

## Why the Perfect is the Enemy of the Good

Rev. Edmund Robinson  
UU Meetinghouse in Chatham  
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Readings: Genesis 3: 8-24; *Foundations of Faith* by Abert Ziegler (Boston: Skinner House 1959) pp 40-41 (at end of text)

Last year I set out to write my personal credo, the things I hold most dear, and this maxim was first among them: the perfect is the enemy of the good. I live by this and I think I will die by it. Jacqueline has heard me say it so many times, I think she's going to start imposing[ a limit on how many times I can use it as we are discussing the major issues in our marriage, like where to stack the everyday china in the kitchen. I want to talk about this on a personal and philosophical level this morning, and then to relate it to what we are doing this year in this church.

As most of you know, this church would not exist today without the pioneering work of Peter Fleck. In the last week I have been delving into the writings of Peter Fleck in order to help guide the lecture series that will bear his name, and was delighted to find one of his sermons titled "The Blessings of Imperfection," published in the book of the same name. It is always good to have one's ideas affirmed by a person who garnered as much respect in the community as Peter Fleck.

Peter started his sermon on perfection with a story his mother used to tell him, about a gnome who lived under a tree. All his life, he wanted a green hunter's bag. He dreamed about it by night and by day. Then one day he finally got a green hunter's bag as a gift. You would think he would have been ecstatic, but his reaction was, "It's nice, but it's not a green as I imagined it."

Peter points out how common this reaction is:

"All of us, at times, have experienced the sadness or disappointment upon the fulfillment of an ardent wish. The stream was not quite as clear as we had imagined it, the sea not quite as blue, the mountains not quite as overpowering, the woods not quite as dark, our marriage not quite as happy, our children not quite as accomplished."

Perfection would not be such a nasty word if we didn't pursue it, some of us relentlessly. If it just sat there hermetically sealed in its fortress of solitude, we wouldn't have to worry about it. But we take out after it. We have to have it. In our more competitive moods we measure everything to see if it is up to snuff with our standards of excellence. Are we going out to eat Indian food? We have to research the matter to make sure the restaurant we choose is the best anywhere around, and then we have to make sure we get the best item on the menu. Perish the thought that we could have less than the very best dining experience. Are we buying a dress, making a cake, applying for college, choosing a mate? We don't settle for the merely good. We hold out for the best.

It is in our most intimate relationships that the quest for perfection is most destructive. We know in our minds that there is no such thing as the perfect mom, but that doesn't prevent us from feeling bad because we're not her. Some of us have expected our spouses to be the perfect husband or wife, and have engendered a lot of unhappiness where if we had been willing to settle for good we might have found that our present partner filled that bill handily.

Many of us not only seek perfection in the person we choose to marry, but insist on perfection in the wedding itself. This is one of the reasons why weddings are such stressful times, they are so laden with expectations. When Jacqueline and I got married in 2000, it was her first marriage and while she knew not to expect perfection from me, she was naturally concerned

that things should go well. In the month before the ceremony, however, our landlord decided to turn our home lives into chaos by replacing all the windows in our apartment and I got Bells Palsy which left me with a drooping mouth. Yet we had a fine wedding, a good one though far from a perfect one.

In the months after our wedding, most of the muscle tone in my face came back. But I have had to live with a smile that is a little lopsided, and I don't like to look at myself in pictures for that reason. Many people don't notice this imperfection in my appearance, but I do.

Sometimes, it needs to be said, perfection is possible; there are some areas of human endeavor in which it is possible to perform in such a way that the performance simply cannot be improved upon. When a pitcher pitches a no-hitter, that is by common agreement a perfect baseball game. But that is rare. Most often you will find the term perfect applied to something much more fuzzy, like art or the weather.

The perfect is the enemy of the good. The saying actually originates with Voltaire in the Eighteenth Century; that philosophical gentleman was one of the fathers of the Enlightenment, from which descends not only science, the Industrial Revolution and the American Republic, but also Unitarianism and Universalism in America. Voltaire rendered it in French as "le mieux est l'ennemi du bien," which would literally be translated as the best is the enemy of the good, but I think perfect fits better.

The task I set myself in the title of this sermon, though, was not to prove the truth of this maxim but to explain why it is true. And whenever we ask why, we have a choice of several levels we can answer. Many of you would think about this question on a practical level, others on an ethical level and still others on a psychological level.

One of the levels on which Peter Fleck approached it was the evolutionary, and I am always up for an evolutionary explanation. He has this arresting quote at the beginning of his sermon from a book by Lewis Thomas called *The Medusa and the Snail*:

"... we know a lot about DNA, but if our kind of mind had been confronted with the problem of designing a similar replicating molecule ... we'd never have succeeded. We would have made one fatal mistake: our molecule would have been perfect... The capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel of DNA. Without this special attribute, we would still be anaerobic bacteria and there would be no music."

