**Genesis 1:1-5**

**Acts 19:1-7**

**Mark 1:4-11**

Actress Tina Fey is very busy right now with movies, TV, endorsement deals, and other creative endeavors. She got her big break as a comedy writer on “Saturday Night Live,” eventually becoming head writer. It’s fairly well known that many comics come from unhappy childhoods – they say that’s where they get their humor – but that’s not the case for Tina who had a happy home life, well-loved by her mom and dad.

She tells the story about how very early on they came to visit her at work when she had just started to write for SNL. As they were leaving, her mom came over to her, cupped Tina’s face in her hands, and said: “We are so proud of you.” A co-worker standing by, after the parents were gone, said: “I don’t even know what to do with that.”

Many children never have a parent express – whether in words, looks, or hugs – “You are my dear child,” let alone “I am pleased with you.” We hear those words this morning being said of Jesus. As he was coming up from the waters of baptism a voice from heaven said, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Even those parents who think this in their hearts are often too tongue-tied or embarrassed to say it to their kids. How sad. It really isn’t that hard. In fact, it gets easier once you’ve done it once or twice. But I get it. Moms and dads are doing so much work to train their kids – civilize them, if you will – that correcting them or scolding them is what predominates.

Theologian N.T. Wright notes that the whole Christian Gospel could be summed up like this: God says to us what God said to Jesus on the day of his Baptism. “You are my Beloved. I am pleased with you.”[[1]](#footnote-1) God is saying to us, right now, what we might not have heard from mom and dad growing up.

It is wonderful to think that God is pleased with us. It is one of the most wonderful foundations to a happy, deeply fulfilling life. But there’s another part to that foundation. It is being pleased with ourselves. Actually, it’s easier to believe that God delights in me than it is to be delighted with myself.

Perhaps we feel we’re being sinfully proud or disgustingly vain when we take delight in who we are and what we do. I don’t think that’s true, as long as we don’t overstate the case. It takes supremely modest courage to admit being good at something. “Thank you, I am a good violinist.” “Yes, I am so grateful that I can pick up languages quickly.”

Beyond neglecting to note the worthy aspects of ourselves, we tend to beat ourselves up a good bit. That’s because we see ourselves from the inside out. We know only too well exactly what is unacceptable in us. Often, we do not disappoint anyone but ourselves.

This chronic disappointment is toxic to good mental health. It is toxic to a happy life. It is also, of course, grist for the self-improvement mill. That’s what New Year’s Resolutions are for: a good, solid dose of self-improvement. Give up junk food. Go to the gym more often. Write more thank you notes. Don’t make impulse purchases. We all have our own list of what we need to work on.

And while we need that – the self-coaching and self-challenge – we need to be wary of the drive for perfection. If loving and accepting ourselves is based on how good we are; how well we perform; how much better we are than the next person: then we are flirting with perfection. It is a cruel master who is always out of reach.

Here’s a great saying to defeat the *perfection obsession*: “Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly.” I just learned that recently and it blew a fuse. Because that’s not what our parents taught us. It’s not what we teach our kids. What we teach them and tell ourselves relentlessly is that anything worth doing is worth doing well.

The woman who gave me this new slant had an important decision to make and little time to make it. She is a local pastor and was invited on short notice to join other local faith leaders at the office of one of our Congressional representatives. They were being given the chance to present their views – from a moral and religious perspective – on immigration.

She had never been to a Congressman’s office before; never been asked to lobby for a cause before; had never really wanted to do either of those things! That and the fact she was completely unprepared to speak knowingly about the issue – which is very complex – gave her more than enough reason to say no. But the issue was important to her, and she knew her presence was important to those who invited her, even if she couldn’t do a brilliant job. Even if she couldn’t be perfect. So she went.

It was worth doing in any fashion – well or poorly – *rather than not doing at all*. “Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly.” This new saying is beginning to free me from the tyranny of perfection. Some things are just so worth doing even if I am not perfectly prepared, or have all the answers figured out, or know what to expect.

Another way to deflate *perfection obsession* lands squarely in the spiritual life. It is: “If you want to do it alone, God will let you.” In other words, if God isn’t invited to the party, God stays home. When we don’t invite the Holy Spirit into our lives and our activities, we are effectively closed off from God. And God will let us do it all alone.

This speaks to another kind of tyranny: the tyranny of the urgent. The closer a deadline looms, the more we tend to rely strictly on ourselves. “If this is going to get done, it’s up to me,” we say. Or: “It’s up to us.” We can get so wrapped up in ourselves that we forget about God. And “if you want to do it alone, God will let you.”

A good place to start with New Year’s Resolutions and the desire for self-improvement is with God. Self-improvement doesn’t have to be a solo job. Invite the Holy One into your projects. Pursue things that matter even if it means doing something poorly. Because in the meantime, God is well pleased with us, just as God is well pleased with Jesus.

1. N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone,* Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. Quoted in Synthesis, a weekly sermons-help publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)