

Trinity United Methodist Church, Iron Mountain, Michigan
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 19, 2018, 9:15 a.m.
‘Perfectly Imperfect’ by Pastor Geri Hamlen

This summer we are looking at the variety of ways in which God communicates with people. So many different ways. Burning bushes. Prayers. Strangers from afar. Dreams....Today we are going to look at how God works through Church leaders. Specifically, those church leaders who are designated as in...ordained, chosen by God leaders. Ministers, priests, Bishops.

We ‘professionals’ (air quotes) are called by God to minister to and with the people of God in particular ways...the administration of the Sacraments, like the Baptism this a.m. Reading and preaching from the Bible which is coming up later. Prayer and pastoral care of the people. This is a unique calling for imperfect people, like myself, to serve our most perfect God within the structure of a particular congregation, assembly, group.

In searching the Bible, Moses is the most written about ‘minister’ of God’s people as he leads them out of Egypt. Moses had a special relationship with God...the burning bush, the 10-Commandments and today, in our first Scripture reading, we will hear how God gave Moses very specific instructions for serving the congregation of people who were led out of Egypt. But....Moses, as so often happens with those of us who try the hardest...just didn’t quite follow directions perfectly. I think of this as the story where Moses ad-libbed God’s instructions and got it wrong.

First Testament Reading Numbers 20: 1 – 12

The Israelites, the whole congregation,
came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month,
and the people stayed in Kadesh.
Miriam died there, and was buried there.
Now there was no water for the congregation;
so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron.
The people quarreled with Moses and said,

“Would that we had died when our kindred died before the LORD!
Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD
into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here?
Why have you brought us up out of Egypt,
to bring us to this wretched place?
It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates;
and there is no water to drink.”

Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly
to the entrance of the tent of meeting;
they fell on their faces, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them.
The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

'Take the staff, and assemble the congregation,
you and your brother Aaron,
and command the rock (use your words) before their eyes to yield its water.
Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them;
thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.

So Moses took the staff from before the LORD,
as he had commanded him.
Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock,
and Moses said to them,

"Listen, you rebellious people,
shall we bring water for you out of this rock?"

Then Moses lifted up his hand (without a word)
and slammed his staff against the rock---once, twice.
Water poured out with abundance,
and the congregation and their cattle drank.
But the LORD SAID to Moses and Aaron,

Because you did not trust in me, didn't do as I said,
didn't treat me with holy reverence in front of the People of Israel,
you two are not going to bring this congregation
into the land am giving them."

We all fall short. Even Moses. Thank God we can come to church today and admit our failings.
And then trust and receive the Amazing Grace that is offered by and through the life and death
and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

***Morning Hymn**

Amazing Grace vv. 1 - 3

#378

I will set the stage for the second reading and then we will alternate.

That song describes for us what we want our baptized baby, Pryor to find out as he grows...that
the amazing love and power of Jesus translates into grace...

We want him to experience and be grateful for that invisible, holy guidance, rescue, first-
responder force that God offers those who follow and believe and affirm faith, hope and love.
What a wonderful thing to teach...

Being lost...grace finds us.

Being blind...grace teaches us how to see.

Being scared, full of fear...grace, our fears relieves. Through all the dangers, toils and snares,
grace will bring us through safely and grace will lead us home.

And God's grace leads some of us...myself included...to ministry, spiritual leadership within the assembly, the congregation. So God can speak through us. Not because we are perfect, but because we are called for God's special purposes in this world. Hear how Paul describes it in....

Second Testament Reading Hebrews 4: 12 – 5:4

Since, then, we have a great high priest...

who has passed through the heavens,

Jesus, the Son of God...

let us hold fast to our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable

to sympathize with our weaknesses,

but we have one who in every respect has been tested* as we are,

yet without sin.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,

so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Every high priest chosen from among mortals

is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf,

to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

Such a priest is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward,

being also subject to weakness..

...and because of this, the priests must offer sacrifice

for their own sins as well as for those of the people.

And one does not presume to **take** this honour,

but takes it only when **called by God**, just as Aaron was.

Message

'Perfectly Imperfect'

Pastor Geri Hamlen

When I was a kid, ministers were scary. Grownups in general were pretty scary but ministers had a special scariness about them.

Like they were closer to God.

Like they knew something the rest of us didn't and we better figure it out soon, before it was too late.

It was like ministers had to be better than all the rest of us. You know what I mean?

Imagine my surprise...as a teen-ager when my mom told me that the Presbyterian minister at the church we went needed a baby-sitter. His name was Rev. Talbot and he had 4 kids. I don't remember where he and his wife went that night but imagine my surprise...My Mom dropped me off at their house and I went in and it was...pretty messy. Not at all what I expected. OF course, I realize now that my Mom ran a pretty tight ship...the kitchen was always, and I mean ALWAYS, cleaned up at my house right after dinner. Clutter was NOT allowed in the living room and bedrooms had to be cleaned up on demand at my house.

Not at Rev. Talbot's house. Dishes in the sink and still on the table. Walls were covered with smudges and crayon drawings. Blankets were on the floor in the bedrooms and toys...my goodness...toys everywhere. Messy house...Not at all what I expected from a Reverend! But I thought to myself...his secret is safe with me...and I don't remember mentioning it to anyone. It did however, open my eyes to the reality that ministers are people just like everybody else. Yes, ministers, we put our pants on one leg at a time. Need 3 meals a day, a good night's sleep now and again and...a certain amount of slack for making mistakes and being less than perfect.

