

Abiding in Perfect Love

This past week I reached out to a number of you, especially the teachers, to ask what you think about the word “perfect.” How you understand it, how you use it. And in particular, what does it mean for something or someone to be perfect? Here are some of the responses I received. See if you can guess who might have sent them.

One person said (and I’m paraphrasing a bit for all of them), “To be perfect means to be complete—God’s grace gives us all we need for a relationship with God. Although we’re not without sin, to be perfect means to be considered righteous.”

Another replied, “The word perfect is one I use a lot. To be perfect means to be just right for a given situation. The perfect chair is just right for the room. The perfect blouse is just right for the occasion. The perfect card is just right for that person. Of course this is based on each person’s opinion.”

A third said, “To be perfect means to be whole or complete or in harmony. It may have a moral or ethical connotation, but a judgmental or exclusionary tone would be in tension with the idea of completeness, which seems more inclusive.”

And another said, “Perfect has several meanings or connotations for me: 1) completely acceptable, what was expected or required, the goal for which one was created; 2) the ultimate in excellence, cannot be improved; and 3) the right thing for the situation in question. The word also makes me think of ‘perfectionism,’ which is a distortion of the quest for what is good and right.”

Thank you for these rich, thoughtful responses! And I’m glad that last one brought up the issue of perfectionism. I confess that I was brought up to be a perfectionist. My dad loved to say this: “It’s perfect, but it will have to do.” Which meant that he was never completely satisfied with anything, whether a woodworking project or an academic article he wrote. I’m afraid I inherited that unfortunate tendency. Something can always be improved.

And so I struggle with this idea of “perfect love.” Because nothing is ever perfect. Especially love.

I learned in seminary that New Testament Greek is rich with multiple meanings and nuances. Last week in my sermon I talked about the three Greek words for the English word “love”—*eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. And I focused on that last one, just as the writer of 1 John focused on it in his letter. *Agape* love, I proposed, is sacrificial love, self-giving love, or maybe most simply, God’s love. I hope you found it helpful to distinguish *agape* love from these other kinds of love.

This week our Greek word with multiple meanings is *teleios*. Which can be translated as “**perfect**.” As it is three times in this morning’s text. But it can also be translated as: **complete, whole, finished, full-grown, mature, fully developed, ready, meeting the highest standard.**

So, is there such a thing as “**perfect love?**” Or to put it differently, is perfect love humanly possible?

Last week we talked about the love that exists in various human relationships, for example between a husband and a wife, between a parent and their child, between family various family members, between friends, and of particular importance, between “one another” in the Church (including this church), as brothers and sisters in the family of Christ. Love, we

concluded, is hard work. You have to choose it. It is sacrificial. You have to give something up.

Again, we can ask, is perfect love possible? And don't we pretty much have to conclude that the answer is no? Our love for one another can always be better. It is full of flaws. Human flaws. Which, being human, we can't help. So if, in order for it to be perfect, our love for one another must have no flaws, we may as well give up. Right now. We may as well quit—or leave this scary project we call the church. (And unfortunately, sometimes people do leave.)

But what if “perfect love” means something else entirely? What if, instead of flawless, it means “complete?” Finished? Accomplished? Then of course perfect love isn't possible for us now, because none of us done loving yet! None of us is done living yet. We're still here! And you know what? God isn't done with us yet. Thanks be to God! We're a work in progress! As individuals, and as the Church.

And isn't that John's very point? **1 John 4:12**: “No one has ever seen God; if we love another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. Perfection, in other words, is a process. A long process. One that lasts a lifetime.

Let's look again at **1 John 4:18**: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.” Well of course we haven't yet reached perfection in love. Because we're still afraid. Afraid we're not good enough. Afraid of change. Afraid of sameness. Afraid of God's judgment. Afraid of other people's judgment. Afraid of death. (I visited Elsie Philips at Wesley Hospital in Wichita Thursday. She told me she was afraid of dying. I told her that I was too!)

But you know what? That time will come. For all of us. That time when we will breathe our last. That time when, at long last, or whenever it happens, whether sooner or later, we are complete. Accomplished. Perfected.

This past week I've found myself especially drawn to the definition of *teleios*, or in English “perfect,” as “mature.” And what has kept popping into my head is the image of a **fine bottle of wine**. I don't know why. Lois and I only occasionally drink wine. And we never, ever, buy the most expensive bottle. Far from it.

What if First Mennonite Church of Hillsboro is in God's eyes like a fine, or finely aging, bottle of wine? And even now we're being poured out for the world? As immature or as incomplete or as flawed or as “not yet ready” as we are? And in the meantime, we keep getting better and better. God's love is being perfected in us. One day, one grape, one taste, one test at a time.

There is yet one final word in this text that I want to talk about. The word “abide.” In Greek, the word *meno*. (Not Mennonite or Menno Simons but just *meno*. ☺) Like *agape*, like *teleios*, *meno* or abide is one of John's favorite words. It appears in the New Testament 40 times, and all but one of them are in the writings of John (and six of which are in this morning's passage). To abide can also mean **to dwell. To hang out with. To stay with. To remain with. To hang in there with.** **1 John 4:16**: “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

The word abide has reciprocal connotations. It goes in both directions. Like the Greek word *alleilous*, which I said last week is a “reciprocal pronoun” meaning “one another.”

We're in this together. Us with God, and God with us, and us with one another. First Mennonite Church of Hillsboro is like a fine, aging wine. One that keeps getting better and better.

Amen.