

NOBODY'S PERFECT

I want to start off by taking a survey. Will everyone who is perfect please raise his or her hand? Thank you for your honesty! After you have lived for as long as I have, I am sure of the answer to that question. Nobody's perfect. Some are closer than others, but we all have some conditions, some flaws, some warts that get in the way of perfection. One of my many flaws is a substantial character flaw. I love rock and roll. Give me the Rolling Stones and Mick Jaegggar, Steven Tyler, Three Dog Night, Hang on Sloopy, and Arrowsmith any day. I just can't help myself.

God knows about all our flaws, too. Did you ever notice in the Bible the people that God chooses to do his will and his work? He picks lots of people who don't want anything to do with God's assignments, and he also picks lots of people that have some pretty serious character flaws. I love to tell Bible stories that teach us lessons about that. One good example is Jonah. God told Jonah to go preach to Ninevah and the Assyrians. Jonah knew that was a pretty rough place to preach. Jonah actually ran away from God because he didn't want to preach in Ninevah. Of course you know the rest of the story—Jonah wound up in a whale which spit him out on the coast by Ninevah, and Jonah finally gave in to God's request. I think that message is that you can't run away from God. There's a little kicker to that story which I love. After Jonah went to Ninevah and preached their destruction if they did not repent, the people actually took Jonah's message to heart and repented. Jonah wound up getting mad at God, because he didn't destroy Ninevah after Jonah had gone to all that work of preaching in sin city.

Or how about David? You know, David was God's fair-haired boy, and he became King of all the Hebrew people. What a guy. He even slew Goliath, the big giant of the Philistines. Surely he was a near-perfect chap, upstanding and ready to do God's will. Yeah, right. Do you know the story of David and Bathsheba? This one is worse than a soap opera. David, who is already king, sees Bathsheba sunning herself and she is quite a looker. Not content to just look, David finds out who she is, and she happens to be the wife of one of his army officers. That little inconvenience doesn't bother David, and he arranges to get with Bathsheba, and she becomes pregnant. The bottom line is that David arranges for Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, to be in the front lines of the battlefield, and he is killed in battle. After Bathsheba does her obligatory mourning, David takes her as his wife. What in the world is the message here? It comes in the last line of the story. "But the thing David had done displeased the Lord. Even the high and mighty, even the chosen of God, even the bold and the beautiful have to play by God's rules. God's punishment turned out to be a bitter one. David's son born to Bathsheba was condemned by the Lord to die.

Here's another Bible story worthy of soap opera status. In fact, it was made into a great movie called Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. It is our Old Testament lesson for this morning. Jacob was one of the patriarchs of the Old Testament. You have heard of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; they were the fathers and sons called the patriarchs. Now Jacob had twelve sons, and they turned out to be the first leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. That certainly was quite an honor, and one would think that people selected for that honor would at least be loyal, trustworthy and obedient. Yeah, right. Let me tell you what happened to the brothers twelve. Now Joseph, we'll call him Little Joe, was the second to the youngest of all of Jacob's sons, and it was common knowledge that Father Jacob loved him best. He had been born to him in Jacob's old age, and Jacob saw to it that Joseph had a beautiful coat of many colors, the envy of the whole family of Jacob. In fact, this made the other brothers so jealous they hated him. Now if you found yourself in that kind of situation, wouldn't you play it low key and attempt to find a way to get back in the brothers' good graces? Not Joseph. He had a dream that they were all gathering sheaves of grain out in the field when his sheaf stood upright and all of the

brothers' sheaves bowed down to it. Not the best thing to say to eleven men who were already sick of Joseph. But Little Joe didn't stop there. He said "and let me tell you about my other dream. This time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me. That was like pouring gasoline on a fire. Dream on, Little Joe, you are not doing yourself any good telling your brothers about dreams like that. Well, you probably know the rest of the story. The brothers were grazing their sheep and Little Joe came out to meet them. When the brothers saw him coming, they decided to kill him, but one of the brothers, Reuben, said "don't kill him, just throw him down into a cistern. Then when a caravan came by, the brothers sold Little Joe into slavery for twenty shekels, and went back and told Father Jacob that Joseph had been eaten by wolves. So much for brotherly love. Of course there's a lot more to the Joseph story as he is taken to Egypt where he becomes second in command of the country, and even saves the twelve tribes from famine, but that is a subject for another day. Here are the sons of Jacob, committing a terrible crime against their very own brother, and God selects them to be the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Once again, God selects some very flawed people to represent him here on this earth. As we said, nobody's perfect, and God knows this when he chooses people to do his will.

