

The Perfect Church

In the name of our Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and calls us by name, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: We live in an imperfect world. I don't think anyone here doubts it. We know it from firsthand experience. And in a way, that's good, because it's one of the basic tenets of our faith that ever since the fall of our first parents into sin the entire Creation has been under God's curse and subject to death, decay, frustration, and futility. Everything is messed up. It always falls short of what it was made to be. There is nothing on this earth that isn't deficient or blemished or, in some way or another, not quite right. We know this.

And yet, isn't it surprising that knowing it we still seek perfection? For example, musicians and singers, gymnasts and other athletes all seek the perfect performance. Actors seek the perfect role. Authors want to write the perfect novel. Young people pursuing love and companionship seek the perfect mate. Shallower young men seek for a wife a woman they'd call a perfect 10. I suspect that those of you who farm strive to grow that perfect field of corn or raise the perfect steer. One day I'd like to preach the perfect sermon (maybe you'd like that too). I've heard of other people who are on a quest to find the perfect gemstone, the perfect sunset, and even the perfect pizza. It could be that you are on your own quest for perfection in something.

And I think it's safe to say that we who are Christians would like to find and be a part of the perfect church. Certainly in our highly mobile culture, in which most Americans move several times during their adult lives as required by their careers, it's what a lot of the faithful are looking for. Whenever they're transferred and have to settle into a new community, one of the things they do upon arrival is go church shopping. And what they're looking for is a perfect church. But even those of us who remain in the same place all of our lives want our church to be perfect – or as close as possible to it – don't we?

What would that look like? What is it that makes a church perfect? It depends on who you ask, I suppose. Different people would describe it in different ways according to their personal tastes. Some would want a church that's modern and progressive and looks like a cinema complex in a shopping mall, with a Starbucks quality coffee bar in the lobby where you could get all kinds of drinks with names like "frappa-mocha" and "expressa-chino"—but you wouldn't have to pay Starbucks prices for them. No, in a perfect church they'd be free. The church would have five services on a Sunday morning each with its own distinct flavor ranging from rigid and time-honored, to easy going and laid back, all the way to let's get down and get funky. For some folks, that'd be perfect. Others would envision the perfect church to be something more traditional – maybe a great big, highly decorated cathedral or one with a cozy country church feel to it.

But regardless of what it looked like and how it felt, the perfect church would have the perfect pastor. That means he'd be 35 years old and have 40 years of practical experience. He'd be brilliant, good looking, charismatic, and naturally gregarious and outgoing. He'd have a PhD in theology and be able to speak seven ancient languages fluently; but he'd never challenge anyone to think by saying or teaching something that everyone in the congregation didn't already know. He'd keep his witty and often hilarious sermons short, short, short, and he'd always pick everyone's favorite hymns to sing. He would automatically know whenever anyone was sick or in the hospital. He'd be independently wealthy and so ask not to be paid.

Oh, and his beautiful young wife would play the organ, lead the choir, head up the ladies aid, and never fail to perfectly supervise the couple's perfect number of perfectly behaved children.

Of course, what would really make a church perfect are the members of the congregation. Naturally, they'd all be perfect: friendly, warm, and hospitable. They'd be interested in you; but never nose-y, intrusive, or judgmental. They'd be helpful, eager to please, and perfectly meet the description that St. Paul lays out in his famous chapter on love in 1st Corinthians. They'd be patient, kind, not envious or boastful; they could never be described as arrogant, prideful, or rude. They'd possess perfect humility. They'd never insist on having things their own way; never be irritable or resentful. They'd never engage in doing anything wrong, and always stand up for what's true and noble. In short, the perfect church would be made up of people who aren't sinners. They'd all be perfect. And that's the problem with this kind of perfect church. If you ever found it, they wouldn't let you join because if you did, you'd ruin it.

So why am I even talking about it? It's because the Bible does. In today's first reading from the Book of Acts, St. Luke gives us the Lord's own description of the perfect church – and his is the only opinion that matters on the subject. Our personal desires and tastes don't. And what's interesting about this perfect church is that it didn't have the perfect building and most comfortable setting. They met wherever they could. It didn't have the perfect pastor. No, the men who served this church were, for the most part, former fishermen. All of them were full of faults. And it goes without saying that the members of this church weren't perfect. In fact, many of them had stood in the crowd at the trial of Jesus and angrily called for his death. The blood of Jesus was on their hands. They were guilty of killing the Lord of glory – the most terrible crime in all of human history. And they knew it. And yet they were part of the perfect church. This, I believe, demands further investigation.

This morning's first reading summarizes what happened in the aftermath of the Day of Pentecost. We heard about that last week: how Peter preached to the crowds that gathered to see what all the commotion was when the Holy Spirit descended with power and the sound of a mighty rushing wind, and came upon the disciples, appearing as tongues of fire upon their heads, and enabling them to speak in other languages. The amazed people were wondering what it all meant. And so Peter explained it to them. He told them that this was the promised outpouring of the Spirit that the Lord had said would come in the fullness of time in the world's last age. He told them that it was made possible through the ministry of Jesus, God's Son, who had come to earth, taking on human form; and how he went about teaching and performing miracles that proved his divinity. Peter told how the religious leaders opposed Jesus, ultimately handing him over to the Roman authorities and accusing him of many crimes so that he would be condemned to death. And he explained how Jesus had since been raised from the dead and exalted by God the Father to his right hand. And Peter wrapped up this message by pointing at the crowd and saying, "Know this: this Jesus whom you crucified is both God and Lord."

An overwhelming sense of guilt fell upon them. They knew Peter was right. They were cut to the heart and ashamed of what they'd done. Most of all they feared the righteous wrath of God. They trembled, thinking that they were doomed. In their terror they cried out, "What shall we do?"

