Sunday, December 15, 1991
BETTER THAN PERFECT
Luke 3:15-18

There are probably more stories about things going wrong in Sunday School Christmas pageants than most other events that take place in a church.

William Muehl, who was one of my professors of preaching when I was a student at Yale Divinity School, told us in his class about a Christmas pageant in which his four-year-old son had a part. His role was that of a shepherd in the manger scene. As a general rule, this professor disliked Christmas pageants intensely, but when your child is in one, you have a different point of view.

The houselights dimmed, and someone sneaked on stage with a box of straw. Then, from the wings, came three Virgin Marys, who arranged themselves coyly around the crèche and waved to their relatives in the audience. Why three Virgin Marys? Because the church had, over the years, acquired three costumes for Mary, and they wanted to include as many children as possible in the drama. The Virgins were followed by two Josephs who took up sullen postures near the box of straw and stood there picking their noses.

Next came the angels, about twenty little girls dressed in diaphanous white gowns and sporting immense gauze wings. They deployed themselves with suspicious symmetry across the platform. Then the shepherds appeared — an equal number of small boys dressed in burlap sacks and clutching an assortment of saplings that purported to be crooks.

At this point, an unfortunate discovery came to light. In order to be sure that the angels and shepherds would strike a pleasantly balanced array on stage, the drama coach had made a series of chalk marks on the floor — a circle for each angel and a cross for each shepherd. She had urgently instructed that they were all to find and stand on their appropriate symbols. But, unwisely, this marking had been done while the pupils were wearing their ordinary clothes — shorts, skirts, and overalls. When the angels came on in their gowns, each of them covered not only her own circle but the adjacent cross as well.

The shepherds, driven by who knows what demonic impulse to indiscreet obedience, began looking for their places. Angels were treated as they have never been treated before. At last, one little boy, who had suffered about all such nonsense that he could handle, turned toward the wings where the teacher in charge was going quietly mad and announced angrily, “These darned angels are fouling up the whole show! They’ve hidden all the crosses!” And you can guess whose son it was that made that dramatic statement.

In another church school Christmas pageant, the children had memorized their lines. The innkeeper was supposed to say to Mary and Joseph when he answered the door, “Sorry, there’s no room in the inn tonight.” On the evening of the pageant, he could hardly say the words — they sounded so inhospitable — so he added his own words after a slight pause, “But won’t you come in for a drink anyway?”

Then there was the church that had held a Christmas pageant for 47 years using the same director. Perfection was her goal — nothing less. For years, the annual Christmas pageant ran like clockwork. Perfect lines, perfect pacing, perfect everything. After 47 years, something unusual happened. For all those years, the director’s commitment to perfection was greater

than her commitment to children. She knew that when there are too many youngsters, there is no control. This particular year, that policy was changed by the Board of Christian Education's pageant committee, which had on it three mothers whose children had been rejected for the roles of Mary, Joseph, and shepherds. The new policy was: all children who wish to be in the Christmas pageant will have a part. This was more than the long-time director could handle. She resigned in disgust.

The pageant didn't fall flat with the director's resignation, but it was different. This time, no one was left out. There must have been a dozen shepherds and twenty angels. There were at least two dozen sheep. It was a rural church, and the young people who were in sheep costumes knew that sheep wander — and they did just that — all over the church.

Then Mary and Joseph entered. Mary was carrying a doll wrapped in a blue blanket, with Joseph walking solemnly beside her. The narrator was supposed to read the Biblical story that Joseph went to Bethlehem "to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child." One of the mothers who was on the committee was concerned that the children could not understand the Revised Standard Version about Mary being "with child," so she switched to the Good News translation. So, as Mary and Joseph entered, the narrator read, "Joseph went to register with Mary, who was promised in marriage to him. She was pregnant." As the last word echoed through the sound system, little Joseph froze in his tracks. He gave Mary an incredulous look, then looked out at the congregation. "Pregnant? What do you mean, pregnant?" he asked. That brought down the house. One woman, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes, said, "That may well be what Joseph actually said." The former director had a look that said, "I told you so." When Silent Night was sung, a beautiful thing happened. The sheep bleated their way down the side aisle and sat around the former director, who had excluded them from earlier pageants.

Then Minnie McDonnell, hard of hearing and always speaking too loudly, broke the spell when she whispered to her husband in a voice all could hear, "Perfect, just perfect."

And it was. It wasn't perfect in the way previous pageants were perfect. It was perfect in the way God makes things perfect — the way God accepts our fumbling attempts at love and fairness and covers them with grace. Isn't that what Christmas is? Better than perfect!

I'm all for striving for excellence in the things that we do — but I also know that things do not have to be perfect to be good, and there are many things we do that, although not perfect, are really better than perfect because God transforms them. We need to do our best and then leave the rest to God.