God calls certain people to be spokespeople, to reveal God's wisdom and to share God's love but that doesn't make those people perfect.

Samuel Johnson...a literary giant of 18th century England wrote: The 3 qualifications for the ministry are the grace of God, knowledge of the sacred Scriptures, and gumption.

Gumption and guts to accept the calling of God to take the stole, the title and the responsibility for praying God's love, reading God's Holy scripture, and preaching God's wisdom and love and dreams weekly (if not more often) to a uniquely located group of people. As the Scripture reading said...Ministers, yes, we accept the grace of God to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward. And somehow, the God who calls us into ministry gives us the Gumption to do all of that and so much more, knowing all along, that we are not perfect.

Perfection is NOT one of the job requirements for those, like me, who do our best to be the voice of God as ministers. We all know that there is Something good in even the most awful person.

And something not quite right in even the most wonderful person.

Only Jesus gets to be perfectly perfect. The rest of us...we're pretty perfectly imperfect.

And God knows that. Yes God is OK with calling imperfect people, like me, like Moses, like each of you to do all sorts of wonderful good in the world.

God gives us the grace...not just ministers but all of us...to catch ourselves before we do too much damage.

The Scriptures guide us to ask God every day...how to use our gifts AND our imperfections to help make the world a better place...not a worse place.

How to use our perfectly imperfect hearts to Help bring some joy and love into someone's life....

To show us how to do right by God because God is ultimately...our boss. In charge.

I imagine each of you have known a minister or two that you didn't think too highly of. When you don't like something that your minister is doing, I invite you to ask yourself this question. What was God thinking?!?!?

And then tone it done with this: How is God using that person? What is the bigger plan? You do know don't you that:

So often, it's the people that irritate us who become our greatest teachers.

Maybe God is trying to teach you something through a minister whose imperfections are grating on you. Maybe more patience, more love, more forgiveness.

Anonymous in our current times said: A pastor needs only three bones to remain upright: a backbone, a wishbone and a funny bone.

A backbone...that's the gumption.

A wishbone...that's the wisdom of the Scriptures and the Spirit showing us what God want's said and done in the world.

A funny bone...a sense of humor. To keep it all in perspective.

Guess what? That's not just true for pastors. All of us need a backbone, a wishbone and a funny bone to get through this life.

There is funny stuff going on all around us if we pay attention and write it down because people tend to forget the funny stuff a whole lot faster than the seriously sad and disturbing events of life. At the end of the day I try to remember something amusing and I share it with God and say thanks for the smile or the giggle or the guffaw.

Sometimes it's the dumbest things that make for the funniest moments. Last winter I was in a rush...bringing in groceries and a bag of stuff from Shopko and then dashing out the door. Later I came home to make dinner and found my Shopko bag in the refrigerator. I texted my sister about my 'cool' new pair of leggings!

We ministers may not be perfect but God's grace is always stronger than our imperfections. God can and does use both mistakes and flaws as well as our gifts and best efforts to make heaven come true on earth. I would love to end there but...here's where the gumption comes in...There's another, darker side to being a minister.

Ministerial imperfections are one thing. Clergy Sin and misuse of power and abuse of women and vulnerable children is NOT acceptable.

There are ministers and priests and bishops who go beyond human imperfection into unholy betrayal of their calling in terrible and cruel ways. I was in the Chicago area a couple of weeks ago as the Willow Creek Church announced that the lead pastor and every single member of the overseeing elder board resigned in regret and repentance for their failure to oversee the founding father of that mega-sized, multi campus church.

At my 8th grade reunion, that same week-end...one of the boys in my class shared with me—probably because I'm a pastor—that his Youth Pastor when we were in 8th grade used to take him and a group of boys to his house. Taught them how to drive his car...without a license or permit. Gave them beer and showed them pornography.

The Pennsylvania Clergy Abuse Report came out this week relative to sexual abuse within the Catholic church and it was appalling and systemic, reaching to the highest reaches of the oldest Christian organization in the world.

God's grace shelters us and leads us through our imperfections, as I've said BUT... God's mercy and healing for those who are mistreated is matched ounce for ounce, minute by minute, for all eternity by God's judgment on those who harm even the hair on the head of our most precious children and women and special needs friends.

God's voice speaks through me, your pastor when I say, paraphrasing Steve Breen's comic that some of you may have seen in the paper: There is no Statute of Limitations in God's eternity...

God's voice speaks through me, your pastor, when I say that I am a safe person for you to talk to if you are aware, if you know of, if you suspect that evil, violence, abuse is happening in your house, in your day care, in your school, in your neighborhood, in your church.

I do have the back bone and the gumption and the power given to me by God to stand up for and take steps on behalf of anyone you know who needs to be set free from the evil that walks in this world. I may not do it perfectly but I will do what I can faithfully, as God is my witness so that the power and grace of God can be revealed in these, the darkest places in our world.

So that the love of God can be set loose upon the people of God.
And the justice of God can be made complete.

I'll do my part...just let me know...God help us all...Amen.

