

26B 2021

Many people like to win, and that includes winning arguments.

Winning can give us that rush of superiority, of triumph, of proof that we are better than others.

That proof is, however, short-lived.

Feelings of inadequacy creep back in, so we need to win again to reclaim that sense of worthiness.

We compete because we imagine that God loves some more than others, that we can somehow earn more love, or, if not that, a replacement for love, by winning.

The reality is that God loves us all equally.

God created us all to be different, to follow individual paths that cannot be compared.

A parishioner once texted me the photo of a coozie that said, "Comparison Is the Thief of Happiness."

My job is to walk my path, to face my challenges.

No one else shares that path.

No one else needs to.

Each of us is tasked in life with taking our unique, God-given gifts and weaknesses (which are two sides of the same trait), and working with others to turn them towards something meaningful.

Someone who is a deliberate thinker, for example, is not the best in a situation that requires a quick decision, like when a pipe bursts.

Someone good at making quick decisions, on the other hand, is not the best at situations that require careful, slow deliberation, like longterm planning.

Doing well is merely a matter of recognizing our gifts and using them in cooperation with others for the good of all.

As Richard Rohr writes, “Divine perfection is simply the ability to include what seems like imperfection.”¹

Our path as Christians, Rohr reminds us, is merely a matter of becoming who we already are.

The Buddhists share a similar notion.

They say that we are already enlightened; we just don’t know it.

In our society, which is about winning rather than cooperation, we can feel inadequate, *imperfect*.

I like to remind people that the original meaning of imperfect was not to have a fault, but to be incomplete.

We still use this sense of “perfect” in grammar.

That perfect tense is used for *completed* actions—I have eaten the apple.

1 Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ* (New York: Convergent, 2021), p. 55.

The action is complete.

By contrast, the imperfect tense refers to action that is not yet completed—I am eating
the apple.

In this sense, we are imperfect.

We are incomplete.

In fact, we are never complete.

Only God is complete, but our incompleteness is what allows us to work together, to
share, to connect.

It is not a design flaw, God's mistake, but a part of God's wonderful plan to increase
love in the world.

As we work together, each one of us different, we spread love.

That is our purpose.

We cannot achieve it alone.

We need others to realize it, others to work with us—like a piston, a camshaft, a spark
plug, and a radiator.

This is why we come to church, to find those who no longer want to strain against who
they are, who do not want to strive to be other than how God created them.

We accept our incompleteness and see it as an advantage, as that which allows
relationship.

We fail to do our part only when we pull away, when we forget that we are part of God's loving plan.

We would never harm others intentionally, in other words, if we realized how interdependent we are, how much we need others to achieve anything truly meaningful.

A piston does not compete with a camshaft, let alone attack it.

Jesus knows this well.

When he sees the Sadducees arguing for dominance, he knows that they are lost, that they feel that they have to prove themselves by besting others.

They drag him into their battle, asking him his opinion (probably hoping that he will lend support to their side), and he answers them well.

By "well," I imagine that Mark means that Jesus refused the black and white, either/or thinking of the Sadducees and offered a more meaningful perspective that supported neither side.

When a scribe overhears Jesus' wisdom during this exchange, he decides to ask him a question, as well: what is the first commandment?

Jesus tells him plainly that the purpose of religion, the purpose of existence, really, is love—love of God, love of neighbor.

When the scribe agrees, Jesus tells him that he is close to the kingdom of God.

You see, the kingdom of God is not some after-life reward for years of mindless obedience to rules.

It is a place that we can inhabit right now.

I have a friend who suffered a severe breakdown from which he has not since recovered.

Once, he was yelling and raving over video chat.

I could not piece together the narrative he thought he was presenting.

I was trying to find a way to connect with him, to let all the rage and confusion slip by so that the person trapped inside it could appear.

At one point, he seemed to run out of words, out of steam, out of rage.

He looked at me in a moment of clarity and said pointing back and forth between himself and me, “This is all there is, isn’t it.”

I told him yes, it is the only thing that really matters.

Exhausted, he soon ended the conversation.

The next time we talked, he was again fulminating and I could not connect with him, but for that moment, he was close to the kingdom of God.

Jesus came to proclaim that the kingdom has come near, not in his birth, not in his death, but in the blessing of creation itself.

Jesus did not change reality, but *recalled* us to reality, to the beauty of a creation that was formed out of love and invites all into relationships of love.

The lesson he taught us is already in our hearts, has been in everyone's heart since the beginning.

In the Old Testament, Ruth knew that her current relationship with her mother-in-law was more important than trying to reverse the loss of her husband and her potential for children by quickly finding another husband.

Naomi selflessly offered her a way out, and Ruth selflessly chose to stay with her.

Those who think that God is disappointed in our imperfection and that only Jesus can save us from God's disapproval miss the whole point of Jesus' life.

He came to teach, to model, to remind, not just to die.

Focusing only on his death allows us to ignore what he modeled.

Saying that he accomplished salvation for us, rather than that he showed us how to walk the path of salvation, allows us to remain at war with others, to seek superiority, to compete for prizes that do not endure.

In reality, salvation is an ongoing process.

When we think we have been saved (perfect tense) rather than that we are being saved (imperfect tense), in other words, then we imagine that we can do whatever we want.

In fact, we even think our salvation makes us superior to “heathens.”

In reality, Jesus is calling us into humble, mutually supportive relationships with one another.

It was that wisdom that the scribe must have sensed.

He was able to recognize it in Christ because it resonated with the truth within himself.

Our job as Christians is to help awaken that truth in others by example, the truth that the creation is an ongoing, imperfect act of love and that we are all invited to participate.