

Sunday, February 23, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Holiness”

One job that I know I would not like to have is an announcer for Olympic sports.

I would not want the responsibility of watching enthusiastic, gifted young people, give everything they've got to a performance and having to point out all the things that they did wrong.

You've seen it these past few weeks, right?

A seemingly flawless pairing of two beautiful skaters dancing across the ice and just as you're wondering how on earth anyone does that, the announcer goes “Oooh – that will cost them.”

You sit up and ask what, what was less than perfect?

My heart breaks for those athletes who perform almost perfectly only to lose to a competitor by a tenth of a second.

Perhaps we have events like the Olympics to remind us that even the best, the well-trained, those in top physical condition with the ability for complete concentration, fall – they don't fail, they simply fall.

No one, it seems, is perfect.

An article in Wednesday's New York Times told the story of figure skater, Gracie Gold:

“In August, Gold turned 18 and her life seemed to fall into a panic.

At a preseason training camp in Colorado Springs, she struggled.

She could not rely on her jumping.

She demanded perfection from herself and became consumed by her flaws.

“She was really, really crumbling,” Denise Gold, her mother, said.

A new coach and a sport psychologist were brought in.

A transformation took place that Gracie attributed to “releasing some of that perfectionist quality and switching her focus to excellence.”

She's won multiple championships since and won a bronze team medal and came in fourth place for the short and long skating performances.

Reflecting on her performance she noted that doubt crept into her mind and she had to keep pushing it out, replacing it with a message of confidence.

All of our readings today focus on what it takes to achieve spiritual perfection – holiness.

In our Old Testament reading, we heard the Lord’s prescription for achieving holiness.

It is essentially a call to return to the Ten Commandments with a reminder of who is in charge.

You are to do this!

Who says?

I say, and I am the Lord!

It is to this text that Jesus is referring in his sermon in Matthew’s gospel.

Jesus, however, takes God’s requirements even a step further.

You have heard it said, but I say to you...this is much harder than you think.

Jesus is calling us to a standard of behavior beyond what we know.

He is demanding a level of excellence greater than that which we expect of ourselves.

Loving enemies, passivity in the face of violence, benevolence to the point of poverty, radical hospitality, acceptance of every living being as a child of God.

He concludes with the demand that we be “perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.”

Oh my goodness, this is hard!

What Jesus is trying to teach by framing the issue as “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you” mode is that just because you have always done something one way, does not mean that it is the right way.

It also does not mean that it is God’s way.

A book by Calvin Miller begins with the simple statement, "The only thing an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is good for is creating an eyeless, toothless world."

We are confronted with the question, “Is it more important to seek retribution or to meet evil with good?”

In his series of statements, Jesus is encouraging his followers to view justice, charity and forgiveness in a new light.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus offers his view of ‘perfection’ and ‘holiness’–

Holiness is compassionate and non-violent, refusing to retaliate when harmed, and seeking the best even for those who consider us to be their enemies.

What is clear here is that holiness is not about not doing things.

It is about doing things that make a difference.

It is not about avoiding so-called sinful behavior, but about doing justice, compassion, fairness, non-violence and generosity.

It is about caring for those who are vulnerable and poor, and treating all people with the same respect and dignity.

Gracie Gold, the figure skater had to change her way of thinking from avoiding mistakes and falls and naming all her flaws, to celebrating her gifts and talents and letting herself soar on the ice.

What Jesus is offering in today's passage is a simple reframing of how we look at things.

Perhaps easier said than done.

However, it is interesting to note that this particular lesson in Luke's gospel says, "Be merciful as your Father is merciful" and some translations use "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate."

The simple lesson, learned by the psalmist, Moses, Gracie and the followers of Jesus is that holiness comes from acting holy!

We just don't seem to be able to embrace this teaching.

At the most simple level Christian life has often been the cause of hatred and injustice, setting even believers against each other as "enemies".

Today we may not use physical weapons, but we certainly use the weapons of the media, of words and of rejection.

We do this against people of other religions as well, but as long as we do this, we fall short of God's holiness, and we inflict death on both our enemies and ourselves.

It is when the offer of grace costs us the most – when the action or thought is most difficult -- that we are most clearly reflecting the grace and character of Christ.

When we refuse to hate or attack or reject even those who are the most threatening and unloving, we begin to embody the "perfection", the holiness that Christ teaches about.

"Holiness" said one commentator "comes down to wholeness, integrity, authenticity, compassion and hospitality.

These characteristics are what God offers us, and what we are called to extend to others – even those we most want to reject or condemn, including ourselves.

I am fond of saying that the work of the church is to "love people into being."

This means that regardless of how people behave, or what they say, we respond with love; with kindness; with gentleness.

This approach requires that we put our egos and our agendas aside.

It means that when we meet a new person we start with the assumption that they are perfect.

Rather than look for flaws or shortcomings, each person is regarded for their strengths, their abilities, the God-given gifts that they bring to the community.

You have heard it said that the nominating committee is undertaking the annual task of building committees to carry out the work of the church, chasing people down and begging them to share the workload;

But I say to you, the work of the church is honorable, empowering, enlightening, exciting and transformative and you are invited to be a part of that.

The nominating committee is responsible for developing opportunities for each one of you to discern where your gifts and talents might best serve the church.

See how easy it is to reframe?

What areas of your life might need a closer look?

Are you operating on historical assumptions that are no longer accurate?

With enough training and coaching Gracie Gold was able to stop counting her flaws and to come out and compete on an international stage for a medal.

She didn't win gold, but she gave it her best and that is what God demands of us.

I wonder if there is a slumbering Olympian in each of us that simply needs the assurance that we are indeed perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.