

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
Don't Sacrifice the Good for the Perfect
April 24, 2011

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

Opening Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able in our opening hymn No. 1059 and hymn of the month “May Your Life be as a Song”

Announcements

John Pepper

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, please pick up one of our application forms also located on the table and put it in the offering plate or look it over and turn it in when you feel ready.

Next week I'll be back and we will remember and honor the people of the Holocaust since May 1st is Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Our special collection this month is for ...

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Today is potluck Sunday, so please plan to stay if you can.

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

Opening Words

John Pepper

We pause in reverence before the wonder of life, the wonder of this moment, the wonder of being together, so close yet so apart, each hidden in a secret chamber, each listening, each trying to speak, yet none fully understanding, none fully understood.

We pause in reverence before all intangible things that eyes see not, nor ears can detect, that hands can never touch, that space cannot hold, and time cannot measure.

Fling wide the windows, O my soul!

The bright beams of morning are warm.

Rejoice Together, p12, Sophia Lyon Fahs

Hymn

John Pepper

Please join me standing as you are able singing hymn No. 266 “Now the Green Blade Riseth.”

Joys and Concerns

John Pepper

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

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I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

Offertory Statement

Offertory Music

Story for All Ages – The Parable of the Starfish

Once upon a time there was a philosopher who would walk along the beach every morning thinking about how to help the world.

One day as he was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a figure moving back and forth, rhythmically dancing to the day.

This gave him great pleasure, so he began to walk faster to catch up. As he got closer, he saw that it was a young woman and the young woman wasn't dancing, but instead she was reaching down to the shore, picking up something and very gently throwing it into the ocean.

When he got closer he called out, 'Good morning! What are you doing?'

The young woman looked up and replied with simple joy, 'Throwing starfish in the ocean.'

The man looked puzzled and said: 'I guess I should have asked, why are you throwing starfish in the ocean?'

'The sun is up and the tide is going out. And if I don't throw them in they'll die.'

'But, don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it. You can't possibly make a difference!' said the man.

The young woman listened politely. She then bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea past the breaking waves and said with a smile...

'... but I made a difference to that one!'

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Responsive Reading No. 657 “It Matters What We Believe” also by Sophia Lyon Fahs

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged.

Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.

Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children's days with fears of unknown calamities.

Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.

Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies.

Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.

Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction.

Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.

Some beliefs weaken a person's selfhood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness.

Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth.

Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.

Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.

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Prayer

John Pepper

Please join me now in a time of quiet reflection. Close your eyes, look out the window, center yourself in whatever way feels right for you. (Pause)

I am wondrously wrought: partly shaped by my biology, partly shaped by my culture, and partly self-shaped.

I am so wonderfully fashioned that the workings of my self amaze and confuse me. I know I have the power to choose among many paths, yet most of the time I am on automatic pilot, acting out of little-examined assumptions, values, rituals, myths, appetites, and impulses.

I can meet life in many ways: I can be tough-minded; I can be tender-hearted.

I can move between activity and quietness.

I can express my uniqueness and individuality, and I can forget myself in commitment to family and community.

I can judge, I can bear witness to the good and evil around me, and I can forgive.

I can analyze, theologize, figure the world out, and I can listen to the still small voice of conscience, intuition, the Holy Spirit.

All these ways of meeting life, and more, are part of the potential that is me. But I am afraid to move very far or very fast from the ways that have become comfortable.

I seek the self-knowledge that may illuminate new possibilities in life, and I seek the courage to try them.

Most of all I pray for wholeness, for a life in which my many ways of living can be connected and filled with the meaning of holy Creation.

Rejoice Together, p99, Robert R. Walsh

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Sermon – *Don't Sacrifice the Good for the Perfect*

Several years ago there was a severe flooding event in Houston, one of many we've had. Afterwards I remember hearing someone say, it just wasn't right. We should be able to prevent these floods. We should build bigger drainage canals and ditches that would control these terrible events. What this person didn't say, but which was implied, at least to me, was that we should be able to perfectly prevent these types of disasters.

