

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2023 A

It would be generous to say I am a mediocre carpenter at best, but I sometimes fiddle around with wood. I often say that my three specialties in the shop are noise, scraps, and sawdust. I inherited the interest from my dad, who was quite gifted with his hands and creativity. I suppose he learned from necessity growing up on the farm, where you just do what needs doing; but to me, there is something inspiring about taking a part of God's creation and fashioning something new, re-organizing the raw materials into forms that serve some useful purpose. ***Each species of wood has its different character, and the beauty of the grain, otherwise hidden or ignored, is revealed when it is cut and machined. In that grain, we see a slice of the history of a living thing.*** The grain of a piece of wood exists precisely because the life of a tree is not straight, linear growth. Woodgrain of course results from the twists and turns and seasons of life that each tree experienced, coming from a single seed and given time and space to grow. ***In that way, the beauty of a piece of oak or walnut arises precisely because the life of tree is not perfect.***

Jesus' words about being perfect can be misinterpreted in two related ways. First, that we have to be perfect for God to love us; that it is only when we achieve perfection are we ready to approach the Lord. And second, that perfection is therefore our work, something we can do on our own. Rather, being made perfect is God's free gift. God is perfect in giving; we are to be perfect in receiving and then sharing God's love. When God is able to fill us with that love, we have something to offer the world that is not simply from our own human limitations, but a share in divine life that passes through us to others.

We know from experience that perfection in this life is at best elusive and fleeting. Jesus is realistically clear that we will encounter evil in the world ... struck on the cheek, disputes over property, restrictions on our freedom, demands from people. In an imperfect world, He says, we will have adversaries, persecution, dealings with both the just and the unjust. Christian faith, then, teaches us ***how to live with***

that reality of imperfection ... our own and that of others, so that we do not equate holiness or goodness with being free from troubles, inconveniences and annoyances. Such serenity is an understandable desire: my father's annual Christmas gift wish was "a little peace and quiet," though he usually ended up with some peanut brittle instead. ***But being made perfect is not achieved by avoiding all complications and obligations. If minimizing disruptions in life is our measure of success, then we will fall short as disciples.*** One of Pope Francis's comments often comes back to me: that a truly meaningful life is ***"full of names and faces."*** A disciple of the Good Shepherd is one who is not immune or isolated from the troubles of others, but knows their stories of need, failure, and sorrow, as well as their successes and joys. We carry those names and faces in prayer and serve them in mercy as we are able. In this way, God offers us a path to live a good and meaningful life in the midst of an imperfect world. We cannot make a perfect world – that is God's redeeming work – but we can make it better.

We may give up the search for the perfect lawn, the perfect hair, the perfect golf game. But whenever we do reflect God's unbounded love and mercy, we get some glimpse of the perfect. Like a piece of wood with all its twists and turns, a beauty that is otherwise hidden is revealed when we live by the Gospel in the brokenness of our world. Like the frightened Apostles in the boat, it is in the storm and at the Cross that we will find Jesus with us. And aware of that Presence of perfect love, even in our troubles, we already find a little peace and quiet.