And then there is the New Testament lesson for this morning I'm telling you, nobody could make this stuff up. Can't you just see God up in heaven, scratching his head and saying to himself, "I wonder who I could get to spread the words and works of Jesus throughout the world? Who would be the best champion for my newly formed church? Oh, I know, I'll get Saul the Pharisee to be my New Testament leader." Is that a good choice, or what? Saul the Pharisee had devoted his life, his ministry, his passion, to persecuting Christians. He was a good Jewish boy who got a superb rabbinical education, and saw his first Christian blood drawn at the stoning of Stephen. Saul worked the cities up and down the Mediterranean coast, looking for Christians to persecute. He would actually go into the local synagogues and ask for lists of Christians for the purpose of capturing them and taking them back to Jerusalem. He was very good at what he did, and his fame spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean communities. That's why he was traveling the road to Damascus, capital of Syria, on that fateful day God turned his life around. Paul had been to the high priest in Jerusalem, asking for letters of introduction to the synagogue in Damascus. As he and several companions traveled the 200 mile trip and were within sight of Damascus, God found a way to get Saul's attention. He was knocked to the ground, and heard a voice saying "Saul, why do you persecute me." Saul was blinded and could not see, and did not eat for three days. In the meantime, God spoke to another person in Damascus, a disciple by the name of Ananias. After Saul went with Ananias, he gained his strength and vision, and soon after that, began preaching in the synagogues about this Jesus, who was sent by God to save us all. Can't you just imagine the confusion of those who heard this former Christian-hater, when they heard Paul's new message. There's nothing more perplexing to us Christians than a ne'er do well or a hell-raiser who repents, who turns his life around, renounces his old ways and begins to follow Jesus. It takes us a long time to finally accept that change of heart. It takes us a long time to put our trust in someone whose reputation precedes him as mean or untrustworthy or kiniving or less than honorable. And yet, Paul is such a magnificent example of the ability to repent, the ability to turn one's life around, the ability to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. OK. Enough of the stories. What can we take away from these Biblical passages that will help us in the here and now? And what is it that we need to be paying attention to in our present Calvin situation?

The Prophet Jonah is a good example for all of us. You can't run away from God. Folks, if you hear God speaking to you, mind up. You're not going to outrun God, so listen up and do His will. You won't get far struggling with Him either. Your arms are too short to box with God. Furthermore, after you do His will, be content with the result. Jonah got mad, because his

preaching actually moved the people to repent, even though Jonah wanted God to destroy them.

King David has a different message for us. Don't get the big head just because God has picked you as his fair-haired boy. God still expects you to play by the rules, even if you are one of his favorites. Justice will be done every time, and God's justice is as sure as the sun coming up in the morning.

Jacob and Joseph and all of Joseph's brothers have several lessons for us to learn. Jacob teaches us to be careful when you play favorites, because you might wind up hurting the one or ones you favor. If you are the fair-haired one, watch your mouth, watch your boasting. It may save you a lot of grief. The brothers are a great example of flawed people being picked by God for big jobs. Each of the brothers became the leader of one of the 12 tribes of Israel, in spite of their sinful ways and the hate they showed to their brother, Joseph.

And then there is Saul. He is such a great example of a life turned around by God, and God selecting someone so unlikely, that it is hard to believe. Another lesson is that we need to be open to giving people a second chance, that repentance is not only real, but it is possible. At the same time, we need to be careful not to be flim-flammed, to be taken, to be fooled by imposters. Ronald Reagan had it right when he was dealing with the Soviet Union and nuclear reduction. His famous words were "Trust, but verify".

So, here we are on June 26, 2011, once again with a pastorless church, wondering what we can do to make things whole again. I believe that you and I, that we, can use some of the stories we just heard to make our transition less painful and less chaotic. First, let's recognize the situation. Pastorless churches tend to disintegrate over time. Attendance falls off, pledges trail off, and programs tend to drift and fade away. It is an even more serious problem in the summer when things slack off, anyway. That doesn't have to happen, but you and I have to resolve to keep on keeping on while we are without a pastor. It will most certainly take all of us to get Calvin Church through these difficult times. What can we do? Chances are good that you already know, but let me enumerate the steps we can take to insure a healthy and holy church in the months to come.

Maintain your regular worship attendance. The Worship and Music Ministry, led by Joan Seymour, is making every effort to fill our pulpit with messengers of God. Let us continue to worship God with love and grace and vigor in the months to come.

Keep up your pledge. Kathleen may be gone but the bills continue. It is important to maintain our financial health during this period.

Say yes when asked to be an usher or greeter or serve communion, or any of the other tasks that need doing. Sign up to host coffee hour. Watch the bulletin board for other serving opportunities.

Continue to participate in your Ministry meetings. Attend Circle and Mens Prayer Breakfast. Keep attending our ongoing Session and other activities.

Participate in our First Fruits Sunday, and support our efforts to help the IPM Food Pantry and the House of Peace.

Read the bulletin board and read the bulletin insert weekly. Stay abreast of Calvin happenings.

And last, but not least, pray for our church. Pray that our Session maintains our programs during the absence of a pastor. Pray that Calvin may form a Pastor Nominating Committee in the near future and pray for their early success. Pray for our denomination in this time of uncertainty and conflict. And pray with me now:

God of our fathers and mothers, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Joseph, God of Noah David and Saul, know that we put our trust in you, know that we put our faith in you. Use us in the days and weeks and months to come to make Calvin Church a shining example of your light in the world around us. Speak to us, Lord, and enable us to carry out what you would have us do. Help us by surrounding us with your Holy Spirit, so that we have the help we will need to flourish in these days ahead. For we ask this in the name of your Son and our Risen Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

Preached at Calvin Presbyterian Church, Amelia, Ohio on June 26, 2011 by Robert T. Bridges