

How Good Do we Have to Be? Sermon for August 27, 2006

by The Reverend Lone Jensen

Before I get into this sermon full steam I have to tell you that this topic is not my idea. The credit goes to one of our members who left a question in the nicely decorated box on the back table labeled sermon suggestions. It said simply: *Why must we always compare ourselves to others? Why can't what we are, or do, be good enough?*

Now there is a really good question I thought. A good question for our age and for our American society with our bigger is better, must win, new and improved, faster and sexier, fame worshipping, super sized and competition obsessed society. Why is it so hard for us to be at peace with who we are? Why doesn't good enough seem to cut it? Are we super sizing everything to feed a heart and a soul that is really hungry for acceptance and for love? I tell you there isn't a burger big enough or a car shiny or fast enough to fill that empty place in our souls.

Harold Kushner writes: *Women starve themselves, wear uncomfortable clothes and shoes, and submit to surgery because they have been taught to hate their bodies as not good enough. Men work themselves to the point of collapse, drink too much, or pour out on others - women, gays, Jews, blacks, foreigners - the*

hatred they feel toward themselves because society has evaluated their earning power and branded them failures. Typically, women turn their anger on themselves; men either turn it on themselves or find a victim to blame. Shame and guilt teach them to feel disappointed in themselves and drive them to hate anyone who has it better than they do and to despise anyone who has it worse. And we wonder why people are so lonely and so angry, and why society is so fragmented.

Now that is a harsh picture I admit. But it has some truth in it. It echoes in my heart also, for none of us are immune to society's messages. Do you really believe you are good enough? Do you feel worthy and loved? Are you a blessing on this world?

I say and my faith, which is Unitarian Universalism, says clearly that you are worthy and valued and loved. Just by being born into this world, you are a blessing. This birthright is not something you have to earn. But do we, most of us, deep down really feel that way? Or have we bought the notion that somehow to be acceptable we must be better than, stronger than, faster than, richer than, smarter than, wiser than, more inspiring than, more educated than, more socially conscious than, well than most everyone else. Fill in the blanks for yourself. Yes, it is natural to want to be better at what you are doing and it is not that quest and passion for excellence I am talking about. Nor is it the joy of

creating, polishing and improving your craft and work.

It is the comparing I am talking about. It is the falling short of an impossible ideal and the envy, anger, stress and other such life denying emotions that follows the illusion of falling short. Kushner writes: *We hear criticism of something we have done, and translate it into a comment about what sort of person we are. We assume it is our worth as a person, not just our behavior that is being judged and found wanting.*

I read recently that at the finals of the National Spelling Bee, where the best school-age spellers in the country come to compete, the organizers have had to set up a "comfort room" where contestants can go to cry in private and vent their frustrations on a punching bag, to try to cope with the shame and sense of failure that come with having gotten one word wrong after having spelled hundreds of words correctly. I can believe that.

He is right. When did you last celebrate all you had done right? Take this act, this strange sacrament that I do most Sunday mornings. Here I come with my sermon, bearing gifts I hope will be received, my nuggets of wisdom or musings that I have dug out over the past week. Often I find in the bright morning light that the shiny jewels I saw the night before were really like the pebbles I found on the beach when I was a child. I gathered stones at the water's edge and each of them shone brightly, a precious jewel

bathed in salt water and sunshine. But once I took them home and put them in my secret treasure box they were just stones, dry and dull and lifeless. It took water to bring them back. Here it is your presence, this gathered beloved community, that is the water and sunshine that brings the words back to life and makes of this oratory exercise a sacrament. Oh, I know the struggle well, between high expectations and “good enough” reality.

Can we tolerate failure? Can we admit our weaknesses? *When Charles Darwin shocked the nineteenth century world with his theory that human beings and apes had a common ancestry, someone asked him whether there was still anything unique about the human being. Darwin answered, "Man is the only animal that blushes." That is, human beings are the only creatures capable of recognizing the gap between what they are and what they can be expected to be, and of being embarrassed by that gap. (From Kushner)*

Do you believe that you are good enough? It is at the core a theological issue and a religious question. It is the difference between Original Blessing and Original Sin. Are we born inherently sinful or blessed? Is the world cursed or blessed? Mathew Fox was excommunicated at least in part for reviving the ancient idea of original blessing. He wrote: *It is telling that the Hebrew word for blessing, berakah, is closely related to the word*

for create, bara. This suggests that a creation is necessarily a blessing, is wrapped up as a blessing. The very word for blessing in Hebrew also means "pool," and with the change of one vowel, to berekah, the word means a reservoir where camels kneel as a resting place. The images of a pool and a reservoir created by a desert people tell us all we need to know about the desirability behind a theology of blessing. Abraham Heschel wrote: Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.

