

Probably you heard it, too. If you opened your newspaper, peeked inside a magazine, or turned on your TV set, more than likely you heard it. As a matter of fact, as I ran an internet search yesterday to refresh my memory, I had a wide selection of sources from which to choose. As is the case every year at this time, news programs spotlighted just a few of the thousands of graduation speeches given across our country. Last year, one in particular stood out. Covered by surely every TV network and providing fodder for commentary for everyone from the “Today Show” to Rush Limbaugh, high school English teacher David McCullough’s “You’re Not Special” speech at the Wellesley High commencement service sparked interest, and in some cases furious debate.

Contrary to what your u9 soccer trophy suggests, your glowing seventh grade report card, despite every assurance of a certain corpulent purple dinosaur, that nice Mister Rogers and your batty Aunt Sylvia, no matter how often your maternal caped crusader has swooped in to save you... you’re nothing special. McCullough went on to assure his young audience:

Yes, you’ve been pampered, cosseted, doted upon, helmeted, bubble-wrapped. Yes, capable adults with other things to do have held you, kissed you, fed you, wiped your mouth, wiped your bottom, trained you, taught you, tutored you, coached you, listened to you, counseled you, encouraged you, consoled you and encouraged you again. You’ve been nudged, cajoled, wheedled and implored. You’ve been feted and fawned over and called sweetie pie. Yes, you have. And, certainly, we’ve been to your games, your plays, your recitals, your science fairs. Absolutely, smiles ignite when you walk into a room, and hundreds gasp with delight at your every tweet. . . . and, indisputably, here we all have gathered for you, the pride and joy of this fine community. . . . But do not get the idea you’re anything special. Because you’re not [*The*

Wellesley Report, June 5, 2012].

Noting some 3.2 million seniors graduating from more than 37,000 high schools across the country—“that’s 37,000 valedictorians... 37,000 class presidents... 92,000 harmonizing altos... 340,000 swaggering jocks”—McCullough assured the graduates that they were not special because everyone is special.

As the speech played again and again, some were delighted to hear someone take the young whipper snappers down a notch or two. Others were horrified. Perhaps they had not observed the proceedings closely enough or listened to the entirety of the message closely enough to be impressed with the obviously close relationship that underlay McCullough’s words. This teacher, who apparently had spent a career urging his students to “carpe the heck out of the diem,” seize the heck out of the day, was calling the graduates beyond self-indulgence and days wiled away surfing the internet to discovery of “the great and curious truth” that selfless service is not just the best thing they had to give the world. It was also the best gift they could give themselves.

I thought of McCullough’s address in conversation with my grandson as our family went through high school graduation a couple of weeks ago. I thought of it again as I prepared for this morning’s sermon, for it seems that the writer of Matthew is seeking to break through to his congregation with something of the same message. Perhaps he is being challenged from within by those who want to snatch the Christian faith away from its ethical moorings in the rich soil of Judaism. Or perhaps he is challenged from without by those who denigrate followers of Jesus as a lawless, godless sect. More than likely, he is seeking to answer both. Following Christ, the Evangelist wants to say, is about more than just discovering yourself to be loved or “special”. It is about that—yes; but it is also about serious discipleship. Following Christ is a journey that, as we saw in our Gospel reading this morning, begins in grace and blessing; but it is also about a narrow gate and a road less traveled (7:13-14). It is about beatitude and finding rest from crushing, oppressive burdens (11:28-30); but it is also about hearing and doing, righteousness, good works, and bearing fruit (7:16-21). “Anyone,” Fred Craddock suggests, “who appeals to faith and freedom in Christ to do less, be less, give less, serve less and love less than our forebears has grossly misunderstood Jesus’ message” [*Christian Century*, Ja. 31, 1990].

So this morning, as we continue our trek through the Gospels, see Matthew wrestling with our temptation, on the one side, of falling off into the harsh demands of legalism, and on the other side, of slipping over into a wimpy gospel of permissive libertinism. We are special, we are loved by God in Christ, Matthew wants to say to us; but this love is not to be taken for granted. It is a call, an opportunity to give our lives, to live our lives, transformed, back to God.

