

One hundred years ago in 1917, the communist revolution began in Russia. In terms of social theory, the seeds of that revolution were sown much earlier in 1848 when two German philosophers, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, published *The Communist Manifesto*. Maybe Marx, who was a staunch critic of capitalism, had today's Gospel in mind when he wrote, "The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness." Marx certainly did not approve of turning the other cheek.

On the other hand, the Russian-born novelist, Ayn Rand, was twelve years old when the communist revolution began. Her family was displaced and their property confiscated. Rand arrived in the United States when she was twenty-one with faith in capitalism's promise of freedom for individuals to pursue their own goals for happiness. But ironically, like Karl Marx, Rand criticized Christianity for being weak. She wrote, "Jesus (or perhaps his interpreters) gave men a code of altruism." "If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men have to reject."

So whether you lean left toward Marx or right toward Rand, either way, you encounter thinkers who objected to the message of Jesus in today's Gospel and found it repulsive. Yet, like the writings of Karl Marx and Ayn Rand, today's Gospel shows that the message of Jesus was revolutionary, too. Further, we know Jesus lived out his creed of altruism and humbleness with absolute integrity. He supported those who were oppressed. He turned the other cheek. He loved his enemies. And he went to the cross for all of us.

The Gospels also show us that Jesus was prone to making absurd exaggerations. For example, when he said it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Or when he said before criticizing your neighbor for the speck in his eye, you had best work on getting rid of the log in your own eye. But even this does not account for the saying concluding today's Gospel: "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Most of us learned growing up to accept our imperfection, and we may well have been told that no one is perfect except God. So what are we to make of this word from Jesus about being perfect like God?

A gallon jug has eight times the capacity of a pint jar. There is no way a pint jar can hold as much liquid as a gallon jug. Yet they can be equally full in the sense that each holds its capacity. The pint jar is full when it contains sixteen

ounces, but the gallon jug requires one hundred twenty-eight ounces to be completely full.

So it is with us in relation to God. We cannot equal God's capacity for love, justice, or any other virtue. If we think that is what Jesus has in mind and we try to put it into practice, we're probably going to feel pretty frustrated. But just as a pint jar can be full without holding as much as a gallon jug, so also can we live up to our potential, small as it is compared to God's infinite capacity. In this sense at least, we can be perfect as God is perfect.

Still, that does not begin to solve our problem with this text, for often we do not even fulfill our pint-sized potential. And once again in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus ups the ante, making the demands of the law even more strenuous. Once again, Jesus uses God's law to make it absolutely clear that there is no way human beings can ever fulfill it.

The Old Testament law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was intended to be a means of limiting retaliation so that no penalty would be exacted that was worse than the offense itself. But the interpretation of this law Jesus offers turns sharply toward submission. We are not to exact any retaliation nor even seek to hold on to our possessions.

The result of this approach to aggression is interesting: even the injury perpetuated by another is nullified. How can there be an accusation of theft if the person being robbed chooses to donate more to the thief than the thief steals? Jesus takes the "let go and let God" attitude to an irrational extreme. How many of us, finding a thief in our home making off with a computer would say, "Hey, there, wait a minute! Don't you want me to give you a hand with the TV, too?"

Pat Harper was a television anchor in New York City who once spent a week undercover as a homeless person. She returned from that experience of living in the streets with many insights, and won an Emmy award for her special report on the subject. Harper noted that very few people really meet the eyes of street people. The explanation she developed to account for this behavior was that people prefer to ignore that which they cannot accept. Since we are unwilling and unable to take responsibility for every person we encounter who needs help, our defenses counter by acting as if the person isn't really there.

At the same time, those who help their neighbor may find themselves at the receiving end of anger from the one they are trying to help. Some seminary

students once took in a person off the street, providing food and a place for him to stay. The end result was that the man left the seminary dorm cursing them. He told them they weren't nearly as concerned about him as they were about themselves. They were using him as a project so they could feel like they were real Christians.

Taking all of this into account - our inability to help everyone, as well as the difficulty of offering help totally unselfishly - how can we possibly hope to follow Jesus' instructions to be perfect as God is perfect?

Part of our difficulty here comes from translating the New Testament's original language, Greek, into English. The Greek word that is translated as perfect does not mean flawless, but means to be completed or to be made whole. In other words, as God is fully God and acts in a totally God-like way, so human beings, who are made in God's image, are to be fully human and act in a totally human way.

If we are to be perfect in the sense of being fully human, we realize there is no way we will ever be able to meet all the needs of others. There are real limits to our resources and to our love. We do not need to make excuses to God for our humanity. God made us and knows what our limitations are.

But on the other hand, to be fully human means that we do not insulate ourselves from others by acting, in effect, as though some people are less human or less of a concern to God than others. To be perfect, to be fully human, is to recognize the commonality of human suffering and to stand with and to be advocates for those who are suffering. Both the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament and the New Testament are clear that the people of God are called to be hospitable to strangers and aliens.

Speaking to this issue a few weeks ago, the bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, whose office is in Jerusalem, sent an open letter to President Trump. Bishop Munib A. Younan, is also president of the Lutheran World Federation and wrote the following:

"I am worried, because I myself am a refugee, and know firsthand the struggles refugee families face. At the same time, as a Lutheran bishop, I know that turning away refugees of any religion contradicts the message of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself was also a refugee, who sought refuge and safety with his family in Egypt. Throughout his life, through his teaching and actions, Jesus showed concern for the stranger and outcast... For this reason,

welcoming the stranger is not optional for Christians. It is one of our foundational values.”

The mission that Jesus gives us is difficult for many reasons. Since Jesus proclaims God’s love and care for all people, his words inevitably challenge any system of government that fails to treat everyone equally and justly. And since the mission Jesus gives us also is personal, it challenges each one of us to wrestle with our own prejudices, as well as to take into account the built-in systemic biases of our various social networks, communities, region, and nation.

In the Nicene Creed, the church confesses that Jesus was fully human and fully God, that he was both perfectly. Yet the religious professionals around him grumbled, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2b)

This is precisely the reason for the church’s existence: to be that community which welcomes all sinners. From the youngest, like Margaret, who was baptized earlier today and has almost all of her sins and everything else in life ahead of her - to the rest of us, who have quite a bit more experience in sinning, forgiving, and being forgiven. The divisions of the world are overcome by the unconditional acceptance and love of God for all sinners in Christ. God’s Word became human not only so we could see and know God in Jesus, but also so that we might be able to see and know God in others.

Unless human greed and selfishness mysteriously and completely disappear, we probably will never find ourselves with the resources to feed everyone who is hungry and to provide housing for everyone who needs shelter. But we can be perfect in the sense of being fully human. We can use the resources we do have to address the needs of those who suffer. And we can welcome all people in the name of Jesus.

For we know that God sees all of us - regardless of our age, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or enemies (genuine or imagined) - God sees all of us as people in need of acceptance and love. Through Jesus, God invites us to accept our humanity and each other’s humanity. We are called not only to look for God in one another, but also to find God in one another. Sisters and brothers, on this side of eternity, that’s about as perfect as it gets.