

Sermon 9/27–28/25: Matthew 5:43–6:13

Ordinary Time

Membership vows series

“Please Hold for an Available Representative”

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

⁶ “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² “So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “Pray, then, in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
may your name be revered as holy.

¹⁰ May your kingdom come.

May your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.” (NRSVue)

I recently had the educational experience of taking five full months to get a prescription filled. It was a granular study in the ways the American medical system ties the hands of its doctors, the ways the American insurance structure is built for greed and caution and not really at all for the wellbeing of those needing access to various medicines, and the ways bureaucracy allows fault to fall on no

one at all. It was a labyrinth of portal messages, of emails, of checking and double checking, of prior authorizations and appeals and recordings and coverage nuances and trying to get someone, anyone to tell me what I needed to do, what secret knock would open the door, how I could understand the club to which they all clearly belonged and to which I was not admitted. I talked to so many different people along the way, trying to remind myself every single time that I could not take the energy with which I yelled “representative!” at the automated phone tree into the conversation with the human just trying to do their job; it wasn’t personal, they probably wanted me to get what was needed, it didn’t make them evil to represent an evil institution. I get that, as a pastor.

Some of them were. In those moments, I remembered how the number one thing people do when they find out I’m a pastor is apologize for swearing like it’s going to offend me, the sweethearts.

Eventually, eventually, eventually I got my meds, but what a sour taste the process left in my mouth; what frustration to finally have the bottle in hand while Tim McGraw played through the CVS store speakers and the poor pharmacist eyed me skeptically for getting emotional by the magazine display because she didn’t know how many times I’d had to deal with representatives like her who didn’t represent any of the things I thought medicine and insurance were supposed to do.

We continue our series this week on the vows of membership of The United Methodist Church with yet another phrase that makes many squirm: “According the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ’s holy church and serve as Christ’s representatives in the world?”¹ Both pieces are difficult—to be faithful to an institution that’s complicated on the best of days and to serve as a representative of one of the most misquoted people in history. No thanks, some

¹ “The Baptismal Covenant IV,” in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 50.

may say; especially these days, I don't want to admit that I'm connected to the Church, that I'm a Christian. What if someone thinks I'm one of *those* Christians?

“Will you remain,” asks the liturgy, and the person is supposed to say, “I will,” all of which implies that there has been faithfulness and representation so far, that nobody wanting to become a member of this would walk into it *unfaithfully*. But what does it mean to be faithful? Who gets to decide what represents Jesus? Because make no mistake, this vow says nothing at all about remaining a Christian. It asks “will you be a representative of Christ,” a reflection of a Person, not a taken title. But what shall we reflect?

Today's text comes from Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, the incredibly dense speech Jesus gave on a hillside in the thick of his early ministerial popularity. It's three chapters long and deals with pretty much every aspect of how to be in relationship with God, self, and others, and I could spend a year unpacking it and still have more to learn. This piece comes on the heels of the Beatitudes—blessed is everyone who society doesn't actually bless, blessed are all the folks who get crushed underneath cultural assumptions, blessed are the ones who are accidentally and deliberately forgotten.

Blessed is the listening crowd.

Because Jesus' sermon isn't delivered to the Congress of His day; Caesar isn't listening in, nor the local governor. These are “great crowds” who followed Jesus “from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”² These are the folks who know what it's like to have enemies who strike them, who persecute them; these are the ones who can't afford trumpets to herald their deeds, who want blessings on their meekness, who have learned how to move so the Roman soldiers don't focus on them in the street. So why would Jesus say

² Matthew 4:25, NRSVue

to these, of all people, love your enemies; be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect? They're not the ones who need to hear this, surely; tell it to the ones in power, Jesus!

Except they do need to hear it, because we all need to hear it. The people listening to Jesus could, indeed, learn to snipe at the people around them—the Roman soldiers, the governors, the tax collectors. Sometimes they had perfectly good reasons to sneer about them, about *those* people, but Jesus doesn't say "be perfect" and "love your enemy" "except when they really don't deserve it." Jesus simply says, "But I say to you."

Professor Karoline Lewis writes, "Jesus now helps his disciples realize that following him will mean meeting up with those with whom you would rather not come in contact, with whom you might consider your enemy. Love your enemies. You will come across those outside of your immediate circles with whom the principles you learned from Jesus you'd rather not share. You will meet others for whom you'd rather the Kingdom of Heaven need not apply.... Our enemies are not always those we deem our opposites, our detractors, our challengers, or resisters. Our enemies are all too often those whom we do indeed love."³

"Be perfect," Jesus says, and then goes on to unpack what perfection means—not "never get anything wrong" but don't be a show-off, a hypocrite. Pray like you want *God's* Kingdom to come, not yours. Love your enemy not because you like them but because returning hate for hate will carve the heart out of both of you, because the image of God resides in both of you and you know that. Love ferociously, in such a way that the other person sees that you will not bend to them, in such a way that you see that they do not have power over you, that both of you are worthy of being seen at all.

³ [Commentary on Matthew 5:38-48 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary 2017](#)

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This is a moment when we need to remember Jesus didn’t speak English—and if that’s a surprise to you, let’s chat later. The Common English Bible translates this, “Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.” This version adds some things there, but it’s actually doing a solid job of getting at the Greek—what is often translated “perfect” is τέλειος, which only means “perfect” insofar as a finished thing is perfect. It means complete, whole, fully developed, mature; be entirely realized as God is entirely realized, Jesus says, don’t settle for being half-formed and call it good enough as though being kind on Tuesdays is an acceptable representation of following God. Lewis writes, “Jesus is not asking for perfection; Jesus is asking for persistence...in the goal Jesus has for us...toward bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to bear.”⁴

“Be completed in your purpose,” says Jesus, and suddenly the idea of being a representative shifts. It is not that each of us has to become Jesus, not least because we won’t; none of you is God, and neither am I, and no matter how sad we may be about that, it’s still true. But we walk out into a world that hungers for people who are working to be completed in mercy, in love, in hope, who give without expecting reward, who pray for forgiveness like they know they too can get it wrong—Church, the world *wants that kind of Christ’s representatives*.

