

## When Perfection Gets In the Way

Sermon by  
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This is a historic week for our nation. On Tuesday we will witness the inauguration of the first African-American as President of the United States. Much has been said and written since Election Day about this event, and this will not be an opportunity to add to that. But there is something wonderfully ironic about the swearing in of an African-American as President one day after a national celebration for the man who was the recognized leader of the civil rights movement in the 1960's. For those of us who lived through those turbulent years, the events of this week are head-spinning. It's amazing to think of how far our nation has come. Of course, if we need an antidote to all of the self-congratulating that is going on here, all we have to do is recognize how much farther we need to go. Just because we have elected an African-American does not mean that our racial problems are over. Neither are they the only problems we have. The President-elect takes office in a time in which we have so many difficulties a person would be excused for wondering why anyone would want the job of President at all. We are in the midst of an economic tailspin that most experts say we won't be out of until sometime next year; the unemployment rate is 7.2% and rising (as we in this fellowship of faith know all too well as more of our own lose their jobs); we are engaged in two wars, as well as an ongoing war on terrorism; the environmental crisis still weighs on us as people debate whether there really is such a thing as global warming while glaciers melt and icecaps evaporate. We in this part of the world hold out hope for some relief from one quarter at least – the hope that the Cavaliers will come through for us and end our sports championship drought, and give us at least something to cheer about. But these are tough times, no kidding. We celebrate a new president taking over, we honor the outgoing president's work, but we still wonder what the future looks like for us. We wonder if God has a word for us, if God is still speaking. It's not just the daily headlines that scream at us about the plight we find ourselves. We in this church are experiencing tough times, too. Next week we will have our annual Congregational Meeting, at which we hear from the respective committees about their activities over the past year. We also will look at the budget for 2009, and just to give you a heads-up, it is not a pretty picture. Even with cut-backs we still had a \$45,000 shortfall, so we cut some more. As a Session, we know very well the situation of our membership; some of our own elders are looking for a new job. Though we were still many thousands of dollars short, the Session felt that it was important to lift this up as a spiritual as well as a financial challenge to our congregation. So as you will see when you take a look at the budget for yourselves there is a line in the income section titled "Faith in God." That is not meant to be testing God; it is more a case of testing ourselves. Testing just how strong our faith is, testing if we are really willing to lean on God, testing if we are open to the new ways God is working our lives; testing if we can hear and follow the word God has for us. Of course, we are not the only ones who are experiencing tough times. The church universal has been having a difficult time staying upright, with all of the battering from without and within. The latest Barna Research, revealed last week, showed that in this country Christianity is no longer "the default religion." That is, you cannot take it for granted that just because someone is from this country that they

will be a Christian. There were all kinds of implications from this study, including one that said that by a 3-to-1 margin, Americans noted that "...they are personally more likely to develop their own set of religious beliefs than to accept a comprehensive set of beliefs taught by a particular church." What especially interested me was another implication of this study, which the Barna folks expressed this way: "Faith, of whatever variety, is increasingly viral rather than pedagogical. With people spending less time reading the Bible, and becoming less engaged in activities that deepen their biblical literacy, faith views are more often adopted on the basis of dialogue, self-reflection and observation than teaching. Feelings and emotions now play a significant role in the development of people's faith views – in many cases, much more significant than information-based exercises such as listening to preaching and participating in Bible study." Faith, in other words, is not so much taught as it is caught. It is caught by those who see the teachings of Jesus Christ lived out by others. It is caught as people live out the teachings of Jesus in their own lives, as they take seriously the way of life described in the Bible and lived out in the boardroom, classroom and playgrounds. It is caught as we seek and expect to hear a word from God in our time. The problem with this is the expectation of perfection. People think that if they are going to be a Christian, they have to be perfect. They have to be right and get it right all the time. But if you do that, you quit being human. Our humanity is a constant process of getting it right sometimes and getting it wrong sometimes, and learning which is which. But we don't like to affirm our humanity, some of us anyway. We want to be perfect. We want to think that if we just try hard enough and think long enough and act good enough – or put up a good enough act – that we can be perfect. The downside is that often in our quest to be perfect we set ourselves apart from other human beings who may have the gifts and the words we need to be more fully human – which is what God made us for, not to be perfect. The times of First Samuel, our Old Testament reading this morning, were really not that different from ours. They were in a mess. They had moved into the Promised Land, but then everybody started doing their own thing and turned away from considering what God thought about that. The religious authorities – the sons of the prophet Eli – got fat off of the offerings of ordinary people, thereby subverting God's dream of justice for all people. To top it all off, the people of the coastal cities, the Philistines, started oppressing the people of Israel. Their political life, their economic life, their spiritual life was one great big mess. Because they had turned away from God, it seemed that God had turned away from them. The words of the third chapter of First Samuel tell us that the word of the Lord and visions from God were very rare. Why would God show up if no one paid attention? And yet God was not done with these people yet. God was just done with the priestly order that had let all this chaos happen. But God was still working for good with these folks. And God would do it through Samuel. Not that it was easy. Samuel was just a kid. He hadn't talked with God yet. Apparently he had been taught something by Eli, he had received the pedagogical thing. But he hadn't caught the God bug yet. And even when Eli figures it out and gives him the words to say when God makes an appearance, it seems that Samuel didn't quite get it right. Eli tells him, "Say, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.'" Samuel hears the voice a fourth time and says, "Speak, your servant is listening." Oh, come on, kid, you messed up the most important part, you left out God's name! You weren't perfect! To which God might have said, 'So what?' Whether Samuel got it right, got it perfect, or not, was not the issue. What was the issue was that Samuel was willing to hear what God had to say, and Samuel would be willing to do what God had in mind for him.

God didn't want him to be perfect anyway. God just wanted him to be faithful and willing enough to listen to what God had to say, and to share it so that others might know that God still cared about how they lived their lives. A few years ago, the junior senator from New York – who is about to become our next Secretary of State – was quoted as saying, "I don't want to let perfect be the enemy of the good." She was talking about a piece of legislature. Our next President would be wise to keep that as a general saying for what he wants to do, with legislature and with everything else. Perfect might be nice, but it is not often realized, especially in the field of politics. All we need is for the good to happen, and if the perfect gets in the way, maybe we need to let it go. The same holds true for us. In our Christian walk we would like to be perfect. After all, didn't Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect"? But we in our culture have a different idea about what 'perfect' is than did those who lived in the time of Jesus. Maybe a better way to look at it is to see how those words are phrased in Luke's Gospel – "Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful." If perfection gets in the way of being merciful, if perfection gets in the way of our being good to each other, if perfection keeps us from enjoying the fullness of life Jesus gives, maybe we should just let perfection go, and just live. That is not to say that we don't try our best. It is to say that more often than not, the best we can do is the best we can do, and then leave the rest in God's hands. That was the case for Samuel. It will be the case for Barack Obama. And it will be the case for us. To let go of our self-worshipping perfection, and listen for the word God has for us to share with others so that they, too, can celebrate the gifts God has given. The God who doesn't need our perfection; just our faithfulness.

Amen.