Now you may not accept either religious world view but you cannot grow up in the Western World with out original sin embedded in your mind. Poor Eve has been blamed for centuries for our fall from grace. Apples and snakes have been given a bad name. But in fact the first time the word " sin" appears in the Bible, it refers not to Adam and Eve but to Cain and Abel.

Now for those of you who are a bit fuzzy on Bible stories let me remind you. Adam and Eve were thrown out of Paradise and began to have children. They had two sons Cain and Abel. Cain worked the land and Abel was a shepherd. One day, each brought an offering to God. Cain brought fruits and grain and Abel the firstborn of his flocks. God in the story accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's. Why, well that is another story. I always thought that God's preference was a bit unfair, rather like a parent unjustly favoring one child over another. Or maybe in this

story God was not a vegetarian and liked lamb better? Maybe the story was written by shepherds? Now since God's mind is hard to figure out the way acceptance by God was measured in ancient times by how the smoke from the sacrifice rose or did not rise toward the sky. So blame it on the wind.

Cain grew jealous. God warned him, "*Why are you distressed? If you do right, you will be uplifted. But if you do not do right, sin crouches at the door; its urge toward you, but you can be its master*" (Genesis 4:6-7). Cain as we know went on to kill his brother and when asked by God answered like an angry teenager: "*I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?*"

Now let us not get into an argument over whether God spoke to Cain or not. I believe it was his conscience warning him as to where his rage would lead him. He did not listen to his better self and maybe that was the sin.

When we feel at heart unworthy we need acceptance. We make idols of our own self image and defend any cracks in that façade. We also need others to be perfect for us. Some have called this the imposter syndrome. If only they knew what I am really like they would reject me. There is a story about a graduate student who was offered a position. This is what he said: *I'm afraid of accepting his offer. Professor X has been like a father to me, wise and funny and caring and genuinely interested in my career. I have*

this fantasy of growing up to be like him when I'm his age. I'm afraid that if I work closely with him for the next few years, I'll disappoint him and it would hurt me a lot to let him down that way. I'm afraid too that I'll learn some things about him that I don't want to know, and I'll be disappointed in him."

That I believe I can promise each of you. We will all at times disappoint each other. It takes enormous energy and effort to keep an illusion and it will not work. It is a lie. Two people in that kind of dance are like a painting by Rene Magritte where two lovers are passionately embracing each other with their faces covered entirely in veils. If you grew up with the notion that there is not enough love to go around then any love given to another is a loss to you. It is almost as if when someone else is loved, he or she is stealing that love from us. *Our primal fear is that our parents don't have enough love for us all, and someone else may be getting our share. Later in life, when we are passed over for a promotion, when our doctor or our minister gets our name wrong, when someone pushes ahead of us on line, we may respond with a disproportionate sense of hurt because the experience reawakens childhood feelings that our parents may love someone else more than they love us. (Again Kushner)*

And parents can become in our minds God, the Mother Church and even the Beloved Community.

Every week when I sit down to write my sermon a part of me try to avoid the encounter. My unruly mind can find all kinds of distractions. Coffee and chocolate, sudden urges to weed my garden, even in the heat, a phone call I should make, my kitchen floor is dirty and what about the bills? It is not really the work I mind and I rather love the creative process, the hunt for elusive words and images. But as a recovering perfectionist I do not want to find myself wanting. Like that professor the graduate student admired I want to be the perfect minister for you and if you see my flaws if I disappoint you well, I have failed you and that crazy taskmaster within me. Yet I know that this perfection is a lie, that honesty is the least you can expect of me and that is what makes the struggle so hard.

Why must we always compare ourselves to others? Why can't what we are, or do, be good enough?

It is enough. You are good enough. Not perfect but good enough. Anything less than that traps us in a hall of mirrors like Estelle in Jean Paul Sartre's play No Exit. She says:

I've six big mirrors in my bedroom. I can see them. But they don't see me. They're reflecting the carpet, the settee, the window. When I talked to people I always made sure there was one nearby in which I could see myself. I watched myself talking. And somehow it kept me alert, seeing myself as the others saw me.

This is the perfectionist's illusion. This is true idolatry. I say embrace instead reality and our messy, flawed and loving humanity. It is there that goodness must be found and for me where God lives among us. You are enough and you are good enough. You are not perfect. And though you may not know it all the time, and may not feel it all the time, you are loved.

And remember that just by being born you are a blessing.

Amen