Often called the most “Jewish” of the four Gospels in the Second Testament, Matthew was written anonymously in the last third of the first century, perhaps only a few years after Mark was written or perhaps as much as ten or 15 years after Mark. As you will particularly note in the stories of the birth and death of

Jesus, Matthew frequently depicts Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy (“this was done to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet”). At a number of points, Matthew depicts Jesus as the new Moses, particularly in telling of Jesus’ birth and in arranging Jesus’ teachings into five sections, reminiscent of the five books of Torah. Matthew draws deeply upon the similarities, the kinship, the shared heritage of Judaism and Christianity; but Matthew also reveals a growing animosity between Jewish leaders and the budding church. The extensive and intensive nature of the woes Matthew pronounces upon the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23 are unparalleled in the other Gospels; and his rendering the cry of the crowd, “His blood be on us and on our children!” has probably done more to fan the flame of Anti-Semitism in the church than any verse in scripture. To rip these passages from their context within the family tug-of-war going on between Christians and Jewish leaders in the first century, however, is to do violence not only to the Gospel of Matthew, but to the spirit of Christ.

“Do not think,” Jesus said, “that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill (5:17). Jesus will move on to offer what is popularly called the six “antitheses”—“you have heard it said . . . but I say. . . .” Far from rejecting or seeking to tear down the Torah and prophets, he seeks to build on them. He seeks to return to the heart, the purpose of the commandments and apply them to relationships within families, between neighbors, toward enemies. Far from handing out permission slips to be and do less, he calls his followers to a higher righteousness.

“For I tell you,” Jesus goes on to say, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” After centuries of teaching, we in the church have tended to hear those words as a negative reflection upon the Jewish faith. But listen to them again. Hear them in light of the fact that Jesus’ audience held the scribes and the Pharisees in the highest esteem. Hear them in light of the fact that those present knew that the scribes and Pharisees extended themselves to the greatest lengths to study and live according to the commandments of their faith. They extended themselves even to the point of accepting martyrdom. Righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees, then, was not the prideful righteousness of comparing oneself to the lowest common denominator. That would have been no challenge at all. Righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees was an invitation to think of the champions of faithfulness and go beyond even them.

Better yet, think even higher. If you want a model of righteousness, look to God. “Be perfect,” Jesus will go on to say, “as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). If you want to know who to love and how to love, if you want to know about treatment of those who are suffering, if you want to know how to deal with your neighbor and your enemy, look to the example of the God who meets us in Christ: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (11:28-29).

Righteousness? It’s a word that strikes fear in our hearts, isn’t it? We have seen it so abused, so identified with *self*-righteousness, so preoccupied with judging and condemning others, so ready to lay heavy burdens upon others, that we lean back from claiming it for ourselves. The righteousness to which Matthew bids us, however, is just the opposite. Far from a legalism that robs the heart of warmth and energy, it bids us to an integrity of heart and life. More appropriately understood in terms of growing toward maturity, it contrasts with legalism’s preoccupation with external rules. By way of comparison, consider that children in their early development obey rules out of their fear of punishment. As they grow toward maturity, however, their code of ethics is internalized; and they seek to live according to who they have determined themselves within their deepest selves to be. In a like manner, “legalism works from the outside in. Jesus wants people to live from the inside out. . . . Mature persons live from the inside, from transformed hearts. Christianity is not conformity to externally imposed rules, but, as the Apostle Paul understood, being ‘new creatures’” [Bonnie Thurston, “The Freedom of Obedience,” *Christian Reflection*].

In another conversation my grandson told me about having read the biography of one of the Lost Boys of Sudan. As he spoke of his admiration of the courage of this young man who now worked to help other young people, Kye, who is not religious, recalled this now grown man’s admission that all he wanted to do in life was live like Jesus. As a grandmother who is religious, who is convinced of the way of Jesus, I celebrated within myself: “Yes! What better model could there be?”

“Love God,” Saint Augustine said many centuries ago, “and do what you will.” Love God and live from a heart transformed by love.

So hear this: You are special. Yes, you are. But so is every other child of the God of creation; and your specialness, your maturity is gauged by the extent to which you reach out and care for these, God’s other children, especially those who are despised, disadvantaged, discriminated against.

So love God and live out of a heart transformed by God's kind of love.