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Beyond perfection

by Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

My six-year-old daughter Natalie is like a lot of first graders: equal parts serious and silly, old and young. She often comes home from school full of newfound wisdom to share, as though she were the first person ever to discover subtraction or photosynthesis. . . and she still plays with toys and climbs into my lap, a taller version of the toddler she used to be.

As I watch Natalie learning new skills and independence, I pray fervently that she will also learn to be comfortable and confident in her body, mind and heart. And so, when I chided her the other day for making a mess in the kitchen, I was astonished to hear her mutter, “I hate myself! Stupid Natalie.” My beloved child’s self-disgust was like a knife in my heart. I told Natalie firmly that everyone makes mistakes, that she is loved no matter what, and that she is NOT stupid and does not deserve words of hate. I reminded her that when Jesus said to love our neighbors as ourselves, he meant for us to be kind and forgiving not only to others but also to ourselves – and even grownups find this difficult, I admitted. Natalie nodded knowingly: “Like that time I heard you crying and saying you were stupid,” she said.

I know what she was talking about. A few weeks before, I had taken a major exam for my PhD program, and there was a delay in the results. Stressed and exhausted after ten weeks of studying and four days of exams, I told my husband tearfully that I was certain I had failed. I had worked so hard; and if the results weren’t good enough, clearly I wasn’t smart enough to get a PhD. My husband, no stranger to my bouts of insecurity, patiently reassured me; but from the basement, Natalie’s sharp ears heard it all.



Though I ended up passing the exam, now it seemed I had failed another kind of test: I'd been a bad parent. I had hoped to keep my kids free from the anxiety of perfectionism, with its agonizing fear of failure. I encouraged them to be brave, not perfect—to try things, to fall down and get up, to keep learning, not to give up. But my pep-talks had been undone by my own self-doubt, my own perfectionism rearing its ugly head. So, naturally, I started to berate myself: the other moms I know wouldn't have been so thoughtless and wrapped up in themselves. Stupid. Then, a lightbulb suddenly clicked on in my mind; and a quiet voice said: See what you're doing? This, right here, is the problem.

We live in a world saturated with images and stories of people who seem perfect, or at least closer to it than we are. Brand-new moms with impossibly flat bellies. Successful CEOs who still have time to keep their homes magazine-perfect and throw Pinterest-worthy parties. Carefree world travelers whose entire lives seem Instagrammable. Christians who never seem to lose their faith. And, of course, parents who never lose their cool in front of their kids.

One of my favorite writers, Glennon Doyle, says that we should be careful not to make the mistake of comparing our whole lives to someone else's "highlight reel."

No matter how perfect someone else's life may seem, the reality is messier for everyone — no exceptions. The truth is that no one's life is perfect, because perfection does not actually exist; and so our efforts at perfection are destined to fail, leaving us exhausted, defeated, and resentful of anyone who seems to have what we don't.

"The perfect is the enemy of the good," Voltaire wrote. No one knew that better than Martin Luther, who repeatedly tried and failed to be a perfect Christian and wound up resenting a God who would be so cruel as to expect perfection from people unable to reach it. Luther's awakening to a fuller understanding of God's grace meant freedom from perfection: freedom to let go of his need to be perfect and to see himself as fully known and fully loved by God. Beyond perfection, Luther found a life filled with purpose, joy and love for others — a good life. This is how God calls us, too: to a life beyond perfection, rooted in the goodness of God's grace. God knows and loves us completely; and in rescuing us from the enemy, perfection, God invites us into something better: our calling to be more fully ourselves, and to extend compassion and love to others as they truly are.

As I tucked Natalie into bed that night, I spoke from my imperfect heart. "Here's the thing," I told her. "I was wrong to get frustrated with you, and I was wrong to say those things about myself. I forgot for a minute that God loves me, even though I'm not perfect and I make mistakes. And I want you to know that God loves you too, no matter what, and so do I. And even when you aren't perfect and you make mistakes, I would never in a million years trade you for anyone else, because who you are is amazing." Natalie nodded at me

again, and smiled. "Don't worry, Mom. It's okay. You're amazing too."

And just like that, God met me with grace, through the mercy and wisdom of a child. May God meet you too, in surprising places, with grace beyond perfection.

Discussion questions:

1. If you could have a conversation with your younger self, what would you say?
2. What do you think God would say to you?
3. Where is God calling you beyond perfection?

Closing prayer:

Loving God, you created us and called us very good. Help us to trust in your love for us so that we let go of self-doubt, comparison, and despair. Guide us to find our true identity and purpose beyond perfection, in the goodness of your abundant grace. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Meghan Johnston Aelabouni is an ordained ELCA pastor who is currently studying full time for a PhD in Religion, Media and Culture. Meghan and her spouse, the Rev. Gabi Aelabouni, live in Fort Collins, Colo. with their three young children.