What this is saying is that imperfection is built into our DNA, and it is what has made possible spontaneous variation, which is a key ingredient of evolution. If the DNA molecule did not blunder from time to time, if it always made perfect copies, we would all be clones of the early life forms and would not have evolved as we did.

Imperfection, in other words, is a key component of the natural world, and has given us all the riches, physical, mental, cultural, spiritual, that we experience around us.

But I want to approach the question this morning on a theological level.

The basic nub of what I have to say is this: our ideas about perfection spring from deep templates reflecting religious notions of salvation. In particular, we are influenced by the orthodox Christian notions of Original Sin so that, when we pursue perfection, we are actually trying to get back to the Garden of Eden. We may not believe any of the theological superstructure, but it is deeply ingrained in us because of our upbringing in Western culture.

Now the Garden of Eden story is in Genesis, in the Hebrew Bible, but the doctrine of Original Sin which was based on that story is a purely Christian invention – the Jews don't have anything like it. The Garden of Eden story is the second account of creation in Genesis. Peter Fleck in his sermon concentrates on the first account, the seven-day creation story, and he points out that when God completed his labors in each of the days, God saw that it was good, and not perfect. But in the second creation account, Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, and God tells Eve that child-bearing shall be painful, and says to Adam that farming the land will

be hard work. The final penalty is that

(Genesis 3: 19) In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

So God imposes four penalties for eating the apple: out of the garden, painful childbirth for women, hard labor for men, and death.

Now what does Christianity do with this story? Paul, in the fifteenth chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians, lays out an elaborate theory that sees Christ as the new Adam, and as in Adam all die, so even in Christ shall all be made alive. Christ, Paul tells us, has stood the Garden of Eden story on its head. Adam and Eve sinned and incurred the punishment of death on the whole human race, and now God gave his Son to atone for that and he will release us from the death penalty and lead us to everlasting life. This is the earliest text from which this basic idea comes.

Original sin implies that there is a state of perfection, but that humans have fallen away from it and need to get back to it. As Crosby Stills and Nash sang about Woodstock, we've got to get back to the Garden.

This is pervasive in our culture. Even the Jean Ritchie song I sang earlier has original sin woven into it, though it is subtle. What Jean Ritchie does is amalgamate the stewardship ethos which comes from the first creation story with the garden of Eden setting of the second, and comes up with a radical rewriting by which God allows humanity to stay in Eden if we keep Eden as Eden.

Universalism, on the other hand, tells us that all of us are saved already. It does away with the idea that Jesus' death atoned for the sins of humanity. Jesus' ministry was to bring people, all people, to the saving love of God.

So orthodoxy measures down from an original state of perfection. Universalism measures up from the state of nature. Look at how far we have come since we lived in trees and ate raw meat. Nothing in the Universalist picture of the world is perfect except God, and the progress of the race is upward towards the greater good.

If we believe, really believe that we are saved already, or, to put it into terms today's UUs speak, that we each have essential worth and dignity, that belief relieves us from the pressure to be perfect. We don't have to get back to the garden.

In this respect, there is a convergence between Universalist and Buddhist values. The Buddha taught that it is a basic delusion of life to think that you are incomplete. We all do it. We all say, I won't really be a person until I have such and such a degree, or until I marry Mr. Right or until I have laid up enough money for retirement or until I have a perfect figure or until my kid gets into the college of her choice. The Buddha says, you are all you need to be and you already have all you need. You are whole.

Orthodox Christianity is all about perfection. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is quoted, in the standard translations, as saying "be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48) But the Greek word translated as perfect, *teleoi*, actually means having reached its end or complete.

There is a lot of difference between being whole or complete and being perfect. Perfect means that it is the greatest thing that can be imagined, it has no flaws. Whole simply means that you have the sum of what it is, a whole loaf instead of half a loaf.

Another villain in the 2000- year old plot to make perfectionists unhappy is our old friend Plato. Peter Fleck points this out in his sermon. Plato taught that the ideal is more real than the real. The circle you can imagine, and that you can describe mathematically, is more real than any circle you can draw on a sheet of paper. Platonic ideas get melded with Christian ideas in the Gospel of John and a thousand years later in the thought of Aquinas and give us the notion of a God who is perfect and unattainable and humanity is a constant state of imperfection.

So why is the perfect the enemy of the good? Because the whole idea of the perfect sets

up in us a recipe for unhappiness, a yearning for something which by definition we can never attain, when we are already, in reality, saved, beloved of God, we are already complete, we are already all we need. So now you know.

But the next question is, why is Edmund preaching about this at this time? I have two purposes in mind. The first is the general purpose of helping all the perfectionists among us – and we’re all there at one time or another – take ourselves off the hook. Ease up, lighten up. Give yourself a break. Cut yourself some slack. Forgive yourself. Laugh at yourself. You already have won.

The second purpose is to encourage you to think of what expectations you have in the way of this new minister standing before you. We are each in a honeymoon phase, you and I. Many of you have told me that you are giving thanks that the church has landed a minister of my talents. I am giving thanks to have gotten a settlement with such great folks. It is common for congregations to have high expectations of their new ministers.