Again, this is not about whether or not we walk into the world as Christians. Dr. Matthew Taylor said, “Some Christians are evil, and I think we need to be honest about that because the word ‘Christian’—we idealize that.”⁵ Anyone can claim to be a Christian, and especially in this country, many do. People call

⁴ [Be Perfect - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2017

⁵ Q&A with Dr. Matthew Taylor, Candler lecture series “Pastoral Leadership in a Time of Christian Nationalism,” September 25, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xdk3k3x0zEI&pp=ygURY2FuZGxlcjB0YXlsb3I%3D>

themselves Christian and protect live rounds more fiercely than live children; people call themselves Christian and throw brown people to the cruelty of ICE; people call themselves Christian and say that the genocide in Gaza is something that God wants and is pleased with; people call themselves Christian and tell disabled folk they are broken vessels drained of the Spirit; people call themselves Christian and embezzle even the widow's mite; people call themselves Christian and say they want to support queer folk while never checking on the queer folk drowning right in front of them; people call themselves Christian and come to church so they can judge whether the children are too loud in our sanctified holy spaces; people call themselves Christian and pray in the public square about how Christian they are while Jesus gets nailed to the cross behind them and they say He should have been quieter, if only He wasn't so disrespectful in His dialogues.

And as a member of The United Methodist Church who has pledged to be a representative of Christ, I have to *love them* because they are my enemies but more importantly because *they are God's creations*. I have to love them because I am a representative of the Christ Who loves me when I am silent about my siblings of color, when I do not listen to the unhoused, when I lament "those Christians" who make my job harder as though I am not making my job harder myself by being the judge of those who are not mine. Jesus tells us to love but Church, I cannot do this! I do not *want* to do this! I am exhausted by the amount of people who tell me they are Christian and in whom I have yet to see anything at all of Christ!

And Jesus *knows* that. "Our Father in heaven...may Your kingdom come, may *Your* will be done on earth as it is in heaven." I cannot represent Christ if I am simply putting Christ's nametag on my own chest, if I am only representing my own idea of who Jesus is for *me*, a Jesus who conveniently dislikes everybody I dislike and tells me how righteous I am; I cannot represent a Jesus who tells me how great I'm going and how miserable everyone else is. Rev. Dr. Alan Brehm

writes, “Trying to be holy can easily harden into self-righteousness. And self-righteousness always expresses itself in a rigid adherence to ‘rules’ that you pick and choose to suit yourself. Our religion can make matters worse because it can reinforce our self-righteousness with piety. We reassure ourselves that we really are right in God’s sight by going through the motions of rituals that are supposed to make us ‘holy.’ But the hypocrisy of it all comes to light when our religion doesn’t translate into life....Integrity is what happens when our lives are integrated—when who we are and what we do match. Integrity is what happens when what we believe translates into how we live. Integrity is what happens when all of living flows from the very core of our being. That’s how we imitate God’s character.”⁶

Be complete in integrity as your Father in heaven is complete—and I can’t do that alone. I don’t want to. So the most important part of this vow? “According to the grace given to you.” You cannot be a representative of Jesus on your own—there’s a heresy for that called Pelagianism we can talk about if you’re interested. You cannot be faithful to the church on your own—and I want to remind folks that “faithful” does not mean “agreeing with everything without question.” Especially those of you who are married, you ought to know that faithfulness can be beautiful and incredibly contentious sometimes (and if you don’t know, let’s have a pastoral chat soon). “Faithful” means challenging when the vision gets lost, celebrating when the Body does great things, asking constantly how we’re building the Kingdom to which God calls us and where we as an organization are failing to represent the Christ we claim.

None of us can do any of this without grace: you can’t represent without grace; absolutely none of us can be completed, perfect, made whole without grace. On our own, we will devolve into perfectionism and praying the public square how

⁶ [The Waking Dreamer](#) 2011

grateful we are not to be like these sinners. We *need* God’s help with this, and God gives it wholeheartedly. The grace given you is what makes the vow possible in any way because God does not give us impossible demands—“be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” because the Spirit walks with us to wholeness, because Jesus shows us the way to follow Him, because God beckons us again and again to the path of righteousness when we’ve wandered off trying to represent something else.

“You have heard it said,” Jesus says several times before telling us something different. We have; we have heard a lot of things said, and promised, and claimed. But we have also heard it said, “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”⁷ We have heard it said that the Lord requires of us “to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God”.⁸ We have heard it said that “as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”⁹

This is what we represent: a Jesus Who calls us to be fully ourselves, God-crafted and holy. This is the Body to which we are faithful: a fierce love of kindness and a commitment to justice in the reassurance that God does not give empty promises. This is the faith we pledge: that by grace we are transformed to forgive, challenge, and reimagine ourselves, our enemies, our churches, the world.

⁷ John 14:26–27a, NRSVue

⁸ Micah 6:8b, NRSVue.

⁹ Isaiah 55:10–11, NRSVue.

Will you, by the grace that is given you, become *that* kind of perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect?

May God's Kingdom come; may God's will be done. Amen.