

Sermon- Stephen Kendrick
February 3, 2008
A Perfectly Good Sermon

Many of you know that I plan my sermons long in advance and I did not know that my sermon on being perfect, perfectionism, would come on this remarkable Sunday when we of Boston fulfill our quest for perfection. I want to thank Bill Belichick for all the theological lessons he has given to me through the years. He is a warm and cozy man and I appreciate him. (Note: that night the Patriots did not complete their “perfect season.”) (Note: That night, the Patriots did not complete their ‘Perfect Season.’) And last night when we were all dancing and I hope I am saying the Baringa correctly, oh well umm...I am not a dancer what can I say? But I was standing out in the narthex and the husband of a member of our congregation (if you pay me enough I’ll tell you who it is, because he got the joke from Pope Benedict.) Well, anyways he said, “Stephen, here is a wonderful joke.” So it turns out that Jesus is strolling through the city square and he sees a woman who is accused of adultery being dragged into the middle circled by the howling mob all holding large stones. And they are ready to stone this woman to death. Of course, you know this story well. Jesus strides next to the woman, takes out his hand, stops the crowd and says, ‘Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.’ And in the back a little old lady toddles out with a huge boulder and just slams it down on the poor woman. And Jesus says, “Oh, Mom, not again.” Actually there is a variant to this joke where a thunderbolt comes down and crisps the poor woman in adultery. And Jesus looks up and says, “Thanks, Dad.”

But you know this whole question about being perfect really dogs religious life. It’s a genuine problem. We’ve maybe even been one of those people for whom the desire to be right and to be good and to be righteous and to be perfect is a quest, sometimes an anguish. We’ve all known such people like this. It’s hard to escape it especially if you’ve grown up in a religious household, because it comes into the Scriptures very early on. Genesis 17:1 “I am the Almighty God. Walk before me and be thou perfect.” That’s a tough walk to walk isn’t it?

From Deuteronomy “Describe your greatness unto our God. He is the rock and his work is perfect.” If you are to worship this God, like the creation, you too must find your work perfect. And I don’t disagree with Jesus very often. I find Jesus to be one of those great spiritual teachers with whom I don’t argue very often but when I encountered this verse as a young man, I had an instinctive argument with Jesus. From Matthew 5:48, “Be therefore perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”

Now if you are a literalist, you’ve been given a very tough task. You are human. You are imbued, it is said, with original sin -- and yet you are asked to be perfect. That’s a real paradox, isn’t it? It’s an uncomfortable place to be. It’s a very rocky road and I sometimes wonder where that road leads us. Sometimes towards a perfectionism where, through our own efforts, our own qualities, our own energies, somehow we will find god-like perfection in this life. And I can’t think for a worse recipe for a truly spiritual existence.

Once the comedian W.C. Fields was reading the Bible. A friend came in knowing just how agnostic Fields was and said, “What are you doing? What are you reading the

Bible for?” And he said “Looking for loopholes.” I am not standing here this morning looking for loopholes. I think this is a genuine spiritual issue. And I don’t want you leaving this morning and going into coffee hour and saying, “Well, I attended a Unitarian Universalist service and he told me I don’t have to be perfect, so I’ve got it made.” Sometimes people struggle somehow to be stronger than they are, better than they are. I think those people are often not happy. When you have an inner need to project something of this perfection, which is divine, you can be tough on yourself -- but more often these folks tend to be very tough on their children, their families, their spouses, their friends. It can cause astonishing unhappiness.

The pursuit of perfection is rarely noted or talked about. And there is a simple reason for it: the pursuit of perfection after all is simply responding to the need to be good. And who can argue with that? Haven’t you always been told from the pulpit, from your mother, “Be good. Be good.” There is nothing wrong with that, but what happens when we take it too far? Didn’t in the Old Testament God speak to Cain, a very imperfect soul, “Sin crouches at the door and thou shalt rule over it.” If that’s addressed to Cain, what is addressed to you? That phrase “thou shalt” is a Hebrew phrase *timshal* meaning “thou shall” or “thou may.” It is a very strong injunction. It is your path. It is your duty. It is yours to achieve.

My teacher in this is Forrest Church, who in his book *The Seven Deadly Virtues* talks about things that we all commonly believe in as virtues. And what happens when they are taken too far? What happens they become greater than God itself? When they become an idol? If, for example, we all think it’s great to be patriotic but what happens if you put patriotism as an idol above the true values of your nation? You get the old saying that patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. And what happens if you take this pursuit of being good into an idol? Forrest says. “Whether it be for riches or for thinness, for fitness or knowledge or fame the desire for perfection tends to shut out other people. And it shuts out pleasures one by one. It is an addiction like cocaine ever more deadly in proportion to its purity.” That’s a pretty unbelievable quote. “Every more deadly in proportion to its purity.”

