

VIBRANT IMPERFECTION

A Sermon by Barbara W. ten Hove
Paint Branch UU Church — Sunday, March 4, 2007

[Follows a choral anthem: “Jazz Blessing,” led by David Chapman, music director]

I love this Irish blessing put to jazz. It combines, in a lovely way, both realism and idealism. The one offering the blessing calls upon God to give the bless-ee important real things that make life better—good work, a bit of money, and friends to share both the blessings and burdens of life. But the bless-er also calls upon the spirit to do some impossible, idealistic things—like making the sun “always shine upon your window pane,” or a “rainbow always follow the rain,” or have all prayers always answered. Like so much in our human experience, this song blends the real and the ideal then flavors them both with hope and possibility.

When David and I were working together to choose music for this Sunday, I knew right away that this “Jazz Blessing” was perfect for my sermon today. I want to talk about humanism and the powerful religious gift it is to us. And to do this, I will draw on the work of Sharon Welch, a UU theologian who will soon be the Provost of Meadville/Lombard Theological School, the place where I received my Masters of Divinity in 1985 and where I hope to receive my Doctor of Ministry this spring.

The process of working for this latest degree has thrown me into the academic community in ways I haven’t been since I was in my 20s. Even when I was young, I was a good student but never a scholar. I have loved the work my seminary training prepared me for but I have never been one of those ministers who revel in theological arcana. (I’m not sure I can even pronounce that right!) But even with this attitude, I do recognize the important work that theologians do when they think deeply and write coherently about why religion, faith and theology matter. My job has always been to figure out a way to make their work come alive in the “ordinary” setting of congregational life.

Part of what drew me into Sharon Welch’s work was her emphasis on the ordinary. She is a great believer in the power of the human story to teach us about the Holy. She rejects a belief in the Divine as wholly “other,” far away and separate, and instead suggests that the divine emerges within the human community, the beloved community. She is, in essence, a religious humanist and her gifts to our faith stem, I believe, from her willingness to look honestly and without sentimentality at who we are as real people living in real places in real time.

Because of this attitude, Sharon Welch is able to see not only the extraordinary gifts we humans bring to the story of the world but also our incredible limitations, for she believes that humanity's "vibrant imperfection" is part and parcel of how we create a better world.

I fell completely for that phrase—"vibrant imperfection"—when I read Welch's essay in *A Language of Reverence*, an important little book of essays about theology put out by Meadville/Lombard a few years ago [edited by Dean Grodzins]. As someone who struggles daily with my own imperfections, I want to believe, as it was once said, that "there is more to me than my failures." And yet I realize how much mine make me who I am. We may be more than our failures and our imperfections, but surely they are as much a part of us as our gifts. How then can we live vibrantly, imperfections and all?

This has been a very challenging sermon for me to write. Preachers are often tempted to find a writer or a story or an idea then digest it in some fashion before regurgitating it anew in a sermon. That's what I tried to do all week. It actually reminded me of when I was a young student in seminary. In those days, over twenty years ago, I was regularly reading theologians and writing papers about them for my professors. I tried to appear knowledgeable but I admit that rarely did I ever feel confident enough to say what I really thought or to attempt to wrestle with an idea and let it take me into unexplored areas of my heart, mind or spirit.

I think this may be endemic to seminarians. The students I taught last month at Meadville/Lombard had some of the same fears. When I told them I really wanted to know what they thought of an idea or an author or a text, they seemed truly surprised. I felt the same way when I was in their shoes. But now, as an almost graduated doctoral student, I feel a freedom I never felt back then. So instead of the careful sermon on theology I tried to write earlier this week, here's the real sermon, the one from my heart.

I've wanted to preach about humanism for sometime but didn't realize that Sharon Welch's work was leading me in that direction until quite recently. Humanism is a theological position that I have struggled with my entire career. So much of what I saw as humanism among my seminary colleagues in the 1980s was of a sort that did not work for me. Humanism as I understood it was all about human endeavor, the "onward and upward" mythology of early 20th century Americans who believed that if we just studied hard enough we would learn the mysteries of the universe and make everything and everybody good little intellectuals who would stop war and poverty.

