake up, first of all.

Secondly, shake up. Shape up, you've got to shake up. Shape up, because practice makes perfect. Shape up. There is preparation required. We've got to find a way to shape up. And if we do, we can move on toward perfection once we shape up. Augustine was right when he said we've got to care for our bodies as though we were going to live forever, and we've got to care for our souls as though we were going to die tomorrow. Shape up our souls. Shape up ourselves. Practice makes perfect. I don't think anybody would think that David went after the giant with a slingshot, that was the first time he picked up the weapon. No, he practiced before he made that shot that took out Goliath. I think. And you can't imagine what it was like in Joshua's house, months before the battle of Jericho when the walls came tumbling down. You have to know that they had to put him in the

basement while he was practicing that trumpet, because no trumpet played that loud should be heard. And when Jesus told the disciples to cast their nets on the other side, they weren't just sitting there waiting for the fish to jump in the boat, they were casting their nets on the other side. Recently here at the church, several of us have decided, instead of taking coffee break every morning at 10:00, instead of sitting at the tables in the conference room talking about the weird behavior of church members, or the annoying interventions of church hierarchy, we decided that we were going to take a walk around the neighborhood. So we're shaping up some, because some of us are a little out of round.

We have a class on marriage communication here at the church, and that's a good thing because every now and then, we need to be reminded of our relationships that perhaps they are not what they could be, and we need to shape them up. There's a Dear Abby letter that read, "Dear Abby, my husband's not happy with my mood swings. The other day he bought me a mood ring so he could monitor my moods. When I'm in a good mood it turns green. When I'm in a bad mood it leaves a big red mark on his forehead." There's a couple needing some help, don't you think?

This Thursday, I'm invited to speak to a class at Rocky Mountain High School. It's a class that meets at 7:30 in the morning, and I'm going to talk to them about marriage. Teacher wants me to explain to those students what I do with the couples before I marry them, when they come in for counseling. I know what I'm going to try to say. I'm not quite sure how I'm going to say it, because I think it's important and needs to be said right. I want to tell them that marriage requires constant work. It's based on respect and mutual consideration, and every now and then, shape it up, fall in love again. One of the most important functions of the church worship, I think, it provides for us practice for living. A shaping-up. Worship, I think, is rehearsal. It's a time to think about pivotal moments that come. In worship we are reminded of the power of prayer as we unite our hearts and minds with God, and so doing, then can take a different perspective on life. In worship, we remember the sanctity of marriage, and the power of love, and in worship we remember the incredible truth that death does not ever have the last word. Worship is rehearsal for living. It's a time for us to shape up our spirit.

I would never say it his way, but I saw a bumper sticker over at the hospital on Friday. Love to go to the hospital on Friday. Because I like to look at the bumper stickers, and sometime I find some of you. There was a bumper sticker on a car, it said, "You've got to exercise. Try walking with the Lord." I thought that was profound, somehow. I don't know. Worship is a time to shape up our spirit. For most of life is preparation for the rest of life, and if we take the time to get ready, we will be set when it's time to act. Most of life is "hurry up and wait" but the wait is not passive, it's an active preparation for investing ourselves in what is to come. Moving on to perfection takes preparation. We've got to wake up, and we've got to shape up.

And finally, we've got to show up. That means when the questions are asked, we raise our hands. When volunteers are needed, we take a step forward. When the roll is called up yonder, or down under, we'll be there. We will show up, prepared to do what we can

to raise the bar of what's possible, or to add to the mix something that was needed, or to add to the scene a glimpse of what might have been missed. We wake up and we shape up, and we urge to show up. One of the tests of our faith is how we respond to the crisis. Sunday school teacher read the story of the good Samaritan to her class, looked at her fifth-graders and said, "If you saw a man who was beaten and bleeding left by the side of the road, what would you do?" One little fifth-grade girl raised her hand and said, with a quivering voice, "I'd throw up." Woody Allen said that 75% of life is showing up. But this showing up is not just taking a space, not for us. It's taking our place in line. It's looking for a way to move the line forward. It's knowing that we were put here and our choice is what we make of it, so at the end of it all they will say of us we made a difference, and things changed because we were put here.

