

Pied Beauty

Tim House, First Church Boston, 10/12/2008

In her wonderful book *Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson talks about life as a composition.

"...the individual effort to compose a life, framed by birth and death and carefully pieced together from disparate elements, becomes a statement on the unity of living. These works of art, still incomplete, are parables in process, the living metaphors with which we describe the world."

"The unity of living", she says, "pieced together from disparate elements." The way Harlequin or the Pied Piper of Hamelin pieced together disparate shreds and patches of fabric to create their costumes. Motley is a study in impurity; and yet the ingenuity and spirit that go into creating it give it its own kind of beauty. Pied Beauty.

I want to talk a little about multiplicity, this morning. And contrast. And inconsistency. Imperfection. Ambiguity. Irregularity. Impurity. Because I think we're often tempted to be a little ashamed of this aspect of our lives. This "*reality*" of our lives.

About a year ago, I spent two full days going through the career assessment process that all aspiring UU ministers are required to go through. While it *is* a career assessment, in some ways that's a euphemism for "personality evaluation." After filling out mountains of paperwork – Myers/ Briggs, Firo "B", - God knows *how* many tests there were – hours of work - I ended up sitting in a little chair, in a little room, in a little building in Dedham. Just me, my entire life story, a psychologist, and every single one of my "*spots*." My mother used to use the expression "Here I am, spots and all," and I'm going to let that be my word for imperfections and impurities this morning. "Spots." And I was, for those two days, up to my armpits in my own "spots." All the bad choices I had made, the failures I had experienced, the hurts I had inflicted and received. All of it.

"Motley" is my middle name. It isn't like I didn't already know that I was a bundle of imperfections, but it's a little overwhelming when you have to look at all of them at once. I

clearly have work to do – as I think most of us do – to make a beautiful whole out of all my patches. But, the psychologist reassured me there was nothing wrong with having "patches." I'd be okay, she said – **spots and all.**

It is still hard to admit to so much imperfection. Why is that? And I don't think I'm alone in this. Somewhere along the line I think many of us got the mistaken message that ambiguity or imperfection meant there was something wrong with us. That purity was the way to go. Get rid of those freckles, those blemishes, those wrinkles, those scars, those curls, those "spots."

Well, I don't want to seem snipity, but the truth is I blame a lot of it on Plato. He had this notion of the "ideal" – some perfect something we ought to strive for. Some standard of perfection that we ought to measure ourselves against.

I'll be honest, as a theatre person it's always been hard to like Plato. He detested the theatre. Thought it ought to be outlawed. It was a threat to his ideal state. He said it encouraged – and this is a quote - "behavior in large part belonging to women and therefore inappropriate to a ruler or any male citizen." Doesn't that get your hackles up? See, I think women have always been able to deal with imperfection better than men have, and Plato just couldn't take the truth. Anyway, he called the theatre a "wild zone... where inappropriate actions might be represented and volatile emotions aroused." In other words, theatre was bad because it didn't represent the ideal. It wasn't pure. It looked too much like life.

I think it was comedy that really got his goat. Comedy's about imperfect people making all kinds of mistakes, trying to work with their flaws and limitations so they can get along in the world. And we laugh because we recognize that behavior. Why do we recognize it? Because we *are* it. We're drawn to these goofball characters in comedies because we see them as reflections of ourselves. While Plato's *ideal* essence sits smugly - all by itself - up on a pedestal somewhere - comedy celebrates *community* - imperfect as it may be – and takes *joy* in it. At the end of a comedy, somebody always gets married and the whole town comes to the party. Everyone. All the characters that had been fighting with one another throughout the play, put that aside and party. They dance. They sing. They enjoy *themselves, and each other.* "Spots and all."

Well, Plato was appalled. But, Plato was a snob. He had a problem with spots.

I'm sure I'm not being completely fair to Plato. But, you know what? Here's another thing. The *fathers* of the Christian religion— and they *were* all men - took a lot from Plato as they were putting the religion together. And whether we like it or not, Christianity has had a lot to do with the shape of our lives in this culture. A lot of it not so great. My guess is, if they'd taken less from Plato, and a little bit more from Jesus, western history probably would have looked different.

a lot more parties...

and a lot less crusades.

Jesus accepted impurities. He gravitated towards them. He didn't have any problem with "spots."

Neither did the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins. Here's his poem Pied Beauty, written in 1877:

GLORY be to God for dappled things—
 For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;

And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.

Hopkins wrote in the Victorian period, and he took a lot of heat for his non-conformity. His wild and wonderful language is way over the top for staid Victorian sensibilities. In a society that “valued uniformity, efficiency, and standardization,” his poems fell way short of the

standards for purity. This poem was - in a way - a protest *against* that idolization of purity – of uniformity. Hopkins didn't see uniformity in creation. But he did see “*unity*” in it. A motley kind of unity. The unity of *his* god's creation was to be found in the beauty that is born of its infinite variety. Unity in diversity. Beauty in diversity. Life in diversity! Listen to his language!

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

Hopkins took *Joy* in life. “Spots and all.”

Well, what about us? Do we see beauty in Life's “spots?”

I think we know in our hearts that our imperfections are not something we need to be ashamed of. But I wonder if we listen to our hearts as closely as we ought to. *Nobody's* perfect. We are not "uniform, efficient, standardized" beings. We are “Dappled” beings! Wouldn't you rather be a "dappled" being, than a "standardized" beings? We are “fickle, freckled.” We know that! Why is it so hard to accept?

