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Perfect is an Idol

Romans 10:8b-13 (*Paul paraphrases Deuteronomy:*)

The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in the Lord will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who ask for help. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Because I am raising two strong women, I avidly and eagerly read the website *A Mighty Girl*. A month or so ago, they featured the work of Katty Kay and Claire Shipman about girls and confidence. They surveyed 1300 girls between the ages of 8 and 18 and their parents. They found that "confidence levels are evenly matched for boys and girls until the age of 12. But between the ages of 8 and 14, girls' confidence levels" drop "by 30 percent." Among the factors that contribute to this drop is the cultural value of perfectionism. Because girls are afraid to fail, they are unwilling to take risks - to try even if it means they fall short. Girls and women aren't the only ones absorbing—and harmed by—cultural messages around perfection. Even when we know that perfection is an unattainable goal, we aim for it as if our lives depend on it, as if the only achievement of value, the only life worth living, the only love worth having is being perfect. Perfectionism is an idol. Idols can never save our lives.

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells about being invited to speak at a church in Alabama. She asked, "What do you want me to talk about?" And the "wise old priest" as she called her host, said, "Come tell us what is saving your life now." And Taylor says, "It was as if he had swept his arm across a dusty table and brushed all the formal china to the ground. I did not have to try to say correct things that were true for everyone. I did not have to use theological language that conformed to the historical teachings of the church. All I had to do was figure out what my life depended on. All I had to do was figure out how I stayed as close to that reality as I could, and then find some way to talk about it that helped my listeners figure out those same things for themselves. "What is saving *your* life now?"

Ash Wednesday is our *momento mori*. Our reminder that we will die. That the things we strive for in this life will come to an end; that change and decay are givens. But the purpose of remembering we will die is not to become weighed down with sorrow and existential dread. We remember our deaths so we can discern what is saving our lives. The ashes you receive today are like watercolor paints, darkly applied over wax crayon so that what was invisible emerges. There is a reason the ashes are placed right here, because that is where, at your baptism, the pastor placed a cross saying, "You are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." Every day, but especially today, we remember that, in baptism, we came face-to-face with our own deaths. We died to sin—and die every day—so that—every day—we rise with Christ. We can be honest about the state of our lives and our world—so far from perfect. We can be honest about the idols we spend our lives on, which will never save us.

And so, Beloved, what *is* saving your life right now? We are surrounded by death: COVID, the war in Ukraine, the loss of loved ones, jobs, marriages, our failures and foibles, endless discouragement. Perfect isn't the plan. Perfect hasn't saved us yet. What God is doing in your life is much bigger than that. Hear St. Paul's words: "We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

Amen.