

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, February 19, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40; Matthew 5:38-48
“... as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

I want to remind you of something that I said when I told the Session on February 7 that I intend to retire on November 1 this year, and when I told you at the annual congregational meeting last Sunday. I said that having made that announcement, I now have nothing left to lose. For the next few months I can really hold your feet to the fire. I don't need to worry about the consequences, or having to live with anything that I may say or do. I am going to retire: what's the worst that can happen??? I understand that John Stewart is already looking for a new pair of boots with the thickest soles he can find...

I say that again today because I can't help thinking that that's what Jesus was doing with his disciples in the passage that is our Gospel text this morning: holding their feet to the fire.

At the Presbytery meeting in Knox-St Andrew's Church in Dutton on Tuesday, my colleague, Rev Andrew Thompson said that it was the common practice for rabbis and teachers in Jesus' time to teach their disciples while they were on the move, while they were travelling from one place to another. The rabbis and teachers would use the journey time to teach and instruct and interact with their disciples.

And we certainly see that in the Gospel stories of Jesus and his disciples: time and again he says what he has to say while they were walking along the road, or while they were going somewhere. Or he would ask them what they were talking about as they walked. Or they would ask him questions about things that he had said that they were struggling to make sense of. For Jesus, it was sometimes an opportunity to tell his disciples things that he didn't want anyone else to hear, especially when he wanted

to prepare them for his pending death.

But when a rabbi or teacher had a particular point to make, when there was something that he particularly wanted to impress on the disciples, he would sit down and teach. It was one way to indicate that this was something special, something important, something especially significant that he was about to say.

And again, we see Jesus doing just that in the Gospel stories. In Mark 9:35, we are told that when he wanted to talk about how whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all, *he sat down, called the twelve, and spoke to them.* In Luke 4:20, when he wanted to explain to the people in the synagogue how the scripture he had just read had been fulfilled in their hearing, *he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.*

And that's how the sermon that includes our Gospel text for today began: *when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them ...* Matthew 5:1-2.

The Sermon on the Mount starts out innocently and appealingly enough, with all the "blessed are theys." It continues with the bits about salt and light and lampstands and bushel baskets. Then it gets serious. There is stuff about the law being accomplished, and not breaking commandments, and how our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees if we ever hope to enter the kingdom of heaven. There is stuff about the dangers of murder and anger, and the importance of avoiding judgement and seeking reconciliation. There is stuff about adultery and lust and divorce, and tearing out your eye and cutting off your hand to avoid sin.

And as if that was not enough, then it's really feet-to-the-fire time. Turn the other cheek. Give up your cloak. Go the second mile. Give to

everyone who begs from you. Don't refuse anyone – anyone – who wants to borrow from you. Love, not just your neighbour, but your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Remember that God sends the sun to rise on evil people and on good people, and the rain to fall on righteous people and unrighteous people alike. Don't just love the way tax-collectors do. They love only those who love them. Don't just greet people the way Gentiles do. They greet only their brothers and sisters.

And the real feet-scorching of all: *be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect* Matthew 5:48. Not just good. Not just sort of OK. Not just pretty good, all things considered. *Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect.* Now, there is a feet-searing standard to have to live up to.

Perfect in turning the other cheek; perfect in giving; perfect in doing more than is asked of you; perfect in sharing; perfect in loving your neighbour and your enemies and those who persecute you; perfect in not just loving those who love you and greeting your brothers and sisters; perfect in doing more than the secular world does and going farther than the secular world goes. *Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

In 1956, when he was professor of New Testament at Glasgow University, Rev William Barclay began a series of Bible commentaries called the Daily Study Bible. In his commentary on our text for today, he manages to make his point in a way that is at the same time scholarly and wonderfully down to earth. He writes this:

The Greek word for perfect is *teleios*. This word is often used in Greek in a very special way. It has nothing to do with what we might call abstract, philosophical, metaphysical perfection ... the Greek idea of perfection is functional. A thing is perfect if it fully realises the purpose for which it was planned, and designed, and made ...

Let us take a very simple analogy. Suppose in my house there is a screw loose, and I want to tighten and adjust this screw. I go out to the ironmongers and I buy a screwdriver. I find that the

screwdriver exactly fits the grip of my hand; it is neither too large nor too small, too rough or too smooth. I lay the screwdriver on the slot of the screw, and I find that it exactly fits. I then turn the screw and the screw is fixed. In the Greek sense, and especially in the New Testament sense, that screw-driver is *teleios*, because it exactly fulfilled the purpose for which I desired and bought it ...

The great characteristic of God is love to saint and to sinner alike ... we enter upon Christian perfection, when we learn to forgive as God forgives, and to love as God loves.