I don't know about you, but I struggle with what to do about my own spots all the time. Should I hide them? Or let them show? Should I try to get rid of them? Or try to work with them? Ignore them? Deny them? Punish myself because of them?

Should I bring *just* my faith and humility to church and leave my doubts and pride at home? Or should I “let beliefs, doubts, shame, pride, humility, and the inescapability of self sit side by side in mutual and self-respect?”

I say let them "sit side by side. I say ‘come as you *are*.’” Let the spots show. Because it's in our *contrasts*, our variety, our complexity - that our true beauty lies.

True beauty – I mean, beauty that looks *true* to us – is always Pied Beauty. We know that! Up here! Why is it sometimes so hard to accept in here?

But, we really need to work on it. Because if we can't see the wonder of our own imperfect, impure, “fickle-freckled” beauty, we are going to have a really hard time seeing it in others – our family, friends and fellow parishioners. I think it's often in trying to mask our own

imperfections that we become more easily critical of the imperfections of others. In her book *To Pray and to Love*, Roberta Bondi says that perfectionism “prevents us from being able to **truly turn our love to other people.**” *Prevents us from being able to truly turn our love to other people.*

That's not what we want, is it? That's not going to help us to be who we want to be. Not as individuals or as a community.

I have to tell a funny story on one of my Great Grandmothers. She used to keep a list of all the things she thought were wrong with all of her friends. She was afraid if she didn't write them down she'd forget them. She was such a hospitable woman, and this little habit seems so uncharacteristic of her.

But, I wanted to share it because what I'm proposing here is that we *not* keep that kind of list. Not about ourselves and not about our fellow human beings. We've all got "spots." Let's just give in to the idea, and instead of dwelling too much on the imperfections *themselves*, let's focus on how we *work* with them. Instead of trying to flatten those sometimes difficult but often *transformative* contours of our lives, let's celebrate how creatively we can weave them into the fabric of our lives as a whole. Let's not strive for “uniformity, efficiency, and standardization.” Let's not strive for purity as human beings. And not as congregations either. Let's pull the camera back for a wider shot, and see all the difficult inconsistencies, the troubling ambiguities, the frustrating non-successes in their relationship to the *whole* life of the congregation. Because I am convinced there is beauty to be found there.

One last story: About ten years ago I was a new member of a congregation, and I agreed to be a member of the search committee for a new minister. There was another guy who was fairly new to the church, and he and I got very frustrated in the first few meetings. Some people wanted to talk about how they did things the *last* time they hired a new minister. Some wanted to make sure that the newcomers understood what was and was not acceptable in a minister for this church. Some wanted to talk about church finances, or the RE program, or how sad it was that so much had changed in the congregation from the old days. Well, the other new guy and I thought *we* knew all about how a meeting ought to be run, and we wanted everyone to get back on the agenda and let's get something done here. Right! We wanted efficiency! After two meetings, or maybe three, everyone in the room had sized up everyone else, and labeled them as this or that "type of person."

One of our senior members – bless her heart – Jean Biggs, said, in an off-hand sort of way, "Why don't we meet at my house next week." So, we gathered in her sitting room, she offered us all some tea. And she said, "instead of getting right into the search material, let's just take a moment to go around and tell everyone a little bit about ourselves." Well, by the end of the night we were no longer a committee. We were a community. Our differences didn't go *away*. But, they were no longer the driving force in our how we saw one another. We had begun to see one another as *whole* people, and not as "types." And, as a group, what *had* been a collection of disparate, disconnected feelings and memories and fears and opinions, was beginning to come together in a new form. When we began to see our differences *in relationship* to one another, those disconnected pieces started to take on a kind of wholeness. In *relationship*, "all things counter, original, spare, and strange" found unity.

Now, I'm not talking about "tolerance" here. Tolerating one another would have been simply agreeing to let our differences exist – bristling - in their own separate corners of the room. It was really about engagement. It was about entering into relationship with one another's differences. Trying to see how *their* beliefs and feelings had come to be woven into the fabric of their lives. Not acquiescing to beliefs or opinions we couldn't agree with, but not being afraid to try and understand them either.

Our committee – like our congregation as a whole – was far from "pure." But it had *beauty* in its impurity. A "motley" kind of beauty. A beauty of shreds and patches.

In the end, it's not just tolerating, but engaging our imperfections and impurities that make us whole. Both as people and as communities. That's *how* we *get* the beliefs and the doubts to sit together. And it's in that place of sitting together that we can carve meaning out of our lives.

It is in our *willingness* to wear our spots with integrity and a sense of humor that gives *other* people permission to do the same. And if *enough* people can do it *together*, you have the makings of a truly healthy and beautiful community. A community of pied beauty.

The gifts we develop as loving human beings and nurturing congregations will grow out of how we choose to deal with our "spots."

Because our ability to be *compassionate* grows out of how we choose to deal with our "spots."

Compassion doesn't come out of perfectionism. It comes out of an understanding of wholeness.

Wholeness is about relationship; *how* the ambiguities coexist. *How* they "sit side by side."

Wholeness is about integration; the *integrity* of contrasts:

Life in its wholeness is "dappled." Its beauty is "**pied**."

So, in our lives - our individual lives *and* our congregational lives - let's be *proud* to offer each other **and** the world our "Pied Beauty."

And, let's be ever grateful for its presence in others.

May it be so. Amen.