**

“Perfect!”

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1 Samuel 2: 1-10; Hebrews 10: 11-18

“How about your American minister, this, uh, Mr. Curry?” I was in conversation with my friend from Windsor, England, whose home is just down the street from where the royal wedding had taken place. “Your Bishop Curry gave quite the talk” my friend said. “But I’m not sure you Americans realize what every Brit was thinking during your American Bishop’s sermon.”

By show of hands were any of you one of the 29 million Americans who tuned in for the wedding of American Meghan Markle and Prince Harry? It was fun to watch the arrival of famous guests, see the bride’s gown, hear the gospel music and listen to Bishop Curry’s sermon. According to my friend, these were the things we Americans were watching. But the Brits were focused elsewhere. Specifically, on a small black object. The queen’s purse. Excuse me, “hand bag.”

The queen has a hand bag code. If the queen keeps her hand bag on her left hand, all is well. If she shifts her handbag from her left hand to her right, it means she is feeling a bit uncomfortable. If she is in conversation it means she is finished with this particular person and is ready to move on. It is a silent code that communicates her wishes to her aides without causing embarrassment for the unsuspecting rube speaking with her. When the queen is dining and puts her handbag on the table, it means she wants to leave in five minutes or less. It doesn’t matter if you’ve finished your dinner or not, when the hand bag goes on the table, all plates get cleared. Poof, dinner is over.

The wedding ceremony was scheduled down to the minute. Each person had their assigned duties and time in which said duties were to be completed. Our American minister, Bishop Michael Curry, was given precisely 8 minutes to preach. And boy, did he preach. He was flowing. He was moving hearts. So why did the royals in the front rows look so . . . uncomfortable?

The queen listened politely as Bishop Curry spoke. Yes, at the 8-minute mark things were just fine, but then it was 9 minutes, and then 10 minutes and then 11 and the queen began to shift her hand bag. All British eyes were focused on the hand bag. As minute 12 approached and the pastor showed no signs of weariness, the entire country drew in its collective breath. Would she place the bag in front of her? And if she did, what would happen? Would the wedding stop? At precisely 13 minutes and 40 seconds, Bishop Curry ended his sermon and all of England collectively exhaled.

Sadly, there were quite a few English folk who missed the excellent content of the sermon because they were hyper focused on that little black hand bag. What did Bishop Curry say? I’ll give you a hint: it was a wedding. He talked about love. Not Prince Charming fairy tale love, but real love. And Bishop Curry said real love is sacrificial.

John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only begotten son so that we might live.* That’s sacrificial love.

And that’s what Hebrews 10 is telling us as well. Let me paraphrase. Verse 11: No human being can do anything to become perfect. Verse 12: Christ’s sacrifice was complete. He showed us what real love looks like. Verse 14: Through Christ’s sacrificial love, we are made perfect.

Well I don’t know about you, but if I am made perfect through Christ’s love, that frees up a lot of my time. You mean I don’t need to write the perfect sermon? Cook the perfect turkey? Does this mean I can possibly stop focusing so much of my energy inward? Does this mean (gasp!) that I can accept shortcomings in myself?

God keeps offering us perfection. First God creates paradise with Adam and Eve smack dab in the middle of it and they eat from the forbidden tree. Then God gives Moses the Ten Commandments so we can live in perfect peace and we fail to obey them. Then Jesus condenses those Ten Commandments into two: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. We still can’t get it right. God puts the law in us, in our hearts and on our minds, so we always know right from wrong. And Jesus walks among us and shows us right from wrong. God keeps offering us perfection. And we don’t accept it.

We are inwardly focused people. We spend so much of our energy, our finances, our passion on ourselves. We are on an endless search for emotional, physical and spiritual satisfaction. We want to perform better. We want to fill up the hole inside of us. We want to make everyone happy. We repeatedly turn our attention inward and search for ways to be stronger, faster, smarter, more attractive, more clever, we want to make ourselves . . . perfect. Let’s revisit Verse 11: No human being can do anything to become perfect.

This Hebrews passage goes on to tell us that all that time while we are turned inward, trying to become something else, we are already forgiven. Verse 17: More than forgiven; our sins are forgotten. If through Christ we are made perfect, then it’s time to channel our energy, our finances, our passion in a new direction: outward. It’s time to make the world better by sacrificing for others. Verse 24: Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. What does that look like? As Bishop Curry said, real love is sacrificial.

In the book of Samuel, Hannah is unhappy. Hannah’s husband treasures her and Hannah’s God loves her, but she is deeply troubled and turned inward because she judges herself lacking. She cries and doesn’t eat. She cuts herself off from relationship with her spouse because she can only focus on her own perceived inadequacies. The text says nothing about her working to feed the hungry, or clothe the naked, or care for the ill. Hannah is singularly obsessed with her own issues and seems both unwilling and unable to turn outward, to engage in a healthy relationship with her spouse, to praise the God who loves her.

Sadly, Hannah cannot see herself as God already sees her. Perfect. It is only after she gives birth to Samuel that Hannah considers herself whole. Hannah needed to forgive herself for not being the same as other women. And Hannah needed to feel forgiven. Only then could she focus on the world beyond her womb. Thank God the day came when she was able to embrace that forgiveness.

Hannah sings, “I rejoice in my victory, my heart exults in the Lord.” Her heart is overflowing with love. She dedicates the life of her son, Samuel, to do God’s work. Why? Because real love is sacrificial.

It is not wrong to try to be better. It is not wrong to work on self-improvement. And it is not wrong to experience depression or feelings of inadequacy. All of those things are part of the human experience.

But surely God is looking at us and saying, “You can’t become perfect on your own. Through Christ’s sacrificial love you are forgiven. You are made perfect. Believe it! Now get out there and do some good! That’s the real source of happiness I’m offering to you.”

In her prayer, Hannah says the Lord raises up the needy. Needy as in lacking. Perhaps the needy is someone who needs the confidence to believe in herself. Perhaps the needy is someone who needs more strength to accept himself as he was created. The Lord raises up the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

That sounds like an invitation to a royal wedding. Where everything is running right on time. And the room is overflowing with sacrificial love.

Accept the invitation.

Amen.