

**Cincinnati Friends Meeting**  
**8<sup>th</sup> Month, 3<sup>rd</sup> Day, 2008**

**MESSAGE: *Perfectly Imperfect* by Donne Hayden**

Good morning, Friends ~

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” Jesus tells his followers in the Gospel of Matthew (5:44-45 & 48). He has just made the point that we should love even our enemies, and in this way, resemble our “Father in heaven” who “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” In other words, in loving, God makes no difference between people, and Jesus tells us we are to love in this way also. The word translated here as “perfect” could also be translated “complete” or lacking “nothing necessary to completeness.” We are to be “complete” in our love as God is complete or perfect.

Today, I am led to compare our human ideas of perfection to what Jesus tells us God regards as “perfect.” Let’s face it—most of us, most of the time, don’t think about loving all humanity when we think of being perfect. Instead, we equate “perfect” with words like “flawless.” Even worse perhaps, in terms of human behavior and ethics, we often associate “perfection” with something pretty close to how we ourselves behave and believe. And this may lead us to ignore, reject or exclude some who fall short according to our definition of perfect; and we can’t love people if we exclude them. We can’t love people if we exclude them. When I typed that last sentence, I realized this message is meant for me as well as any of you. Here is why.

Last week I had the privilege of attending Wilmington Yearly Meeting for the first time. Doing so gave me insight into some issues of concern to Friends in these meetings, including same-sex marriage, water baptism & communion, and the relationship between humans and the Divine. The disagreement among Friends regarding same-gender marriage clearly rests on attitudes toward homosexuality, which for some represents ultimate imperfection. I suspect no

one would disapprove of people getting married unless they first disapproved of the people. When eight of 32 meetings in Wilmington Yearly Meeting refused to approve a revision of the 1977 Faith and Practice, partly because it did **not** include language specifying that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, that water baptism and communion may be permitted in Friends meetings, and that marriage is between a man and a woman, I thought, “They want to exclude anyone who believes differently than they do. Don’t they care that they may split the yearly meeting? Clearly they are more interested in being *right* than in being *together* as Friends. Well, let them go their own way.” But we cannot love someone we exclude, if that exclusion happens because they reject us.

Friends are not alone in this dilemma, of course. Many other denominations are also struggling with divergent opinions in their congregations on the issue of same-sex marriages or whether certain people should be excluded from leadership positions (i.e., women and homosexuals). Last May I had an encounter with someone who, though Lutheran, represents the views of many Friends in Wilmington Yearly Meeting. I was in Columbus, Ohio attending a pastoral counseling workshop with people from several denominations. At the mid-morning break, I went to get coffee and returned to the lobby area, where two Lutherans were talking. One—let’s call him George—was an older man who had been a trauma nurse for 25 years and an active lay leader in his large Lutheran congregation. A nice fellow—friendly, open and talkative. As I sat down at the other end of the couch, I heard him say, “I don’t have anything against them. I think what they do is wrong; it’s immoral. But I say welcome them, anyway. Love the sinner, hate the sin.” I continued listening, as they talked about how accepting homosexuals into the church was splitting the Lutheran denomination. George repeated several times that he disapproved of what they did, but thought the church should welcome them. (I couldn’t help wondering just how “welcome” someone would feel, knowing of his disapproval, which I suspect he would have trouble keeping to himself.) Homosexuals were wrong, he said, they made the

wrong choice and sinned when they chose to be homosexual, but he would welcome them into the church.

I was quiet as long as I could be, but when George repeated his comment about homosexuals *choosing* to do wrong, I said, “I’m not sure it’s always a choice. I heard a recent report on national public radio about transgender children who knew from the age of 18-24 months that they were ‘in the wrong body.’ I went on to recount some of the details in the radio report<sup>1</sup> about a little boy named Armand, who insisted he was really Violet. When Armand was around two years old, he “found an old Minnie Mouse dress the family had gotten at Disneyland. He put it on and then refused to take it off.” His parents said that “Any effort to remove the dress would provoke an outburst. In fact, the more [they] tried to limit Armand’s behavior, the more explosive their son became. And it only got worse as Armand got older.”