Some of the most difficult and dangerous people we will ever have to love and care for in this life are people who are hot in pursuit of being so good. And not only do they want perfection for themselves, they want it for you and for everybody. And when we forget our shadow side (and I am going to be talking about our shadow side in a couple weeks from now on the 17th), when we forget our natural propensity for being imperfect, we don’t stand in the light. What we do is we pretend we are the light that other people should walk by. The task of spirituality is to walk by a common light, never to be sucked into or seduced by somehow this notion that somehow we ourselves are the righteous ones. That’s not our task. That’s not the invitation. That’s not the path of spirituality, and it never was, but it is deeply seductive.

You know, when we are told to be perfect that we are also told about the doctrine of original sin that we are all born with it. Unitarians don’t necessarily talk about original sin. We talk about original blessing but there is no question that we do accept that human beings are born into this world, deeply, imperfectly human. We don’t have all energy. We don’t have all time. We don’t have all knowledge. We cannot be the deepest, richest repository of love and compassion. We are human. We have a short time on this earth

and our energies and our vision are limited. So you do the best you can do. And where does that lead us?

Well, this would not be a “perfectly good sermon” if I just left you there. There is in fact a turn here that is very important, which I find very liberating. But I know this: we cannot be perfect. We cannot be miniature little gods. One is what I talked about, this innate limitation in being human. We stand and exist and operate in world that does not allow us to be perfect because the world itself is threaded through with contingency and capricious decisions and unknowingness. You know the ancients used to say when they laid out their maps what would happen beyond the edge of what is known, and they would write, “Here be dragons.” There are many dragons because our knowledge is imperfect. The world itself does not give you the option of being right all the time. Once I heard a minister from downtown Hartford come and speak to a group that was working for abortion rights. And it was an anguished sermon because he said, “My daughter has had to face tough decisions because she was able to be told before the birth of her children that severity of their birth defects.” And he said, “I am here tonight because of the decisions she made. I am here tonight to tell you that life is usually not about having to make a decision between what is right and what is wrong. Life is usually about having to make a choice with limited information, knowing that there is no right or wrong. Sometimes some decisions press in upon us sadly but truthfully as the lesser of two evils and that’s just the truth of the world we are born into.” Perfection is not our path because we are not God.

And I am not even convinced that God may be perfect in this world of contingency and indecision but that’s not where we are left and thank goodness for that because you remember that verse from Genesis? “I am the almighty God. Walk before me and be thou perfect.” Interestingly enough when God says this to Abraham, a decidedly imperfect soul, the word in the Hebrew is *tamin*. T-A-M-I-N. The Revised Standard translates it as “blameless.” It would appear on the surface that what we are being told at the very beginning of the scriptural tradition is that we can somehow walk before God always doing the right thing and never sinning. That it’s a possibility but it’s not a good translation, thank God. The same word can be translated as “whole-hearted.” Hear the difference. Walk before me and be thou wholehearted. It may also be translated as to walk with integrity. To walk before me and have integrity. It may also be translated “as to be whole.” To walk before me and to be made whole.

We are imperfect but there is a path that leads not to perfection but to a life of integrity to be the person that you were meant to be. To be whole. To be healed. To find resources and energies and a reservoir of something in you that you did not know. To tap into it and therefore out of this you may be compassionate, you may be loving, you will not be perfect. You will have to make decisions that often do not allow you to always make the right choice but you may be whole. You may try as best you can to walk with integrity, which is to say to be real, to be authentic, to be human, to be you. Truly you. That’s why this is a perfectly good sermon. Leonard Cohen has a great line in one of his late songs. He says, “Everything is made to be broken. Everything is cracked and that’s so that the light can get in.” Chinese potters deliberately put a crack into every glaze because it is not right that one pot should be perfect. All need to have the mark of the maker who was human.

I end today with words from Thomas Jefferson, the decidedly imperfect Unitarian. He said, "None of us, not one is perfect, and were we to love none who had imperfections, this world would be a desert." We are not asked to walk through this world alone righteous and holy with the illusion and seduction of perfection. We are not asked to climb a ladder of perfection to God. We are not asked to be God or to pretend to powers which are not ours. We are asked to walk through this world and make sure it is a desert watered with our tears and our hopes, our friendships, and, yes, even our very imperfect decisions.

Lincoln once said, "God must have loved the common person because he made so many of them." God must love imperfect people as well. The world is full of us. And thank goodness. Amen.