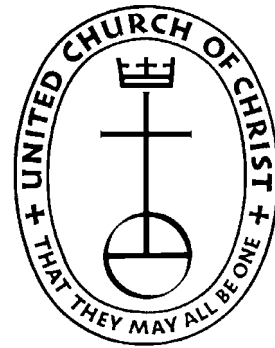


# Christmas and the Pursuit of Perfection

A Sermon By —  
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Our faith is not about perfection; it is about God's love for a world full of people, who in life's valleys as well as on life's peaks are all nevertheless awesomely and wonderfully made. Instead of trying to make Christmas perfect, let's try to simply let Christmas be about loving, valuing and accepting all those fellow children of God with whom we are privileged to journey through life.

**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

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241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

## Christmas and the Pursuit of Perfection

Charlie Brown, a huge grin on his face, trudged up a snow-covered hill pulling his brand-new sled, saying to himself, "No more sliding downhill in a cardboard box. Now I have the fastest sled in the world!" He pushed off and raced downhill shouting: "Nobody can beat me. Nobody!" But just then, Snoopy went right past him, sitting regally in his food bowl which now doubled as a lightning-fast sled. Charlie yearns to really excel at something in life, but usually ends up disappointed.

Now sometimes, our Christmas expectations end up in disappointment. My mother and grandmother both loved Christmas. They loved our silver tree with its 1950 aluminum foil branches made red, blue and green by a color wheel aimed from down below. They both spent far more money on Christmas than they should have. They wanted perfection. Yet every year something fell short – someone was absent, gifts weren't received with appropriate gratitude, the weather was poor, the gravy didn't turn out right.

Episcopal priest Charles Hoffacker described his Christmas fantasy. He pictures an attractive old house on a wooded parcel of land, snow on the ground, more falling gently, silently.

Inside, parents host their grown children and young grandchildren, along with various aunts, uncles and cousins. The entire clan is attractive, respectable, well-mannered and well-spoken. Each person is either successful in school, advancing in a career or enjoying a comfortable retirement. No one is mentally or emotionally struggling, seriously ill, chronically unemployed or even socially inept. All have broad smiles and straight teeth.

Most extraordinary about this clan is that its members all get along with each other. Despite hours of proximity, rich food and potent drink, no simmering hostilities boil to the surface. No harsh words are spoken. Everyone sits down for a splendid meal, the air echoing with compliments for the cooks. The entire family helps clean up.

Presents stacked beneath the tree are opened one by one, and each gift delights its recipient – the right size, color and style. Children gleefully tear off the brightly colored paper and smile gratefully at their elders. A dreamy state of tranquility overtakes the revelers as the fire in the hearth burns low.

The perfect Christmas!

But not a Christmas experienced by most of us who live in the real world. "I don't know, Linus, I just don't seem to have the Christmas spirit," mopes Charlie Brown. It is hard for Christmas to live up to expectations of perfection.

Rachel Ramen, granddaughter of an orthodox rabbi, is an oncologist who is convinced that the pursuit of perfection has become one of the major addictions of our time.

She says, "I think perfection is the booby prize in life. It's very isolating, separating and impossible to achieve." The pursuit of perfection leads us to struggle to become something we are not. From her cancer patients living on the edge of life she's learned that what is important is not perfection, it is who you've touched on your way through life, and who's touched you.

Dr. Ramen describes herself as a "recovering perfectionist." She wrote, "Before I began recovering, I experienced that I and everyone else was always falling short, that who we were and what we did was never quite good enough. I sat in judgment on life itself."

She wrote, "Life offers many teachers. One of mine was David, an artist and my first love." She said, "While we were together, my driver's license came up for renewal. And I needed to take a written test of the traffic laws."

"I studied the DMV booklet for days while David tried to persuade me to join him for a walk or go out to dinner or just talk, but I couldn't take the time. I got 100% on my driving test. David looked up from his painting with an expression of great tenderness, as he said, 'My love, why would you want to do that?'"

It was not the response she expected, causing her to realize how addicted she was to the pursuit of perfection. She just needed to pass the test, not get a perfect score requiring hours of study. She now understands that perfectionism can break your heart and the hearts of all around you. The goal in life is wholeness, not perfection.

Jonathan Edwards, a key figure in Congregational history, came into ministry at a time when the fervor of early Puritan Congregationalism had diminished. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from his pulpit in Northampton, Massachusetts, he became the voice of America's Great Awakening revival, an attempt to recapture evangelical zeal.

His most famous sermon was entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." An imposing figure in his black robe, he looked down from a high Puritan pulpit on a

throng of frightened parishioners and let go with a torrent of fire and brimstone.

The whole sermon was about the vengeance of God. He said there is no want of power in God to cast wicked people into hell at any moment. They deserve to be cast into hell; they are not good enough, and are under a sentence of condemnation. For Edwards, even his parishioners were objects of the justified fury of God: "The wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the furnace now hot."

What incredible imagery; what horrendous, wrong and distorted theology that bears absolutely no relationship to the teachings of Jesus! For Edwards, God required a perfect life without sin. You could not flee from that God who would find you and destroy you for your sins.

