

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:48

It has taken me a lifetime to understand what Jesus was saying here. I cannot be perfect, and it is only in accepting my imperfection that I experience God's grace, the love of God we know in Jesus Christ. It declares us God's perfectly loved creation, righteous by what Christ did for us.

As a child, I thought that the goal was perfection. I was the weenie little kid who, at the end of first grade, said to my mother, "I hope I fail first grade!" Now, there were many gifts I did not possess, but I was smart, a gift from God. "Why?" my mom inquired, incredulously. "Because then next year, I would get all 100's!" I rejoined.

But, there is an enormous price to be paid for aspiring to be perfect under our own steam:

- We don't risk, so
- We don't grow.
- We shrink small enough to achieve very limited perfection.
- We don't learn from our mistakes, viewing them as a character flaw.
- We don't accept God's grace.
- We really don't need a savior, if we can do it on our own.

Even if others label us "perfect," we feel like we are living a lie, so we can't let anyone get too close, to know us as we really are. At the very least, it creates distance and resentment from others.

How can we avoid the "perfection trap" for the children we love?

- Encourage kids to try a wide variety of opportunities, not just the things at which they are likely to excel.
- Affirm all they learn from those experiences.
- Celebrate effort and improvement, not just perfection.
- Catch yourself not being perfect ... and model being okay with it.
- Decide when "good enough" is good enough.
- Celebrate the time you have for important things, when you let go of perfection.

Actually, it has been Lutheran theology that has taught me to elude the perfection trap. I hear, as God claims me in baptism, that I am beloved and forgiven, not beloved and perfect. What a sweet gift of grace that is.

Two weeks ago at a Sunday night family dinner, our grandson Hayden, age 5 1/2, finished early and nested in his father's arms. He looked adoringly up at our son Jonathan. Jon gazed down at Hayden, a twinkle in his eye, and said, "Do you know how lucky you are to have a perfect dad? If you don't believe me, just ask your mom." Tammie, sweet and wondrous woman, mom of Hayden, wife of Jon, just grinned and rolled her eyes.

Hayden, with such a serious expression, replied, "Dad, you know that there was only one perfect person ever. And he came so that you wouldn't have to be one. He loves you just the way you are." Oh, I love that little five-year old theologian!

Embrace your identity as beloved and forgiven ... and pass it on.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Catch your kids building new skills, taking a risk, and improving. Affirm effort, not always the results.
2. When things don't go well, do an "autopsy without blame," focused on what can be learned from the experience. What went well? What didn't? What will we do differently next time?
3. Learn to laugh, instead of anguish or rant, when things don't go well.
4. Regard mistakes, not as a character flaw, but as a learning experience.
5. Listen, listen, listen when your child tells you about an experience of "not perfect." Validate the feelings, then reassure.
6. Remind your children daily that they are beloved and forgiven.