

Shove Over!  
*A Sermon towards Blessed Imperfection*  
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Beacon UU Congregation  
January 10, 2021

During my Divinity School days (some years ago), I sat down for a friendly, informal lunch with a colleague named Tom. His sandwich came, as cafeteria sandwiches often do, with a small bag of those generic potato chips and a pickle. As we chatted, he ripped open the bag and lifted a potato chip to his lips. Then he stopped, examined the chip intently, and began to chuckle.

Naturally, a bit puzzled, I wanted to know: "What's so funny, Tom?" And then it all spilled out; the tale of one of the wackiest and most unintentionally profound moments in his ministry. Sometime the previous summer, he tells me, a wedding was being planned at his church and he was to officiate. (Through my marriage ministry, I know a lot about weddings and wedding snafus, so I was really game for his tale!)

The Mother of the Bride, a bit of a Martha Stewart type and a definite candidate for what we might call, "The Perfect Club," had every detail covered, from the amount of fresh air to filter through the windows to the color coordination of flowers to pew cushions. (I kid you not) She even wondered if Tom owned a stole that might better match the color scheme. Needless to say, she was driving everyone, including Tom, a bit loopy with her perfectionism.

The wedding day dawned, bright, clear and promising, the ceremony began without a hitch, and the Mother of the Bride settled triumphantly into her seat in the front pew. Then, during the vows, the back door of the sanctuary swung open, like a set of saloon doors, and through it stepped a man named Joe, dressed in a disheveled ensemble of clothing and wearing a snorkel mask.

He was known to the church and to Tom, since he lived in a nearby socialization center for folks who had been recently resettled into the community from a mental health facility. He was a harmless, if quirky fellow, who often stopped by the church to chat with Tom and to hustle some potato chips from the stash in the church kitchen.

Tom looked up, right in the middle of the "to have and to holds," as Joe started his march down the aisle, past bewildered guests, towards the front of the church. Tom kept on with the vows. Then Joe stopped at the front pew, gazed down through his snorkel mask at the startled Mother of the Bride and proclaimed, "Shove Over!" At first, she didn't respond, *couldn't* respond. She looked up at him horrified and then at her husband sitting to her right.

"Shove Over," Joe repeated. The look on the Mother of the Bride's face, Tom tells me, was a pungent mixture of astonishment, defiance, and pleading. But, she did finally "shove over" to make room for Joe. And the wedding proceeded; she dabbed her eyes with her husband's color-coordinated handkerchief as Joe sat serenely next to her in the pew enchanted by the beautiful bride (made ever-more dewy by his misty snorkel mask view).

Tom knew what Joe wanted, after all. Just *potato chips*. So, during the musical interlude, Tom relayed a message to that effect through a groomsman, who recruited a wedding guest to invite Joe into the kitchen for his usual snack. And it all ended well, at least from Tom's, and probably Joe's, perspective. The bride and groom handled it with good cheer, as well, I'm told, and they have a priceless wedding anecdote to tell for years to come. The MOTB? Well, I can't say with any certainty that she has recovered.

Most folks (and pre-marital couples) with whom I've shared this story over the years have gotten a good chuckle from it, as well as a "There but for the grace of God go I" moment of recognition. But one person didn't think it was funny in the least. In fact, she felt just awful for the beleaguered Mother of the Bride, and pronounced the wedding utterly *ruined*. Ironically, her own wedding at the Ocean View Inn in Gloucester many summers ago was harmlessly interrupted by the familiar calliope-like melody of an ice cream truck passing by us on the road between the Inn and the beach.

The driver slowed down, smiled and waved and everyone, (including the bride and groom and me, the officiant) waved back. To this day, the bride is bitter about the ice cream truck interruption and seems perplexed by why so many of her guests (and yours truly) remember that moment as sweet, joyful, and touching. Maybe the Perfect Club has room for one more, eh?

My response to her was this: Whether the wedding was ruined or not, whether any moment in our lives is good or bad, a disaster or a triumph, depends quite a lot on our expectations. Do we expect a perfect world free of glitches and messiness; that everything will always work out as we planned; that reality will cooperate on cue; that a fault line runs under every living room but ours?

And if so, are we destined to sit stunned and devastated whenever the unexpected and the messy galumphs down the center aisle of our lives in a snorkel mask, looks us square in the eye, and demands that we "Shove Over?" Or, instead, might we find a way to shove over, and *endure*, on our own *and* with the help of our companions?

My wry colleague, the Rev. Dave Maynard, suggests wisely that, "Expectations are pre-meditated resentments." "Think about it," he writes, "Much of my growing up was based around expectations. My expectations were of recognition, money, love, Christmas presents, friendship, success, and exciting adventures. While I usually reconciled to reality, most often there would be a negative edge. Why could it not be the way I imagined? And so forth. The problem was not in the reality," he concludes, " -- it was in my expectations. Premeditated resentments!"

Perhaps, this explains the Mother of the Bride's reaction to Joe, as he stood there at the end of her pew, urging her to "Shove Over." Pre-meditated resentments! Despite Martha Stewart's (and others) success in selling the prospect of achievable perfection, such an outcome doesn't hold up so well in the harsh light of reality, and just leads to pre-meditated resentments. This is especially true as 2021 dawns and we've endured a most imperfect, off kilter 2020. Certainly, not what we expected, was it?

In my view, life, reality, the human condition are more like Rumi describes them in his poem: "This being human is a guest house," he muses, " every morning is a new arrival; a joy, a meanness, an unexpected visitor..." although he never explicitly mentions a snorkel mask! Life involves us humans who are by definition flawed (including ministers, I might add). That's why Perfect Clubs go out of business so quickly.

