



“In Praise of the Imperfect”

Text: Numbers 25:1-13

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

One of my favorite weekends of the year, is when Rabbi Gary Mazo and I “swap pulpits” – with me preaching at the Friday evening Shabbat service and Gary preaching our services on Sunday morning. Like us, Reformed Judaism has a “lectionary” – and a specific portion of the Torah is assigned to each Shabbat. Along with it is the assigned a reading called *haftorah* – an assigned passage from the Prophets.

Now, in the five years we’ve been doing this pulpit swap, I’ve come up pretty short in the Torah passages assigned for the pulpit swap Shabbat. I am a little suspicious that a certain Rabbi looks ahead to see what passage he doesn’t want to preach and chooses that as the weekend for the swap. Our Old Testament lesson for the day has usually been fairly straightforward, though, on occasions, I have invited the good rabbi to choose a passage of his liking.

This year, my Shabbat passage was the story of Pinchus, or as we use his Greek name, Phinehas. It was one of the better ones I have been assigned. And since a significant number of you were not there when I preached it, you get to hear a version of it today. We call that “recycling.”

At the heart of the story is imperfection. Imperfection is something my family has to deal with every day. Some of you, of course, have no idea of what I’m talking about. Living with perfect people, as some of you do, is hard work. It’s tiresome and irritating and exasperating. It is good that God has spared the women in my house from this fate.

Pinchas, or Phinehas, is an imperfect man. Israel, in the story, is an imperfect people. Moses, as we well know, was an imperfect leader.

So, you have to accept from the very outset that we are dealing with imperfection throughout this story.

The first thing we notice about Phinehas is that he is zealous. Phinehas is not alone in being described in that way. There are zealous people all through the scriptures. These are people who are passionate for God and the ways of God.

And there's nothing wrong with being passionate for God and the ways of God. There's nothing wrong with living the life God calls us to live. There's nothing wrong with devotion to God, the Torah, the Scriptures, righteous acts and works of faith, and the traditions that make us who we are. There is nothing un-Jewish or un-Christian or un-Muslim about being a passionate, ardent, and devoted person of faith. And for that, we can honor Phinehas and all those whose zeal for God and the things of God touched and touches the world in good and positive ways.

But when that passion – that zealous conviction – leads us to take matters into our own hands and embark on a course of action that is loaded with moral danger and peril, we leave the healthy life of faith behind and begin to walk the shadowed path that leaves God behind. When what we believe leads us to action that flies in the face of God's call to authentic life, we cannot claim to be committing that action in God's name.

This dangerous zealotry is present in all religious traditions. It grows out of various forms of fundamentalism that are anchored in the belief that one is right while all others are wrong. It grows out of an exclusionary position that proclaims and honestly believes that "I'm in and you are out!" It is fed by words and actions that divide people from each other, ridicule and deride others, demonize and demean others – especially those who are not just like us – whether because of their faith, their skin color, their heritage, their ethnicity, their ideas, their social class, the level of education, or their politics. And, sadly, whenever a media outlet wants a comment from a person of faith, it is one of these zealots who is put before camera and microphone and the rest of us are labeled negatively because of the vicious and malicious bile that pours out of their souls and mouths.

When Moses was asking God for a successor, Rabbi Mendel asked why God did not appoint Phinehas instead of Joshua. In answering his own question – which is evidently something good rabbis do – Rabbi Mendel said that a zealot cannot be a leader. Being a leader requires attributes that zealots do not have.

What kind of attributes? Our Jewish friends will recite them very soon as they enter their high and holy days. They are the attributes of God that forms the pattern of our lives – Jew, Christian, or Muslim:

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...”

This is who God is and who God's people are called to be. This is how God acts toward us and how we are to act toward each other:

- compassion before a person sins;
- compassion after a person has sinned;
- compassion to give all creatures according to their need;
- mercy, that humankind may not be distressed;
- gracious, if humankind is already in distress;
- slow to anger;
- plenteous in kindness;
- plenteous in truth;
- keeping kindness unto thousands;
- forgiving iniquity;
- forgiving transgression;
- forgiving and sin;
- and pardoning wrong.

These are the qualities of the life of God's people. These are the attributes of God and they are to be the attributes of God's people. That is true for Jews, for Christians, and – from my reading of the Quran – for Muslims, too. Compassion, mercy, graciousness, peacemaking, speaking truth, forgiveness – this is the call to life as God's people.

In a postscript to the story, we are told that God makes with Pinchas a “covenant of peace.” It seems strange that God would do such a thing, considering what both God and we know about Pinchas. Why would God offer a covenant of peace with a man of such anger and violence? Like a good rabbi, having asked the question, I will now attempt to answer it.

Well, we all know the first answer to the question, which is, when you are God, you get to do what you want. God is in charge and God calls the shots. God had made a covenant with Aaron and his descendants to be priests, and Phinehas was a descendant of Aaron. So, even though Phinehas takes matters into his own hands and breaks the commandment against murder, God stays faithful to Phinehas and God's promise that Aaron and his descendants will be priests before God. God never makes a promise that God does not keep. That's first.

The second answer to the question is this: if God is going to wait for a perfect person, how will God's work be done? God has to use imperfect people to accomplish God's purposes because that's all God has. God uses flawed and faulty people to accomplish God's flawless and faultless purposes. God used Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Saul, David, Solomon, Jonah, and the list goes on and on – imperfect people, one and all. And from our tradition, add Peter, Andrew, James, John, the rest of the apostles, Paul, and so many tens of millions more since the ancient church that it is impossible to number them all. The perfect Creator uses the imperfect creation to accomplish God's perfect way.

And if you need proof, just look around this room. Here we are: God's imperfect people. Yet, God continues to use our imperfect lives, our imperfect words, our imperfect actions, for God's glory and honor. God uses our imperfections to share God's covenant of peace and wholeness with the world.

And before us is the Table of the Lord. It is a Table where the imperfect are invited guests. If we were required to achieve some level of perfection and faultlessness, we would never taste the bread or drink from the cup. Perfection is not needed to answer Christ's invitation. All that is required is trust in God and the commitment to live the life of a person of God a little better today than yesterday.

An old minister friend once told me, "Jesus Christ was perfect. You don't have to be." Considering my track record, that was really good news. God doesn't want us to be perfect. God wants us to be faithful. You just might find some good news right there.

So, here we are - God's imperfect people. Let's hear it for us!
For now and evermore. Amen.



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