What I saw as a young seminarian was a world gone mad with violence and the poor still very much with us. I did not see how humanism could save the world, and when I was in my 20s I thought that was my job. I felt that we had to find something stronger and better to trust than human intellect.

But as I've aged, my view of humanism has changed. I now understand that humanism is far more than intellect and onward and upward forever. It is a theological position with enormous power that does not need to conflict with my understanding of the Holy. And so I find myself taking a second look at it. But I do so with a different lens, one I am only just beginning to understand.

Sharon Welch helps me, particularly her recognition that it is not only our gifts, but also our imperfections that lead us on a path to a better world. She rejects the idealistic "onward and upward forever" humanism of the 20th century as she challenges us to see the human story in all its fullness and to learn and grow from that knowledge. She, like many feminist theologians, believes that it is through *stories* that we shape our understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to create justice.

But she is clear that it is not simply the stories of greatness and success we must tell. We must also remember those who failed, those who made the wrong choices, those who chose evil over good. I think this is why Holocaust deniers are so dangerous. Unless the evil story can be told, the stories of sacrifice and blessing don't make sense.

It is through the human story, in all its vibrant imperfection, that we learn what is right and wrong. Thus it becomes essential to religious life that we tell human stories and learn from them.

Today is the last Sunday of Black History month. African-American history, in particular the Civil Rights era, is good to use as an example in exploring the vibrant imperfection of which Sharon Welch speaks. For many whites, particularly those of us with a liberal perspective, the Civil Rights era began in the 1950s when the combination of factors such as the post-war political and cultural climate, the advent of television, and the emergence of powerful leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks came together to create a movement that led to passage of the 1964 Civil Rights legislation and other positive changes for blacks in this country.

As significant as this story is for us to remember, it is only a small slice of the saga that is black history in America. What a lot of people forget is the incredible struggle and the decades of losses it took to get to a moment in time when segregation and Jim Crow could be effectively challenged. The century between Civil War and Civil Rights was a century of extraordinary pain for many African Americans and other oppressed people. As Unitarians and Universalists we love to look back at our history of support for abolition and civil rights and it is true that we have many to admire from the past.

But for every inspirational leader like Theodore Parker and Whitney Young there were dozens, maybe hundreds of our liberal religious ancestors who were racist and worse. A religion that glosses over the hugely imperfect ways of our forebears does no service to the few who did make the hard choices to do the right thing.

And it's also critical that we acknowledge that even those people who did extraordinary things for the good of humanity often did so out of their deeply flawed humanity. No one can deny the timelessness of Thomas Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." But today we do ourselves and our faith a huge disservice if we don't also acknowledge that Jefferson was an unrepentant slaveholder who truly believed that African Americans were less than human.

Knowing this about a Unitarian icon allows us to understand the challenges we face today to become anti-racist. The culture of freedom our American founders attempted to create was, from the very beginning, racist. Yet, it was also an incredible dream of democracy that outlasted them and has found continuing new life and new interpretations in our world today. The documents that created our nation, and the people who wrote them, are wonderful examples of vibrant imperfection.

One could argue that the Bible offers another opportunity for us to see vibrant imperfection at work. Even the most literal interpretation of the Christian scriptures can't help but show Jesus as an imperfect person. He gets angry, he gets tired, he even seriously doubts his faith. And yet those of us sitting here today cannot deny that his gifts were enormous as well. Would he have been the leader he became if he had been perfect? Some early Christians wanted to deny he was ever a real man and some Christians today will also overlook his humanness in favor of the Divinity they claim belongs solely to him.

But I would argue that it was because of his imperfect yet vibrant humanity that he was able to touch others so deeply. Jesus as the imperfect man is a far more interesting and compelling story than Jesus as perfection.