Peter told them: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." To their great relief and joy, they discovered that their situation was not hopeless. They learned of God's vast mercy and grace in Jesus – how he had been sent by God to bear their sins on the

cross, and how simply by trusting in what the Lord had done for them, they too had life and forgiveness in Jesus' name. Even though they had the blood of Jesus on their hands, through Baptism they would be covered by the cleansing blood of the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. Some 3000 of them leapt at the opportunity and were joined to the church that day.

In today's reading we hear what that church was like. And it's almost like the first two chapters of Genesis, which describe the Creation before the fall into sin – when everything was perfect. The idea is that with the coming of the Spirit the restoration and recreation of all things has begun. Sadly, this image of the perfect church doesn't last very long. As the account unfolds from this point in Acts we soon learn that Satan works his way into the early church. He opposes it from the outside with persecutions and infects it from within with false doctrine, petty jealousies, competing and prideful personalities, and every other sin you can name. But for this brief moment, we're given a description of what the church looked like when it was perfect – when it was everything it was supposed to be. And I think we're given this description so that we know what the ideal is – so that we'll know the kind of perfection that we should be seeking in the church.

What does it look like? We read that they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. The word used there implies that they couldn't get enough of it. They were eager to hear the Word of God and have explained to them how in all the Scriptures the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed to be the Savior from sin. They hung on the words of these men who walked with Jesus while they told of his life and teachings, and of the miracles he performed and what they signified. And what they were listening to, of course, were the under-shepherds of the Great Shepherd fulfilling Christ's commission to "feed my sheep". And so through the apostles they heard the voice of their Good Shepherd, calling them by name and leading them to green pastures where their hungry souls were fed and to the quiet waters that satisfied their thirst for the righteousness that comes from trusting God's grace in Christ.

We read also that they were devoted to the fellowship; that is, to the worshipping community of Christ united in one faith and in perfect harmony with the teaching and doctrine of the apostles. Say it another way: they believed the same thing. They confessed the same truth about Jesus Christ. And in this perfect fellowship of faith, unspoiled by dissention and contrary points of view, they continued in the breaking of the bread, that is, in the practice of the Lord's Supper instituted by Jesus himself; and also to *the* prayers. This is important: it isn't just *any* prayers that are being referred to here; but to *the* prayers of the church in corporate worship. It's what we would call the liturgy of the church. They had an orderly way of going about things – which is not surprising because they had all been grounded and raised in the worship of ancient Israel. Their order of worship was no doubt largely taken verbatim from the worship they had long known in their synagogues. The only difference was that now in Christ they saw what it all meant – how that everything they had formerly been looking forward to was now fulfilled in Jesus.

And having described what the fellowship of faith looked like when it met for worship, we're next told of how the fellowship played out in the day to day lives of the faithful. We're told that they had all things in common, and that as need arose people would sell their possessions and property in order to provide for members who lacked anything. It's important for us to understand that this was not an experiment in communism. No, the idea here is that each person retained his or her own private property. Items were sold voluntarily by people moved by the love of Christ to give, and even then only as necessary to respond to the needs of others. The point is that they saw themselves as one big family – truly as brothers and sisters in Christ.

They loved and cared for each other. And those with the means to do so were happy to help those who were going without the basic necessities of life. They were grateful that the Lord gave them opportunities to share their blessings and to give expression to the love and mercy they themselves had received from God.

“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God, and having favor with all the people.” That is to say, they lived as Christians. They worshipped together. And they were hospitable to one another to the point of dining at each other’s tables – which was a way to express close kinship in the ancient world. And they did so with hearts overflowing with gratitude to God for all his blessings. And other people saw it too. To be fair, the church had its detractors. There were plenty of people opposed to Gospel of Jesus Christ and who would soon be actively trying to suppress it. But those who were honest and objective recognized that these Christians had something good going on. And it helped open their hearts to hear and believe the Good News themselves.

And so it was that “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” This too is important. Too often we’re told that we need to get out there and convert the world for Christ. We’re made to feel guilty – that it’s our fault personally – if a neighbor or friend is not a Christian. This passage makes it clear that you can’t convert anyone to Christ. It’s God’s work through his Word and Spirit when someone comes to faith in Jesus. Now, to be sure, we have a role to play in this. The Lord uses us to accomplish his goals. We bear witness in our words and actions. And we are more effective witnesses when we speak the truth clearly and in love, and when our actions match what we say we believe. But at the end of the day, it’s the Lord who makes the flock of the Good Shepherd grow. The perfect church belongs to him.

And it still does today. That’s right: the perfect church still exists – not universally as it once did. But it is here on this earth. It’s not found in perfect buildings or in perfect pastors or in perfect congregations. These things do not exist, so there’s no sense in looking for the perfect church there. No, in today’s text we’re told where it is and how to find it: it’s found in Jesus Christ who alone is perfect. It’s found in his Word – his Word in the mouths of flawed and imperfect pastors who rightly declare the Words and works of Jesus. It’s found where sinners stand accused and confess their guilt before the Lord and receive his forgiveness for Christ’s sake. It’s found in the water of Baptism that washes away sin and imparts the gift of God’s Holy Spirit. It’s found where Christians unite in confessing their faith, all believing the same truths about Jesus and his work of salvation. It’s found in the Lord’s Supper, whenever and as often as someone receives in faith the body and blood of Jesus given and shed for the forgiveness of sin. And it’s found in the faithful – the members of Christ’s body – who, filled with the Spirit and moved by God’s love share that love with one another. When you see any of these things going on in this imperfect world with all its problems and shortcomings, there you are getting a glimpse of the kind of perfect church this fallen world needs.

May God in his mercy make us part of that kind of perfect church. And according to his plan and purpose may he add to it daily those who are being saved. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!