In fact we could build bigger and deeper drainage ditches. We could dislocate thousands of people in the process whose homes would be in the path of the drainage ditches. We could tear up our roads and our medians to build bigger and more expansive storm drainage. And we could build huge pumping stations to transport water from one area to another. We could spend billions and billions of dollars in all of these efforts.

We could do all of this but what would we have gained? Would we absolutely and perfectly assure that similar events never happen? I sincerely doubt it. But more importantly, in the process what would we have sacrificed for the delusion of a perfectly flood free world?

Let's change our focus now, rather drastically.

What is the perfect cake? There are literally hundreds of different cakes and probably each one is someone's favorite.

What about the perfect vacation? Mine would not be somewhere cold but yours might.

What about the perfect symphony? If you love classical music one might come to mind immediately but if you can't stand classical music, none would qualify.

Perfect is sometimes strictly a matter of preference.

What about the perfect child? Yes children can be difficult, but at the same time if they are your children, in some ways they are still perfect – and especially when they are newborn babies.

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On the other hand some parents try to create the perfect child. They try to ensure that their kids go to only the best schools, are proficient in sports and music, and act perfectly at all times.

Our culture sometimes seems obsessed with perfection. But many things that are perfect, or that are deemed to be perfect, come with a cost. The recent movie “Black Swan” focused on a young woman who was technically perfect in ballet but she lacked the right emotions and no amount of practice would help.

She ended up with some severe form of psychosis and began to abuse herself. I actually didn't watch the movie. I heard an in-depth interview on NPR and realized it wouldn't be a movie I could enjoy.

Although “Black Swan” was just a movie, there have been many real life examples ranging from models who die from anorexia trying to achieve a perfectly thin body to men who die from steroid abuse attempting to build the perfect physique.

Achieving perfection or what we define as perfection, often takes a terrible toll on the ones pursuing it.

My fear is that we individually or collectively as a society, all too often sacrifice what might be absolutely acceptable or simply good, for what we label as perfect. And when this happens, it is often tragic.

How did we get here? Well to be perfectly honest, pun intended, I don't know. I don't know why we create these unrealistic expectations for ourselves and others.

I do however; have a few guesses and naturally most of them are theological in nature.

And Easter seems like the perfect time of year – there's that word again – to tackle the issue simply because much of what I'll call Easter doctrine or theology, revolves around Christianity's belief in Jesus' perfectly divine nature.

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Unfortunately, when Christianity made Jesus God and the perfect sacrifice, that theology quickly overshadowed and continues to overshadow the Gospel or Good News that the man Jesus preached.

Thus the Good News was sacrificed when Jesus was made the perfect sacrifice.

Jesus, in my opinion, never really preached a theology of perfection. What he preached was much more nuanced than that. For instance, in Matthew Jesus repeatedly performed healings on the Sabbath and the Pharisees attacked Jesus for violating the Sabbath.

For Jesus, in every case it was more important to heal the sick than it was to keep some arbitrary rule of expected earthly perfection. Jesus gave them this analogy in Matthew chapter 12 verses 11 thru 12 where he said to the Pharisees,

“Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

Obviously Jesus was more concerned with doing good rather than perfectly obeying some Sabbath ritual. Jesus was simply being responsible or mature and I believe that is what he expects of his followers.

So what happened? Where did things go wrong? Here is my best guess. In another place also in Matthew, Jesus shares these words with us. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

But what did Jesus mean, or possibly mean, when he said “perfect”?

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According to one interpretation I found, in that verse the word translated “perfect” is the Greek word “TELEIOS.” In the Greek a person or a thing is perfect if that person or thing fully realizes the purpose for which that person or thing was made. William Barclay writes: “It is the whole teaching of the Bible that we only realize our (personhood) by becoming Godlike. This one thing which makes us like God is the love which never ceases to care for (all people), no matter what (people) do to it. We realize our (personhood), we enter upon Christian perfection, when we learn to forgive as God forgives and to love as God loves.”

