

*[Before my homily I just want to repeat one of the announcements made before mass. The Washington state bishops have asked Catholics to send a message to their legislators opposing Senate Bill 5395 – a bill imposing a state standard on all schools K-12th grade to teach comprehensive sex education. This is not the case of those prudish Catholics wanting to keep a healthy knowledge of basic biology from their children. The Bishops oppose the bill because it fails to adequately address complex moral issues tied to human sexuality. The underlying ideology behind the curriculum will indoctrinate children into a false and harmful understanding of the human person. Please see the statement in this week's bulletin.]*

In the 23 years I've been a priest I've seen a lot of kids volunteer as Altar Servers. God bless them for all their service. I deeply appreciate it. But while some serve for years, there are others who drop out of serving very quickly. There are many reasons for stepping back. And, of

course you're free to do that at any time. But I bring it up because I want to speak about one of the reasons as a way into today's Gospel.

In recent years it seems an increasing number of Altar Servers step back from serving because of anxiety. They just get too nervous. They fear they'll do something wrong, that everyone will see that they don't know what they're doing, etc. Of course, when we start something new it's natural to be nervous at first. But I sense sometimes it's more than ordinary nervousness. It's a kind of perfectionism that I believe they learn from us – the adults in their lives. But nobody needs to be afraid to serve. It's not me or another priest or the congregation that you are serving as an Altar Server. You are serving Jesus Himself at the mass. And Jesus knows none of us are perfect.

But Father, you might ask, what about, "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect?" How can any of us human beings do that? Isn't God asking the impossible from us? There are many people in our society who have emotionally or spiritually harmed their lives trying to

be perfect in this way. One “B” on the report card, being rejected by your chosen college, a missed promotion, not to mention forgetting to ring the bells at the right time at mass, and we fall apart because we’ve proven, at least to ourselves, that we aren’t perfect . . . so we’re failures.

That’s not what Jesus means here. The Greek word translated “perfect” in this passage is “telieos” from “telos” – “goal, target, end.” What Jesus is saying is that we’re to have the same goal or target for our thoughts and actions as God does. God’s not demanding we never error, but that we should lift our heads up from our self-striving and focus our eyes on God’s will.

Erasmus Levie-Merikakis, gives an analogy of what this feels like: human life is like shooting at an archery target. To be perfect is to aim at the target that Jesus Himself is aiming for. The life of a Christian Disciple is not about our striving to follow God’s rules without failure. Perfection is, rather, a joint effort in which we allow ourselves to be completely guided by Jesus. Imagine “it is Christ who stands behind us

as we face the target in life, his left hand over our left hand (holding the bow), his chin on our right shoulder, his right hand (holding ours), drawing back the bow string together – to shoot the arrow of his and our common love so as to hit our common goal – our neighbor.

The world tells us that to grow up is to no longer need a guide or helper. Faith says the opposite. To be perfect is to so grow in dependence on a guide, Jesus, that we do nothing without his hands on ours. Coming back to serving at the altar, what is our intention in serving? Is it to look good, have fun, impress people? If so, then we can fail. But if we serve at the altar (as priest or altar server) intending to do what Jesus desires us to do to the best of our abilities, then we can't fail. If we're trying to do what Jesus wants from us, with Him, Jesus is pleased no matter the results. And that goes for all parts of our lives.

The Christian life is not something we try to achieve alone as God watches from a distance, judging our performance (that's the attitude that produces the perfectionism, spiritual breakdowns, and despair I

was mentioning). Perfect Discipleship is simply living the life that Jesus gives us in complete cooperation with Him: shooting together as a team at the same target in life.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Lent is a time of more intense training in that Divine Archery, when we can grow in our ability to cooperate with Jesus, learning to be docile to Jesus' guiding hand, letting Him guide us in hitting the target in life.

What might that look like this Lent? I have already preached last week about our Fire it Up! Mission this Friday and Saturday. Today is your last chance to register for that if you haven't done so. There is the little black book we give out every year for daily meditation. We will also be offering a choice of two other books to read over the next forty days. And, of course, there is fasting, going meatless on Ash Wednesday and Fridays and abstaining from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday – and then your own individual fasts. For more intense prayer come to daily mass at least once a week. There will be Wednesday

evening masses at 6:00 to help you with that. There will also be stations of the cross on Fridays at 7:00.

But there is also a lot of room for your own creativity in deciding what would help you the most to become ever more dependent on Jesus. “Be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” What are we aiming for in life? Is it the same target God has in mind? And can we let Jesus guide our hand in it? That is what Lent and the entire spiritual life is about and what will determine our happiness.