The parents took Armand to various doctors and psychologists, but none were able to identify the source of the child’s behavior. “Still, while the doctors were unable to find the right label, their son seemed to understand what was going on.” His mother said “that during quiet moments, like the ride from school, her child would confess what was causing so much trouble.” The child, Armand, would say “I am a girl,” and then ask his mother if she thought he was crazy.

After many years, the family found a psychologist who had experience with gender issues. At the end of a two-month evaluation, the therapist gave them a diagnosis: gender identity disorder. (Notice the label “disorder” – another word for “imperfect.”)

Gender identity disorder is the label most psychiatrists and psychologists give to children who believe themselves to be born into the wrong biological body. It involves a range of behaviors, but on one end of the spectrum there are children like Armand: kids who are more than effeminate boys or masculine girls who may turn out to be gay in adulthood. These are children who genuinely believe they are girls — even though they have a male body — or boys, even though they have a female body. (National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, May 8, 2008).

After I told George the Lutheran this story, I remarked that though some homosexual behavior might be a matter of choice, there appear to be instances when a person is simply born

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<sup>1</sup> National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, May 8, 2008.

a certain way. He responded with something about unChristian behavior, to which I replied, “Well, who would Jesus exclude?” To his credit, he responded, “No one. He’d accept them all.” One of the other Lutherans remarked carefully that those Jesus came down on hardest were the righteous Pharisees. The conversation dwindled at this point into an awkward silence and George avoided me through the rest of the workshop.

The other Lutheran’s reference to the story of the righteous Pharisee from the Gospel of Luke is quite appropriate here. Let me read it to you: (By the way, I am using the translation from *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* in which the Jesus Seminar identifies the words most likely to have actually been spoken by Jesus. These verses are rated Pink, meaning that though they may not be the actual words, they so closely follow Jesus’ teachings that he probably said them or something very like them.) Here is the story of the Pharisee and the toll collector, a person thoroughly despised at the time because of his **choice** of career.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a toll collector.

The Pharisee stood up and prayed as follows: “I thank you, God, that I am not like other everybody else, thieving, unjust, adulterous, and especially not like that toll collector over there. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of everything that I acquire.”

But the toll collector stood off by himself and didn’t even dare to look up, but struck his chest, and muttered, “God, have mercy on me . . . .”

Let me tell you, the second man went back to his house acquitted but the first did not. (Luke 18:10-14)

If we put this story in contemporary setting, say somewhere in southwestern Ohio, it might come out something like this:

Two men went into the church on Sunday morning. One was a deacon in the church, highly respected by the congregation, known to be a paragon of virtue, a good Christian man. The other fellow was a homosexual.

When the deacon prayed, he said, “Almighty God, thank you for not making me like some other people—those drunks and adulterers, and especially that homosexual over there. The deacon considered with satisfaction the amount of money he put in the collection plate each Sunday, and the hour every Wednesday he spent working with the youth group. While the

deacon prayed, the homosexual also prayed. He didn't think about what a good Christian he was; instead, he asked for mercy for whatever he had done wrong, wherever he had fallen short. Now, according to Jesus' teaching, the homosexual went home that day in right relationship with God; the deacon did not.

This means, again, according to Jesus, the despised, imperfect but humble person was more pleasing to God than the straight-arrow, orthodox, self-satisfied, and judgmental believer. This is not only hard for humans to accept, it is almost offensive to us, especially to those who fit the "good Pharisee" or "good Christian" description. How comforting the story is, though, to those aware of their own imperfections.