But vibrant imperfection is not only a concept that applies to big historical events or famous people. As individuals, we all, too, must come to terms with the limitations we are born with and the many mistakes we make. A wise teacher once taught me that mistakes are not the awful failures I had somehow been led to believe they were. Mistakes, she told me, are how we learn. If you never make a mistake, you may never learn and grow. In other words, it is often our very imperfection that leads us not in the wrong direction but in the right one.

When we look at the past to learn from our elders, it is tempting to focus only on their successes and forget the many ways they failed both in word and deed. But as one pair of theologians has written, “When we idealize the elders, we learn far less of what life has taught them or can teach us [than] if we learn from their strengths *and* their weaknesses” [Karen & Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, in *A Language of Reverence*, p. 54].

The 1985 statement that named our seven UU Principles also acknowledged that our UU “living tradition” draws from many sources, including this one: “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

Even as I have struggled to accept some elements of religious humanism, I find the caution against idolatry to be a critical one. I found in my earlier understanding of humanism a tendency to make an idol of “man”—to see in humanity the potential for perfection and in the human species the be-all-and-end-all of creation. Now I recognize that true religious humanism calls us to make an idol of neither God nor the human being, but rather challenges us to use the human story—the human *stories*—to help us understand what is really important and what really matters.

Sharon Welch challenges us to look with unblinking eyes on human imperfection. She reminds us that we must “have a full awareness that life does destroy many people; injustice destroys lives and makes people mad” [*A Language of Reverence*, p. 51]. Knowing this, we have choices. We can ignore injustice and pray that something outside us—whether God or human—will take care of it. Or we can give up in despair, thinking that our imperfections will surely doom any hope that things will change for the better.

Or we can live our vibrantly imperfect lives just as our ancestors and their ancestors and their ancestors have done. We can tell stories, we can make mistakes, we can fail, we can succeed, we can laugh, we can cry, we can act, we can hope. As Sharon Welch puts it, “We are not the first to suffer and fail, and we will not be the last. We are not the first to also embody a measure of justice and we will not be the last” [*A Language of Reverence*, p. 55]. We are a chapter in the story of creation, not the book. And so we do what we can, knowing that much of what we do will not be enough; that much of what we do we will do poorly or incompletely; that much of what we do may look like failure.

But here’s the wonderful part: Our failures do not define us. Our imperfections are not the final word. We are more than our mistakes. This is the gift of humanist theology. It does not teach that we are sinners from birth. It does not teach that we will be saved by faith. It does not teach that some outside force will determine our fate.

What it teaches is that each of us, in all our imperfection, is still important to the story of the world. That the choices we make do matter. Yes, we will make wrong choices for good reasons and stumble upon the right thing while headed toward the wrong. We cannot know the end of the story of the world. But we can live it. Vibrantly and fully.

I am not and will never be completely a humanist. Sharon Welch does not believe that there is a spirit working in creation that gradually points us in the direction of good, but I do. I cannot help but believe that there is more to life than the human story. But I can believe with her and other religious humanists that the human story is the best place to start to understand who we are and why we are here and what we are to do. We can learn from the mistakes of our ancestors. We can learn from stories of people much like us and people unlike us in almost every way. We can learn from elders and from children. We can learn from great success and abject failure.

And then we can take that learning and do our best in this imperfect, incredible world to meet love with love and respect one another. Sharon Welch teaches that respect is the most important thing we humans must learn. She is right.

And so we come to this place, a religious home that honors the human spirit and the human story in all its glory and struggle. Each of us is welcome here and I encourage you to become a part of the story of this place. For in loving and respectful community is, I believe, the hope for the world. So I invite you to join in the ongoing imperfect story of this congregation and bring your vibrant humanity to it, so that together we may face the challenges of life and do the work of justice making.

For, as the words to our [next] hymn remind us, when we share our stories and our questions and our feelings with each other; when we show each other compassion, acceptance and commitment, then we learn to care. Then we learn to give. Then we learn to love. This is humanism at its core. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Hymn #1012: *When I am Frightened*

Closing Words:

In this beloved community, may we embrace life, in all its vibrant imperfection.

May we give to one another the best of who we are.

May we offer one another solace and hope.

And may we bless the world with our love.

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