The Greek word “TELEIOS” also means mature. It is a dynamic word filled with vigor and vitality – real life. For the true Christian, becoming teleios – perfect – is a process of growth.¹

In Luke we find a slightly different version of the same story found in Matthew and here the author says “be merciful as your father in heaven is merciful!”

So, in this one word “perfect,” we actually have many different meanings, including being merciful, being mature, and fully realizing a purpose through the love which is God.

Down through the centuries I believe people have used that one verse in the Bible as a guide in how to be in this life. If they understood and related to “perfection” as being mature, merciful, and loving, their approaches to life were also mature, merciful, and loving.

If they understood and related to “perfection” as something without fault or error in any capacity, then their approaches to life were unrealistic and often harmful.

Sadly, I believe many of the most prominent theologians took this latter approach to Godly perfection.

¹ www.ChristianHealthForums.com

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For instance, just a few centuries later, instead of focusing on mercy, maturity, or love, Augustine focused on Sin. He promoted a theology where all are sinful and where sin is inherited and there is nothing we can do about it. This particular theology denies a merciful or loving god described by Jesus and Augustine's assertion that we are all inherently sinful took hold and the loving and merciful God was sacrificed.

Several more centuries passed and Luther entered the picture and he attempted to be the "perfect" Christian. He tried to always say and do and feel and believe the right things and he found himself constantly in prayer asking for forgiveness because he always failed, at least in his mind. He never achieved the "perfection" he believed God demands. After many years in this state of "imperfection" Luther finally gave up and declared salvation is through faith alone and one's actions are irrelevant. Only through faith is one saved.

Here Luther is an extremist, he is all or nothing. Where is the maturity in that approach? Instead there is only unrealistic expectation and no room for middle ground. Luther's theology also took hold.

Since we can't be perfect, being good is not enough and only faith, a perfect faith, is acceptable for salvation. And now all that is required is the mere belief in Jesus, and his teachings about doing good are marginalized in favor of this much easier approach to life. Luther sacrificed the Good News for perfect faith.

Not long after Luther, Calvin rose to prominence.

Calvin claimed, "Original sin ... may be defined as a hereditary corruption and depravity of our nature, extending to all the parts of the soul ... Because our weakness cannot reach his height, any description which we receive of [God] must be lowered to our capacity in order to be intelligible ... We thus see that the impurity of parents is transmitted to their children, so that all, without exception, are originally depraved."²

² *Out of the Flames*, Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone, p93

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One of the first Unitarians, Michael Servetus, a contemporary of Calvin responded. “In his eleventh letter, Servetus attacked Calvin’s concept of original sin. “All that men do you say is done in sin and is mixed with the dregs that stink before God and merit nothing but eternal death. In this, you blaspheme.

Stripping us of all possible goodness, you do violence to the teaching of Christ and his apostles, who ascribe to us the power of being perfect: ‘Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect.’”³

Servetus argued on behalf of goodness, mercy, and even a loving God. Calvin responded by having Servetus burned at the stake.

If one didn’t live up to Calvin’s expectations or if you defied Calvin, he simply had you imprisoned or killed.

How tragic and utterly opposite to the Good News, the love of God that Jesus preached and proclaimed. Calvin knew no mercy and love seems to have been an irrelevant concept. Calvin sacrificed all the Good News for his own perfect doctrine of man’s utter depravity.

Today Easter theologies revolve around doctrines promoted by Augustine, Calvin and Luther – original sin, the total depravity of man, and blind faith.

Jesus became the perfect sacrifice to save us from our perfectly sinful nature and Christianity sacrificed the Good News of Jesus for the perfect Christ of theologians.

But the UUs who came before us did not accept these teachings and neither do we. Jesus lived and his message of love and mercy live on in spite of his death.

The Good News didn’t die on the cross. It is resurrected whenever anyone follows the teachings of Jesus whether they knew Jesus or not. And his teachings were the same as other Masters who came before and who came after him.

