Child

A famous economist\* made an interesting statement recently. "There isn't a single person in the world who can make a pencil," he said. The wood may have come from a forest in Washington, the graphite from a mine in South America, the eraser from a Malaysian rubber plantation. "Thousands of people," he concluded, "cooperate to make one pencil." That's fascinating to me. All those people to make this one little pencil.

I read about the giant Sequoias out in California--some of the largest trees in the world-- and found out that they have tiny roots that lie near the top of the soil. How in the world do they stand up so tall, I wondered, with those tiny roots so near the surface? Someone explained that they intertwine their roots with other Sequoias nearby. They help keep each other up. And I realized that this is one of the great secrets of life.

It is one of the great secrets of this church. We need one another. We lean on one another sometimes and when we work together we accomplish more than any of us could ever accomplish working on our own. We call that cooperation don't we? Cooperation is important at school, on the playground, in our families and all sorts of places. But most of all, it is what the church of Jesus Christ is all about. We belong to Him, but we also belong to one another.

Adult

Sometimes age and experience force us to reevaluate long held beliefs about the world and the way life works. As idealistic youths in Sunday school and CYO, for instance, my friends and I vexed and perplexed our ultra-orthodox pastor by arguing against the doctrine of original sin. We were convinced that people were innately and instinctively good. And then we grew up and were "mugged by reality": stung by the selfishness that lies hard by the heart of each and every mortal being, including ourselves. Some among us once believed in some form of elemental fairness and justice in this life. And then we saw virtuous people suffer great hardship and heartache, while others who lived only for themselves prospered and flourished. Questioning and doubting St Thomas Aquinas saw as necessary to come to faith

Part of growing up is shedding ideas and notions that fit us no better than toddlers' clothes would fit us now. "Older and wiser" is the phrase that comes to mind. But sometimes, age and experience reinforce long held views. I have, for example, long believed that the Christian faith is by definition countercultural. What I mean is this: Many of the central tenets and themes of the Christian faith run counter to the prevailing beliefs and values of the society in which we live. A few examples: Ours is a culture that values material abundance and prosperity; as we have in the Protestant churches those who preach the prosperity gospel, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor." Our culture denies death and avoids suffering; the Christian faith unromantically confronts death, teaches that suffering holds redemptive power, and sees the suffering and death of one man as the gate to life for all people. Our culture makes heroes of rugged individualists; baptism gathers God's family into community. Indeed, the God we worship -- one God in three persons -- St. Augustine described as a "community of love."

Our culture warns against mixing religion and politics; the God of the Bible is highly political, and nowhere is the political manifesto of that God more clearly articulated than in the Sermon on the Mount, a portion of which forms today's Gospel reading.

The themes of that sermon are highly countercultural. They ran counter to the beliefs and practices of first century Israel and Rome, and they run counter to the beliefs and practices of the twenty first century America.

From an itinerant rabbi whom faith acclaims as God's only Son comes an astonishing reversal of human values and mortal ways of going about the business of life. But one glance at the morning news is all it takes to see that the great reversals Jesus proclaims are not very widely in evidence among those who name the name of Jesus: Russians and Ukrainians -- many of them Christians -- murder each other in a protracted and bloody war whose root causes few of us comprehend, and even fewer of us care about.

In our land, where Christians still comprise a plurality if not a majority, there is a growing resentment not only of anti-poverty programs, the effectiveness of which is certainly open to reasonable debate, but more dangerously, a resentment of poor people themselves. And giving to organizations and efforts to fight hunger -- many communities of faith -- is dramatically down, despite increased need and -- for many who could respond -- increased income.

It is well known that Mohandas Gandhi was a great admirer of the Sermon on the Mount. A confused reporter once asked him, "If you like the Sermon on the Mount, then what do you think about Christianity?" Gandhi replied, "I think it would be wonderful. Is it was practiced" Gandhi's reply is at once both comical and a stinging indictment of Jesus' followers.

Our Lord's sermon describes an old way (an eye for an eye, for example, and a tooth for a tooth) and then commends a new and better way (turn the other cheek; do not resist an evildoer.) Such countercultural preaching typifies the mission and ministry of our Lord. Recall some other of his statements: "The first shall be last and the last first." That's countercultural!

"Whoever would be great among you must be your servant. And whoever would be first among you must be slave of all." That's countercultural!

"Those who would save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake and the gospel's sake will save them." That's countercultural!

"Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." That's countercultural!

God's way of being with us runs counter to our expectations of who God is and how God ought to act. God comes as a baby, cradled in a feed trough; God dies on a cross, convicted like a common criminal. The countercultural mystery of the gospel is that that coming and that cross are more powerful than any regime, any power or principality in the world; more powerful than any sloth, apathy or lovelessness in our hearts and souls, for that coming and that cross simply are the power of God's perfect love.

When we hear the stark and startling demand Jesus makes in the closing verse of today's text, "Be perfect," we do well to remember that it is precisely God's perfect love and not our moral and spiritual striving that has the power to perfect us. God's perfect love emboldens and sustains us to swim against the currents of our culture when those currents flow counter to the perfect will of the holy and righteous God. When we hear the demand of perfection and shudder at the impossibility of fulfilling it, we do well to remember that the God who says "Be perfect" is the same God who said "Let there be light" ... and there was light! This God brings about his holy and perfect will by calling into being that which did not previously exist: light in darkness, order out of chaos, countercultural followers of Jesus from those whose lives were once indistinguishable from those of the surrounding culture.

People who hear Jesus' sermon and hearken to it find themselves living countercultural lives, by the grace of God. For when people learn to turn cheeks, surrender cloaks, go second miles and love their enemies, they demonstrate that they are living by the values of God's coming kingdom rather than by the values of the present age.

Those who place their trust in the God whose perfect will Jesus' sermon proclaims find themselves no longer consumed by the love of power, but perfected by the power of love. And in late twentieth century America, my friends, that sort of lifestyle is definitely countercultural.