I recently read a fine sermon on expectations of ministers preached by John Nichols, who was once interim minister in Brewster, to the church in Framingham two years ago while they were in search. The UUA sets up a website to which ministers and search committees have access, and each side gets to post its own descriptive document and eventually to see the documents posted by others. John cruised through the website to see what sorts of ministers congregations said they wanted; here is what he found<sup>1</sup>:

“They want everything. They want a great preacher. They want a person of solid intellect, considerable passion and commensurate speaking ability. But this person must be comfortable speaking to and satisfying a congregation of humanists, pagans, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians.

“They want [a] dedicated and caring pastor, who also has solid administrative skills. They want a spiritual guide who will also understand fund raising and help them raise their annual budget but not by leaning too hard on people who are sensitive about money. They want a team builder who will be able to resolve staff conflicts by getting every staff member to agree and get along nearly all of the time.

“They want a harmonizer, a builder of community who is still able to lead in those new directions that will ‘grow’ the church, but not at the expense of any current member who need a great deal of the minister’s personal attention. They want a social activist who can represent the congregation to the community, but only on those issues around which everyone in the congregation agrees. They want someone who absolutely adores little children and teenagers and retired folks.”

It is a characteristic of religious liberals that we want it all. When confronted by an either/or, we instinctively try to convert it into a both/and. This is a good and praiseworthy habit, but sometimes it gets us into trouble.

Listen again to the wisdom of John Nichols:

“... you will never find a minister who will fit even fifty percent of that profile. God or Nature does not distribute all of those prime ministerial qualities equally to any one individual. The minister who moves smoothly through crowds and loves being constantly with people will probably not be the preacher who will bring fresh provocative ideas to the congregation. They’re just two different

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<sup>1</sup>“Your Next Minister: Some Things You Need to Know” sermon preached at First Parish Framingham, MA Nov. 12, 2006

personalities. They have different, almost opposite gifts, and those gifts do not reside together as strengths in any one individual.

“... [T]he idea of a complete [ministerial] package is an illusion. Everything we know about the development of personality reflects that having some qualities as strengths precludes having other qualities as strengths. Good ministers ... learn to maximize what they do well, compensate for what they do not do as well, and the congregation learns to fill in where the minister alone cannot meet every conceivable need. That’s why good ministers are successful. They have the help of the congregation.”

The bad news is you can’t get back to the Garden of Eden because there is no such place. We did not start from a state of perfection however much your Catholic or Lutheran or Episcopal childhood priest may have tried to convince you. You are not fallen. You are everything you need to be. As a church, you are small but you are vital and abuzz with enthusiasm. I am not perfection; you have already seen my limitations and you will undoubtedly see others in due time. I hope that you will feel comfortable pointing out when you think I am off the mark.

Here’s a thought I will leave you with. Maybe God herself is not perfect, maybe she’s evolving along with the rest of us. Try that one on for size.

My friends, each of us has much goodness, and we have room to grow in that goodness; we don’t need to worry about perfection.

Amen

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#### Readings :

Genesis 3: 8-24 8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ 10He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ 11He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ 12The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ 13Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate.’ 14The Lord God said to the serpent,

‘Because you have done this,  
cursed are you among all animals  
and among all wild creatures;  
upon your belly you shall go,  
and dust you shall eat  
all the days of your life.

15I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will strike your head,  
and you will strike his heel.’

16To the woman he said,  
‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children,  
yet your desire shall be for your husband,  
and he shall rule over you.’

17And to the man\* he said,  
‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,

and have eaten of the tree  
about which I commanded you,  
"You shall not eat of it",  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
18thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.  
19By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.'

20 The man named his wife Eve,\* because she was the mother of all who live. 21And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man\* and for his wife, and clothed them.

22 Then the Lord God said, `See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever'-  
23therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

*Foundations of Faith* by Rev. Albert Ziegler (Boston: Skinner House 1959) pp 40-41

If free will means anything significant, it must mean that somehow, to some degree, man has the ability to act without regard for influences on him, without regard to laws of the universe to which other parts are subject. As such, freedom is an evil too awful to contemplate. If, out of the freedom of his will, man has chosen to do wrong (and reason tells us that he has done and does do wrong), there is no force in heaven or earth that can move him from it. His case is hopeless. Even the religion which weeps over his plight is powerless to save him. What awful ailment seemed to us to call for such a noxious remedy? The problem of evil, the fact that he does not do as he "ought" to do; in short, the dilemma of man's imperfection. The whole structure fails when we realize that it provides a solution for a dilemma which does not exist. Imperfection exists, but it is not a dilemma. Orthodoxy supposed a completed universe, a perfect, finished creation, and so finds a problem in the existence of imperfection in it. Reason, and any healthy fate that illumines it, must know that creation is moving on, not running down; that the universe is in process; that life did not begin in perfection, but in the working out of a perfect purpose, is still moving from chaos into order. What is more natural, then, than that there is imperfection, in the universe and in man?