I'd like to switch tracks here and read a few paragraphs from a book by Lewis Thomas, physician, essayist and educator. The book published in 1979, is titled *The Medusa and the Snail*. Thomas writes:

The greatest single achievement of nature to date was surely the invention of the molecule of DNA. We have had it from the very beginning, built into the first cell to emerge, membranes and all, somewhere in the soupy water of the cooling planet three thousand million years or so ago. All of today's DNA, strung through all the cells of the earth, is simply an extension and elaboration of that first molecule. [To me, only God would have that kind of time and power.] In a fundamental sense we cannot claim to have made progress, since the method used for growth and replication is essentially unchanged.

But we have made progress in all kinds of other ways. Although it is out of fashion today to talk of progress in evolution if you use that word to mean anything like improvement, implying some sort of value judgment beyond the reach of science, I cannot think of a better term to describe what has happened. After all, to have come all the way from a system of life possessing only one kind of primitive microbial cell, living out colorless lives in hummocks of algal mats, to what we see around us today--the City of Paris, the State of Iowa, Cambridge University, Woods Hole, the succession of travertine-lined waterfalls and lakes like flights of great stairs in Yugoslavia's Plitvice, the horse-chestnut tree in my backyard, and the columns of neurons arranged in modules in the cerebral cortex of vertebrates--has to represent improvement. We have come a long way on that old molecule.

**We could never have done it with human intelligence**, even if molecular biologists had been flown in by satellite at the beginning, laboratories and all, from some other solar system. We have evolved scientists, to be sure, and so we know a lot about DNA, but if our kind of mind had been confronted with the problem of designing a similar replicating molecule, starting from scratch, we'd never have succeeded. **We would have made one fatal mistake: our molecule would have been perfect.** Given enough time, we would have figured out how to do this, nucleotides, enzymes and all, to make flawless, exact copies, but it would never have occurred to us, thinking as we do, that the thing had to be able to make errors.

The capacity to blunder slightly is the marvel of DNA. Without this special attribute, we would still be anaerobic bacteria and there would be no music. Viewed individually, one by one,

each of the mutations that have brought us along represents a random, totally spontaneous accident, but it is no accident at all that mutations occur; the molecule of DNA was ordained from the beginning to make small mistakes.

If we had been doing it, we would have found some way to correct this, and evolution would have been stopped in its tracks.<sup>2</sup>

As Thomas remarks, if humans designed creation, we would carefully make everything perfect, our assumption being that perfection—at least our concept of it—is to be desired. This no doubt accounts for our great frustration with God who—if observation of Creation is any indicator—manifests a love for diversity in exuberant imperfection everywhere.

One of the most entertaining explorations of how humans would make things perfect if we could is a 1997 movie titled *Gattaca*, in which the following quotation from Ecclesiastes 7:13 appears on the screen at the beginning:

Consider what God has done:  
Who can straighten  
what he has made crooked?

I first watched the film several years ago because it was assigned in my Christian Ethics class at Earlham School of Religion. The movie brings up questions about the ethics of genetic engineering, but more interesting to me are the questions it raises about our notion of human perfection, our preference for straight rather than crooked, flawless rather than cracked, etc.

In the world of the movie, set “in the near future,” genetic engineering has become commonplace. Parents “place orders” for the best possible combination of their genes, eliminating tendencies toward “undesirable qualities” such as nearsightedness, heart disease, alcoholism, obesity, and premature baldness. Although the film doesn’t mention it, homosexuality is probably on that list of undesirable tendencies parents would choose to eliminate if they were designing the “perfect” child.

The plot of the movie revolves around Vincent, a young “Love Child” or “God-Child,” i.e., a child conceived and born the old-fashioned way; such children are also called “In-Valid.” At

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis Thomas. *The Medusa and the Snail*. New York: Bantam Books, 1979, pp.22-24.

his birth, the delivery room nurses determine via genetic analysis that Vincent has a 99% chance of heart disease and an 89% chance of ADHD, among other “imperfections.”