An acknowledgement of this important distinction between perfection and reality goes back to ancient times. Plato, for one, put forth the wise philosophy that only the *idea* of something is perfect, but that its realization, its expression in worldly terms is always a mere shadow of that perfection. We catch a glimpse of this Platonic ideal in the Creation Story from Genesis, too. After all, during the weeklong process of Creation, the God of Hebrew Scriptures inspects his daily endeavors and pronounces them "good;" not "perfect," mind you -- just "good!" An A-/B+ kind of effort with the imperfection built right in. Should the Mother of the Bride, should any of us, expect more from our *human* endeavors? Or from reality itself?

On this point, I agree with The Rev. Ken Sawyer, who has preached that "Mostly what we [should] have hopes of achieving, of being, of experiencing, of expecting of others, is something *good enough* to bring a smile, calm an anguish, kindle a hope, foster justice or lighten despair. Good enough and realistic enough to satisfy the soul-not-over expectant." I love that idea and his wording— a *soul not over-expectant*. That would be a soul who considers how our blessedly imperfect lives are part of Creation, and as such, are "good" and "good enough," but also annoyingly messy and unpredictably chaotic. Are you nodding now in recognition?

The upside is that we are endowed with the amazing human capacity to be vibrant, resilient and creative in the face of that messiness. Our human predicament is a little like a lost cat ad in England that has made the rounds on the web and reads: "Lost cat -- old, mangy, one-eyed, limped, neutered, crippled. Answers to the name, "Lucky."

Life is like that. At times, it will rain on our parades (or our weddings) but most of the bad stuff (and COVID especially, we hope) is survivable, and life is more a blessing than a curse. Some occurrences are grossly unfair, truly awful messes that leave a stubborn stain, and then again, some moments are truly splendid.

There is a fault line running under us, right here and right now, in this YouTube sanctuary. And from this virtual pulpit, I'm looking out at a congregation of people who, like myself, have felt their share of shifts and tremors in their utterly human, inevitably imperfect lives. And, who, in the process, have come to know the difference between real suffering and life's little irritations and setbacks.

I must admit that, in my younger years (especially in my 30's), I lacked that perspective and aspired to be a charter member of the Perfect Club. Yet, after experiencing a bunch of those genuinely breathtaking and humbling "Shove over" experiences, the kind that knock you to your knees, I've come to more easily accept that a human life is composed of good news and bad news, and that a perfect life is an oxymoron... and a boring one, to boot. Not to mention a form of self tyranny.

The great cosmic knee-slap is that research has shown us that perfectionism actually undermines performance, blunts creativity and flexibility, ramps up self-absorption, and limits us socially. Perfection truly is (in Voltaire's words) the enemy of the good. Making mistakes (and being okay with that) leads to innovation, self-acceptance, and greater happiness. Even so, in our achievement-focused society, "There is still an urge in many of us to get things just right. We want there to be no loose strands, no rough edges, no mistakes, no suffering. Sometimes we come pretty close to such perfection and have been surprised to feel our disappointment in the product. Something is missing, We've tamed the life out of it." (Clarke Wells)

To be sure, I would *never* stand up here and suggest that suffering is good for us. I don't believe that. However, I will suggest that if we can resist the urge to tame life's rougher edges as a soul over expectant, we can often move forward to affirm, as best we can, the incomplete and the imperfect. Indeed, the fault line keeps shifting, the uninvited visitors keep knocking on the door or storming down the center aisle of our lives, demanding that we "shove over" at the most

inopportune moments. Learning is struggling. This is tough time in which we need to be gentle with ourselves.

Living deliberately and deeply, as Thoreau puts it, and sucking all the marrow out of life, is messy. But precisely because of this tension and exertion, we learn. To avert the struggle is to doom the learning. When life barks, "Shove Over," we learn things about ourselves --about our adaptability, our tolerance, inner resilience, our maturity, sense of humor, integrity, and faith --for good or ill. In a way, we waste those "Shove over" moments if we gloss over, deny, avoid, rage against, or neglect their message.

In the end, it's a matter of attitude and a matter of faith, a decision to affirm, even when we've been shoved to the point of bruising, what of value, joy and sacredness still remains with us. To allow ourselves "to be consecrated to the unexpected," in the words of the Rev. John Nichols. To live in the layers, not the litter, and with a dynamic hope, come what may. It is a willingness to hear and to answer a simple and ultimately empowering question: this is your one blessedly imperfect life, messes, mistakes, and all; how will you live it? What will you do *with* it?

I think the answer is to look the visitor in the snorkel mask squarely in the eye, with as much resilience, grace, and honesty as we can muster, and then, to "shove over" and make room for whatever it is that sits down -- illness, divorce, loss, boredom, joy, regret, success, uncertainty, amazement, fear, loneliness, and wonder. Like Rumi advises, "Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture. ...Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."

However, while we're adjusting to that unexpected visitor whose taken up residence in the seat to our left, we mustn't neglect to look for lifelines and support in the pews to our right and all around us. "There is your strength," as the Rev. Robbie Walsh tells us, "The tender strands of love that bend and stretch and hold you in the web of life that is torn but always healing." As a faith community, we're imperfect people who have pledged to help one another make an imperfect world more human, more bearable, more gracious, and more real.

Often, "the best we can hope for in this permanently imperfect world is to increase the odds of something *human* happening." And, certainly, those odds are greatly increased when we band together. We are not the Perfect Club, and thank goodness for that. In fact, we're not a *club* at all; we're a *beloved community*. So, look within yourselves and then look around you.

Most likely, somewhere in this sanctuary, in your next Zoom meeting, at a virtual concert, there is someone who, when push comes to shove, would recognize their own imperfection and vulnerability in yours, and willingly go out to

the kitchen with *your* unexpected visitor for potato chips. So let's be sure to keep plenty on hand. And let's be sure to say, "Bless you."

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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