A few years ago, Pat Robertson echoed that same wrathful theology. When Disney World created a weekend for welcoming gay tourists and the city of Orlando displayed rainbow flags, an infuriated Robertson said Gay Days at Disney World would evoke God's wrath: "It'll bring terrorist bombs, earthquakes, tornadoes and possibly a meteor if you wave those rainbow flags in God's face."

Now an ancient Hebrew poet in the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm metaphorically speaks of a God from whose presence, like that of Edwards and Robinson's God, we cannot escape:

*O God you know when I sit down and when I rise up; you search out my path and my lying down. Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the world of the dead, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand leads me.*

Yes, imagery of an ever-present God. BUT ... for the Psalmist this is not a God who pursues us out of wrath, but out of love. Not a God who judges our lack of perfection, but rather accepts us. This God, in poetic imagery, knows us intimately.

*O God, you have searched me and known me. You are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely. You created my inmost being and stitched me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, **for I am awesomely and wonderfully made.** Wonderful are your works.*

For the Psalmist, we don't need perfection. Even with our failures and weaknesses, each of us has been awesomely and wonderfully made. We need not fear a God of wrath, but rather rejoice in a God of love.

Think of the most famous biblical figures. The Bible is not about perfect people. It is about frail, struggling humans. Abraham, the patriarch of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, was at one point so frightened that he offered his wife to another man in hope of protecting himself. Jacob, Abraham's grandson, stole his brother's paternal blessing and birthright. Jacob's sons sold their brother Joseph into slavery. Moses murdered an Egyptian taskmaster in a moment of rage. King David claimed Bathsheba as his own and had her husband murdered.

Yet somehow, all these people, with weaknesses alongside strengths, continued to be held in God's embrace – because as the Psalmist said, they were all awesomely and wonderfully made.

According to the biblical storytellers, the first Christmas was anything but perfect. Mary, a frightened unwed teenage mother. Joseph, the landless peasant to whom she was betrothed in marriage. A poor couple, marked by shame and stigma, in a town distant from their home. A birth in a stable. Outcast shepherds and foreign astrologers, magi, as witnesses to this event. That is a story about as far from perfect as you could find – but our faith affirms that in that setting, God's love came alive. What is important in the nativity stories is not perfection; it is love.

And the reason those stories have lived on is not because of that infant's birth, but because of who he grew up to be – what he did and what he said. Jesus the wandering peasant sage showed incredible love and acceptance for everyone he encountered – many of his closest followers were social outcasts. He brought healing and hope to those whose diseases made them unclean; he welcomed into his community of faith, shamed tax collectors and women with tarnished reputations. For Jesus, everyone was wonderfully made. And it is our claim as Christians that Jesus was a window through which we can get a glimpse into the love and acceptance of God.

Jesus shows us what God is like and that's why, unlike Jonathan Edwards, I don't think there is such a thing as hell, God is not a God of wrath, there is no judgment. God is a God of universal, unconditional love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Christmas celebrates the birth of one who made it clear that perfection isn't required, and that love and caring relationships are what give life meaning and wholeness.

Thirty people belonged to a little Methodist church in Maine. A young minister came to fill in for the pastor. He didn't know it, but this church's claim to fame was its 92-year-old organist, the oldest active member of Maine's organ guild. Now, her fingers were crippled with arthritis and she was almost totally deaf, so as she began the prelude the young minister noted she missed about half the notes. But with a beaming face,

she played on.

This little church didn't have printed bulletins like we do. So the minister called out the first hymn, #92, "Amazing Grace." But no one in the congregation opened a hymnbook. They were waiting. As the organist began to play, it was clear that hymns were "name that tune" at that church. The organist couldn't hear what the minister had said and so she played what she wanted. The members of the congregation were smiling at the minister, some chuckling at the confused look on his face. But as the tune went along, people started to hum and then there was a furious race to the index to see who could find the hymn first and call out its correct number; it was a regular Sunday game.

Or there was the minister's prayer, too long perhaps, so the organist started the organ response right in the middle of it.

When the service ended, the young minister asked some of the members, "Why don't you give her a dinner, honor her and then seek a new organist? Then you could find an organist who could help enrich the service itself."

They said, "Having great music isn't a high priority for us right now. Maybe after she's gone our music will be better. But right now it is more important that she keep active. She's not just an organist, she's OUR organist."

When that congregation gathered together what mattered was a community of people caring about one another. Their services, undoubtedly including Christmas Eve, were a little ragged and far from perfect, just as the stories about Jesus' birth portray a far from perfect nativity. But our faith is not about perfection; it is about love.

It is about God's love for a world full of people, who in life's valleys as well as on life's peaks, who in great success and also profound failure, who in kind moments and also times of selfishness, are all nevertheless awesomely and wonderfully made.

Our faith is about God's love acceptance of us as we are – God's acceptance of Jacob, David, Zacchaeus, the folks at Disney World's Gay Days and the old organist. Christmas is about love come alive in the most unlikely of places.

Let's not worry about perfection. Let's try to simply let Christmas be about loving, valuing and accepting all those fellow children of God, those fellow sojourners, awesomely and wonderfully made, with whom we are privileged to journey through life. Amen.