Sunday, December 14, 1997
AN IMPERFECT CHRISTMAS
Luke 3:15-18

One of the causes of stress during the Advent and Christmas season each year is the desire to have the “perfect Christmas,” a Christmas where everyone in the family is totally pleased with their gifts and there are no arguments, hurt feelings, or disagreements. No one is going to take any gifts back for exchange or refund. It would be a perfect Christmas if the children in the family did not feel that one or more of their siblings got more than they did, a Christmas with no jealousy.

A perfect Christmas would be one where there were no recriminations because someone spent more time with the in-laws than with the other side of the family, and, of course, having the perfect Christmas tree.

For some church leaders and members, the perfect Christmas would be one in which the many and varied worship services were perfect, especially the annual Christmas pageant.

I heard of a church that had held the exact same Christmas pageant for 47 years using the same director. Perfection was her goal. Nothing less. For years, the Christmas pageant ran like clockwork — perfect lines, perfect pacing, perfect everything. But then, after 47 years, something unusual happened. For all those years, the director’s commitment to perfection was greater than her commitment to children and to the message which the pageant was trying to present.

This wise director knew that when there are too many youngsters, there is a loss of control. And that was the problem. This particular year, that policy was changed by the Board of Christian Education’s Christmas Pageant committee, which had on it three mothers whose children had been rejected for the roles of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. The new policy was: all children who wish to be in the pageant will have a part. This was more than the long-time director could handle. She resigned in protest.

The pageant didn’t fall flat with the long-time director’s resignation, but it was different. This time, no child who wanted to be in was left out. There must have been a dozen shepherds, twenty angels, and 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 on the committee was concerned that the children could not understand the Revised Standard Version which describes Mary as 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 and said, “Pregnant? What do you mean, pregnant?”

That brought down the house. One woman, wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes, said, “That may well be what Joseph actually said.” The former director had a look which 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 many of 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 in which God makes things perfect, the way God accepts our fumbling attempts at love and fairness and covers them with grace. That’s what Christmas is supposed to be — better than perfect.

It’s what the church is to be — better than perfect. Search for the perfect church if you will. When you find it, join it, and realize that on that day it becomes something less 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 that we do, although not perfect, that are really better than perfect because God transforms them. We need to do our best and then leave the rest to God.

A new book I’m reading has the title Good Intentions, with the subtitle, The Nine Unconscious Mistakes of Nice People. The author’s thesis is that most of us are nice people. We were raised that way. We try to do what others expect of us. Because we are nice, however, we unconsciously make mistakes that can cause more harm than good. The first two mistakes of the nine unconscious ones that nice people make are related: trying to be perfect and taking on too much. These two good intentions, according to the author, can cause us to make unintentional mistakes which in turn can drive us to exhaustion, especially during this season.

It’s not that trying to be perfect or to have the perfect Christmas is necessarily wrong. According to this book, we need to look at our motivation for trying to be perfect. If our primary reason for trying to be perfect is our need to be accepted so that people who are important to us will be impressed, then we will wear ourselves out trying to be perfect and suffer because of it. We will suffer because we can never completely meet someone else’s expectations.

Note especially, I am not saying that it’s wrong to strive for excellence for its own sake and for the purpose of fulfilling your own potential.

But trying to be perfect or have the perfect Christmas is a mistake when: you are consumed with keeping your social image untainted; it dictates how you approach every little thing you do; you give up your own growth to please those who don’t care about you; it causes you to compromise your values and ideals; you end up resenting what you are doing.

In this Advent and Christmas season, it is crucially important to remember that there’s much about Christmas that goes beyond perfection, and a baby reminds us of this more than anything else. Have you ever tried to keep a perfect house when a baby or when children are in residence? It’s not unusual for us now to have our eight grandchildren in our home at one

time. 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 home, or children or grandchildren, we hopefully forget about perfection and think about love. And that's what Christmas is. It tells us that we can all be better than perfect. God coming to us in human flesh tells us 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 that unless you do everything perfectly, God will not love you. He was stating a promise, not a command. "You will be perfect, even as God in heaven is perfect."

Remember, God is patient with growing things, especially human beings who are created in God's image. God is no stranger to chaos and incompleteness and is willing and able to work with us through our attempts, our false starts, our mistakes, even our failures, toward a more perfect day. It is God who brings us to perfection, God who makes all things whole, not we ourselves. Flawlessness is not a life requirement for those who know the unconditional love of God.

Here, then, are several suggestions to help you celebrate an imperfect Christmas.

First, move beyond your past and present mistakes and failures. God already has. There is no perfect Christmas according to our human standards, so admit your mistakes, forgive the mistakes of others, leave them behind, and move on. It's so easy to carry our mistakes, grudges, and regrets into our Christmas celebrations. Develop an attitude of "holy carelessness." Do your best and leave the rest to God.

Any person 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.

Second, 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 you can do to make them perfect.

All of us know that one of the secrets to a joyful and fulfilling life is being able to separate the things that cannot be changed from the things that can be changed, so that we do not keep wasting our energy.

The one thing we can always change is our attitude. The simplest example is the weather. If a snowstorm comes when it is not convenient for us, we can't stop the storm, but we do have control over our attitude in the midst of the storm and after 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.

Third, learn to absorb bad breaks. Sometimes we talk about accepting bad breaks, the bad luck that seems to come into each 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 clearly 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, 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 birth of Jesus into the world has not made much difference. They look at the history of the human race and claim that there is as much evil and violence as ever, or 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, are to handle some of the most elementary 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 her mother-in-law and her mother-in-law's friends in their Christmas party? That was her "big" Christmas problem. It can make you wonder whether the birth of Jesus has made any difference in the lives of people or not.

However, I believe it has made a tremendous difference in the world. But it's a difficult thing to measure. Not all things that count can be counted. What difference do the fine arts, such things as our Abendmusik Concert Series, make to this community? What difference does our television ministry make in the lives of people? Our mail gives us some idea, but it's not easy to measure accurately. What difference has this church made to the city of Lincoln over the past 131 years? Can it be measured statistically? Can you measure inspiration or the power of prayer or changed lives? Prevention is by its nature not easily measurable.

We cannot say dogmatically that there would be no democratic governments in the world if Jesus had not been born. But we can say that the Christian faith has reminded us in a fresh way that because we are created in God's image, each individual has a dignity and a desire for freedom that we have never lost and that cannot be ultimately extinguished.

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 was somehow so manifest and more revealing than in any other place or at any other time in history.

So do not worry about having the perfect Christmas. God continues to make everything better than perfect, and that includes you and me. Amen.