Thus, there's something about Christmas that goes beyond perfection, and perhaps a baby reminds us of this more than almost anything else. Have you ever tried to keep a perfect house when a baby is in residence? Frequently now, we have five or six grandchildren in our home, the oldest is seven. There's no chance of a perfect house — but my wife and I would say that it's better than perfect.

When there's a baby in the house or grandchildren in the home, we hopefully forget about perfection and think about love. And that's what Christmas is all about. It reminds us that we can all be better than perfect. Christmas says that God loves us even though we are not perfect, and because of that love, we are better than perfect.

When Jesus said, “Be perfect, even as God in heaven is perfect,” he did not mean “make no mistakes.” He did not mean unless you do everything perfectly, God will not love you. It’s really a promise. You will be perfect, even as God in heaven is perfect. You will be better than perfect. God is patient with growing things, no stranger to chaos and incompleteness, and willing and able to work with us through our attempts, our false starts, our mistakes, even our failures, toward a more perfect day. It’s God who brings us to perfection, not we ourselves. Flawlessness is not a life requirement for those who know the unconditional love of God. Here are several suggestions as we enter this Christmas season for helping you, your family, and your Christmas celebrations to be better than perfect.

Move beyond your past and present mistakes and failures. God already has. If you want to have a better-than-perfect Christmas, admit your mistakes, leave them behind, and move on. It’s so easy to carry our mistakes and regrets into our holiday celebrations. In other words, develop an attitude of “holy carelessness.” Do your best and then leave the rest to God. Anyone who has ever taken an examination, participated in an athletic contest, or delivered a speech or sermon knows exactly what this means. We do our best to be prepared, but we can never touch all the bases and assure all the consequences. So there is great wisdom in holy carelessness.

Do not waste time or energy battling conditions you cannot change. There are a number of imperfect things in this world, and with some of them, there’s nothing that we can do that will change them to perfect. All of us know that one of the secrets to life is being able to separate the things that can be changed from the things that cannot be changed so that we do not keep misusing our energy. But we can change our attitude. The simplest example is what we can do about the weather. If a snowstorm comes when it’s not convenient for us, we can’t stop the storm, but we do have control over our attitude in the midst of the storm. It doesn’t do us or anyone else any good to curse the storm or to be in a foul mood because of the storm.

Learn to absorb bad breaks. Sometimes we talk about accepting the bad breaks, the bad luck that seems to come into every person’s life. The more I’ve thought about it, I think “accept” is the wrong word. A lot of tragedies that come our way are simply not fair. They are not acceptable. I can never accept them, but I can learn to absorb them, deal with them, and live with them. I can receive them into my life and do my best to learn from them, and then move on.

Some people get cynical during the Christmas season, and others get depressed. They are convinced that the coming of Jesus into the world has not made much difference. They look at the history of the world and claim that there is as much violence as ever, or even more. Wars have continued to be fought. Indeed, in some of the places where the church has been the strongest, those very places have been the center of the most brutal and bitter violence. The religious wars of the past and the present make every Christian blush with shame.

Superstition is still around. Poverty and starvation have not been overcome. Spouse and child abuse remain. I am shocked, as you are, over and over again, to see how unable we who have been trained in the Christian tradition and have almost two thousand years of it behind us — how unable we often are to handle some of the simplest human situations. A woman called her minister and at great length told him of her problem. Briefly, her story was this: She married a man slightly older than herself. He had always lived with his mother, and his mother continues to live with them. They are planning a Christmas party. Was it necessary for her to include in her party, and her husband’s party, the friends of his mother? If it was, the party would be a failure. That was her big Christmas problem. Behind it, of course, was a basic inability to deal

with the simplest human relationships. It makes you wonder whether the coming of Jesus has made any difference in the lives of people or not.

However, I believe the coming of Jesus has made a tremendous difference to the whole world. But it's a difficult thing to measure. What difference does the Lincoln Symphony make to Lincoln, or the Abendmusik Concert series to this city, or to our church? It's not easy to put into figures. What difference has this church made to this city of Lincoln over the past 125 years? Can it be measured statistically? Can you measure inspiration, or the power of prayer, or changed lives? Prevention, by its nature, is not measurable.

We cannot say dogmatically that there would be no democratic governments in the world if Jesus had never been born. But we can say that Jesus gave to the individual a dignity and a desire for freedom that we have never lost. We cannot say that there would be no real knowledge of God in the world if Jesus had never lived, but we can say that in Jesus the truth, goodness, and love of God were somehow so manifest and more available than in any other place or at any other time in human history.

The world as we know it, and human beings as we know them, are not perfect, but God, through the coming of Jesus, makes it possible for us to be what we have never been before.

So forget about perfection. You do not have to be perfect to be good, nor does anyone else. The world does not have to be perfect to be good. Forget about having the perfect Christmas tree or receiving the perfect Christmas gift. God continues to make it all better than perfect — and that includes you and me. Amen.