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Perfectly imperfect

by Meghan Johnson Aelabouni

“New Year, New You!” Every January, this phrase pops up in ads for gym memberships, in magazine articles featuring ten easy steps for money management or relationships, and even in churches whose members are urged to recommit to faith in the new year.

For some, the new year is a symbolic time to make a life-giving change: This year I’ll get sober. This year I’ll reconcile with a loved one. But many new year’s resolutions are less about health and healing than about perfection: how to get the perfect look, the perfect schedule, the perfect balance. Why is the promise of a “new you” such a powerful draw?

Many of us freely acknowledge that nobody’s perfect – and then we turn around and try our hardest to be perfect, and feel guilt and shame when we inevitably fail. If we know on some level that perfection is an illusion, why do we spend so much time, money, and emotional energy trying to reach perfection, or at least to pretend that we did?

It doesn’t help when, as people of Christian faith, we turn to the Bible and find Jesus saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Is faith really about being perfect like God? No offense, Jesus, but have you met us? This seems like a recipe for disaster.

Thankfully, there is good news hidden in this verse. The word we translate from the original Greek into English as “perfect” is *telos*, which is much better translated as “complete.”

Telos is really about the fulfillment of our purpose, like a seed that grows into a plant, blooms, and produces fruit. (Considering the biblical commands to “bear fruit” and “be fruitful,” this wouldn’t be the first time that God’s people are compared to plants.)

Why does this matter? Because part of the problem with the word “perfect” is that we tend to understand perfection as a one-size-fits-all standard we’re supposed to meet. If there is one right way to be a human being, everyone is judged by how they fit that blueprint – or how they fall short.

This kind of perfection is not only impossible but also dangerous, because it makes difference a problem. If the “perfect person” in our heads happens to be white, cisgender, heterosexual, married, able-bodied, neurotypical, thin, wealthy, and so on, then all those who differ from this image – such as people of color, trans and nonbinary people, people who identify as LGBTQ+, people who are single, people with physical disabilities, mental illness, autism or Asperger’s, those who are fat, or those who live in poverty – are judged as less than perfect and treated as less than whole. This is not just theoretical: It happens to people all the time, even in churches.

Plants, on the other hand, come in all shapes and sizes and hues, and even plants of the same species grow differently. We would never say “this rosebush has failed at being an apple tree,” or expect any two plants to be identical. Gardens are celebrated not for perfection but for the beauty of their variety. Why aren’t humans?


Here’s the good news: God never intended for us to “be perfect” by being the same, and God never asked us to become someone else. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that God wants you to become “a better person” (in other words, a different person). Rather, God’s desire is for us to become more fully ourselves, to be who we truly are. The truth Jesus reveals to us is that we are, already and always, God’s beloved children. God has created us as diverse people and called us very good.

And yes, we’re also sinners – but sin isn’t the state of being less than perfect, it’s the mistake of thinking we’re supposed to be. Sin is the fear and shame that fill us when empty promises of human perfection define how we understand ourselves and others. Martin Luther described sin as being curved in on the self. We may gaze on ourselves in self-adoration or self-loathing, but we’re stuck on ourselves either way – and we’re meant for more than navel-gazing.

God’s grace doesn’t make us “perfect,” but it does make us complete. Grace frees us from the never-ending struggle to make ourselves good enough, reminding us that all we will ever need to be is who God has made us to be. Grace unfurls us from our cramped, inward-curved position, so that we can stop fixating on ourselves and reach out toward our neighbors with the abundant love of God.

The apostle Paul also struggled with imperfection and failure, and from this experience came some beautifully honest words about being God’s people – for example, his statement that “we have this treasure [the gospel] in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

In other words, we are the clay jars – made from the stuff of the earth, every one of us



different, none of us perfect – and it is precisely where we are cracked and broken that the light of Christ can shine through. We are not called to be perfect, but rather to be perfectly imperfect. Nurtured by God’s grace, we grow to be more completely ourselves, to bear fruit in the world in love and service.

Discussion questions:

1. Where in your life do you feel most pressured to be perfect?
2. If you were truly free from the need to be (or appear) perfect, what might you do?
3. How is freedom from perfection good news for your congregation, community, and the world?

Closing prayer:

God of new beginnings, in this new year we pray not for perfection, but for purpose. Free us from worry and fear, and give us the courage to live as your perfectly imperfect people, that the light of your Son, Jesus, might shine more brightly in the world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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