You see, because we are people of faith, we cannot accept the world where people couldn't care less, because we are those people who couldn't care more. Nelson Mandela was right when he said our deepest fear is not that we're inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. You know what power is? Kim Drake, she wrote about her mother. This is power. Her mother was getting phone calls. Strangers would call. She didn't know why, and then she found out. Some billing company had an 800 number that was her number, except that it had an 800 in front of it. So she called the company to complain. They told her she ought to change her number. She said, "I've had this number 20 years. You change your number." They wouldn't do it. She said, "Okay, the next calls I get, I'm going to tell anyone who calls me that their bill is paid in full." Guess who changed their number.

That bulletin cover, my goodness, did you ever see one that bright? I never saw anything on the front of a bulletin cover like that. It says, "Sunday School teachers needed." Sunday School teachers needed. Are we desperate? No. I don't think we want anyone teaching our children about the Christian faith because they're manipulated and feel guilty and have to do it. But there are people here, people who have been awakened, people who have been shaped, and people who are prepared to show up and do that. And it is a privilege and not a pain. An honor, not an obligation. I know that because I've done it. When I was in college, I did it, and I would do it any time. Show up. Step forward. Excellence happens when we decide to show up with the best we have, even when we have to encounter the worst we've ever seen.

I think the most remarkable part of the whole Christian story, frankly, after Jesus' death on the cross, and after the disciples, the male disciples, ran in fear for their lives. I think it was those women, who had the courage to show up, they were going to put spices to anoint his body, and there wasn't going to be a Roman goon with a sword who was going to stop them, or a Pharisee or a Sadducee or a scribe, no Pilate Pontius or Caesar Augustus. Those women were there, they had a job to do, they showed up, and they were the first to witness the resurrection. They were the ones who lived hope. Wake up, shape up, show up.

I want to tell you about someone who knows what it means to show up, when all when does is lie in a hospital bed and let people wait on her. You see, showing up doesn't

require that we do something. It's a matter of being. It's a matter of being aggressive and tenacious and bold, with an attitude that is behind what we do. What does it mean to show up? Eleanor Roosevelt understood it. She said, "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face, and you're able to say to yourself, "I have lived through this horror and I am able to take the next thing that comes along. I will do the thing I think I cannot do. I will do it." Showing up when the road ahead leads beyond the land you know. Showing up is when there is less that you're sure of than what you see for wondering about. Showing up is when the threats are hidden in the challenges and there's no way out, only one way, and that's through it, though you could turn around, but you don't do it.

She's young. She's too young to be going through what she'd going through this stage of her life, and she's pretty. Even though the ravages of cancer have taken away her hair, have left her with bruises and a hollowing thinness that gives her a kind of pallid and pale look. I've been to see her twice. They've got her stuck in a transplant ward in the old part of a hospital in Denver. She's dying. It's just a matter of time. The machines wheezing out their intrusive gasps, plastic tubes and bags, and pleasant nurses with worried expressions. This is not fair, she says. I'm too young, she says. She loves music. She played the piano for church years ago. She's worried about her parents and what they will do when she's gone. And if you look close, or if you look deep into her eyes you see the rage of a soul who will live her days to the very end, and if you look even longer, you will see that her death will not be the end, because something new will start, and she knows it. "There is more I wanted to do with my life, more I wish I could have done," she'd say, and the smile on her face and the easy laughter comes. No fear. No withdrawing into quiet despair.

And when the inevitable happens, there will be tear and concern, but that concern will be for the Almighty, when Carol gets hold of that first conversation about why and how could this be, when there is so much good she could have done on earth. Pity God, not her. And when you start to leave and you're asked to pray, the words come easily between yourself and God on her behalf. She knows all about life that any of us could know. Wake up? She did, she's awake. Shape up? She found purpose and discipline and focus. Show up? Oh yes, eyes wide open. And when you leave that ward, and you hear those machines in the background, as you take off gloves that you have to wear, and the paper shirt that's required, and the antiseptic script that we all have to live out. But you don't have a sense of death with her. Death, where is your sting? Poor death, never had a chance to rule like it thought it would. Death is just an afterthought, or prelude to an afterlife. And you climb into your car, and you pause for a minute, and you know what comes to mind? One word. One simple word, and that word is "excellence." Excellence. Maybe there is a way for all of us to move on toward perfection. Carol did. Let us pray.

In all we do, O God, may it be according to your will and way, as we strive to be the best we can be. Amen.