³ Ibid., 156

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Jesus taught us to take care of the stranger in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus taught us to let go of the past in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God is right here, right now.

Jesus taught us to forgive not just once, but always.

And Jesus taught us not only to love God, but to love one another.

These teachings and many others were the Good News and we don't have to sacrifice them for something unobtainable, which we label as perfection.

Easter is a time of rebirth and a time of remembrance.

Just as the Earth gives itself another opportunity each year for renewal, so too can we whenever, we fail or believe we have fallen short of our own or other's expectations. We can start again with new purpose and new dedication to the good we know we can do.

The Good News reminds us that the good that we do is its own reward and that good means something to the recipient. Just like the child in the parable of the starfish, we can't save all the starfish, but it means something to the ones we do save.

Please, don't sacrifice the good for the perfect. You will lose far more than you gain.

Namaste!

Sermon Response

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Flower Communion

The Flower Communion ceremony is one of our sacred rituals. It is not a magical or mystical ceremony and it does not confer anything out of the ordinary upon any one of us. It is sacred simply because we are all sacred to each other. That expectation, that we value each other and the uniqueness that each of us bring to the relationship, is at the heart of true Fellowship.

The Flower communion service was created by Norbert Capek who lived from 1870 to 1942. He founded the Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia. He introduced this special service to that church on June 4, 1923. For some time he had felt the need for some symbolic ritual that would bind people more closely together. The format had to be one that would not alienate any who had forsaken other religious traditions. The traditional Christian communion service with bread and wine was unacceptable to the members of his congregation because of their strong reaction against the Catholic faith. So he turned to the native beauty of their countryside for elements of a communion which would be genuine to them. This simple service was the result.

It was such a success that it was held yearly just before the summer recess of the church.

The flower communion was brought to the United States in 1940 and introduced to the members of our Cambridge, Massachusetts, church by Dr. Capek's wife, Maja V. Capek. The Czech-born Maja had met Norbert Capek in New York City while he was studying for his Ph.D., and it was at her urging that Norbert left the Baptist ministry and turned to Unitarianism. The Capeks returned to Czechoslovakia in 1921 and established the dynamic liberal church in Prague; Maja Capek was ordained in 1926.

Communion celebrations in most churches are conducted by the priests or ministers, who give communion to the church members and the ministers typically assume all control and responsibility.

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But we are not typical and we can make Communion something that truly works for us. We UUs here at Thoreau Woods are lay led and each member is in communion with every other member and thus we are all responsible for each other. We also gladly welcome and extend that same communion of Fellowship to any and all visitors.

Today, in the spirit of our common responsibility to this Church and to each other, as you are able, and when I ask you, please stand and come to the center aisle in order to come forward in a single file.

As you reach the front of the line, you will be given a flower by the person in front of you, along with the hand of Fellowship and then you will walk forward and pick out another flower to give to the person directly behind you in line, also with the hand of Fellowship.

My hope is that this procession of giving and receiving will represent our own personal commitments and responsibilities, not only to give, but also to receive blessings from each other in this our Beloved Community. And I also hope you will recognize the diversity of the flowers in the service, which represent the diversity of people in our fellowship. We are all perfectly unique.

Please rise and come forward in a single line.

(Music during Flower Communion)

Consecration of the Flowers – No. 724

Now please read with me the Consecration of the Flowers, No. 724 written by Norman Capek, the author of our UU Flower Communion.

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these thy messengers of fellowship and love.

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May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection and devotion to thy holy will.

May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike.

May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts.

May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us, or sully our relationship, but may we realize that whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do thy work in this world.

Norbert F. Capek

Closing Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 270 "O Day of Light and Gladness" and remain standing for our Benediction.

Benediction

John Pepper

May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all whom we touch.

Amen and Namaste! Go in Peace and Love!

Rejoice Together, p123, Philip R. Giles

Extinguish the Chalice

Postlude