His father in particular is disappointed in his son’s genetic make-up. When he and his wife decide to have another child, they choose the *in utero* method available to parents in which a obstetric geneticist offers them choices of gender, hair and eye color, weight and height, athletic prowess, IQ, etc. So Vincent’s superior younger brother, Anton, is born.

As a boy, Vincent is consumed with an interest in the solar system and space travel, but he faces a limited future because, as an “In-Valid,” he is assumed to be inferior. His father, trying to keep Vincent realistic about his future, tells him: “The only way you will see the inside of a space ship is if you are cleaning it.” Sure enough, as an adult, Vincent is screened into janitorial work and becomes a janitor at the space facility, Gattaca.

Although his strong, healthy, handsome and brilliant brother is close to perfection and all career doors are open to him, Vincent comments that Anton faces another burden: the burden of perfection, as do all “Valids” or “Uteros.” When, through sheer will power, the adolescent Vincent swims farther and refuses to turn back first, Anton must acknowledge that his InValid brother “beat” him in their competition. To be beaten by an inferior creature like Vincent is humiliating.

We meet another example of “the burden of perfection” in Jerome—a perfectly engineered specimen—also strong, healthy, handsome, and brilliant—a competitive swimmer who, unable to accept that he took 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the Olympics, stepped in front of a car and tried to kill himself. Instead, however, he lost the use of his perfect legs and must use a wheelchair. Having been perfect, Jerome is now imperfect. The rest of the movie deals with the connection between Jerome and Vincent, i.e., Vincent contacts a “shady character” who shows him how to assume the identity of a Valid, in this case, Jerome, whose genetic makeup still carries all his perfection. Through an elaborate method, which involves intricate attention to all traces of

genetic material, i.e., flakes of dried skin, eyelashes, hair, saliva, blood and urine, Vincent assumes Jerome's genetic identity. (I won't tell you the rest of the movie.)

What rose up for me is the fact that all the "imperfect" characters in the movie—i.e., the old "In-Valid" janitorial supervisor who helps Vincent; the doctor whose son is "not perfect"; the young woman who, though genetically superior, has an imperfect heart; Jerome the crippled genetic superman—all these show *compassion* to Vincent in some way. The genetically superior characters, on the other hand, show no compassion. For them, those who are inferior are beneath notice. Because the audience sees through the experience of *imperfect* characters, however, the movie makes us consider these questions: What is most admirable about human beings? Physical and intellectual perfection? What makes us most truly human? Perfection? or imperfection? Or some ineffable quality of the spirit?

In a piece titled "The Perfection of Imperfection," Joan Tolliver writes:

I was born without a right hand, so from early on I have been dealing with myriad reactions . . . to ideas of "imperfection" and "abnormality." When I was a toddler, people would stop my mother on the street and tell her we were being punished by God. Children would stare and point and ask questions. Adults would hush them up. . . .

Babies and animals . . . approach my arm, the one that ends just below the elbow, without ideas. They aren't frightened or repulsed by it. They don't feel sorry for me. They don't think I'm heroic or amazing. They see the actual shape of what's in front of them without concepts and labels.

As someone who lives with one of God's "mistakes," Joan Tolliver concludes that ". . . perfection is life as it actually is from moment to moment. Asymmetrical. Messy. Unresolved. Out of control. Imperfect. Terrible. And miraculous." Does anyone here doubt that, one-armed or not, she is a deeply beloved child of God?

Which of us can know the initial impetus or the final result of God's marvelous trial and error? As Ecclesiastes puts it, "Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything." Who among us **is** a perfect specimen of humanity? No one? On the contrary—I believe we are all—**all**, just as we are—as perfect as we need to be for God to love us and value us. Our challenge is to love as

completely and “perfectly” all of God’s other creatures, including humans who are significantly different from us or with whom we disagree.

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” God asks of us, not that our bodies, our beliefs, or even our behavior be perfect, but that our Love be perfect.