

Claire Feingold Thoryn  
May 11, 2014 Mother's Day  
Theme: Teachers  
Sermon: Good Enough

**Call to Worship:**

We gather in this place to strengthen our souls  
So that we may go out and strengthen the world.  
May we bring all that we are to this hour together  
Our imperfections, our impurities, our crooked hearts.  
On this day, may we give thanks  
for those who gave us life  
and for those who taught us how to live.

**First Reading:** Psalm 101 – from the Common Worship Psalter

I will sing of faithfulness and justice; •  
to you, O Lord, will I sing.  
Let me be wise in the way that is perfect: •  
when will you come to me?  
I will walk with purity of heart •  
within the walls of my house.  
I will not set before my eyes •  
a counsel that is evil.  
I abhor the deeds of unfaithfulness; •  
they shall not cling to me.  
A crooked heart shall depart from me; •  
I will not know a wicked person.  
One who slanders a neighbour in secret •  
I will quickly put to silence.  
Haughty eyes and an arrogant heart •  
I will not endure.  
My eyes are upon the faithful in the land, •  
that they may dwell with me.  
One who walks in the way that is perfect •  
shall be my servant.  
There shall not dwell in my house •  
one that practises deceit.  
One who utters falsehood •  
shall not continue in my sight.  
Morning by morning will I put to silence •  
all the wicked in the land,

To cut off from the city of the Lord •  
all those who practise evil.

**Second Reading:** “Perfection, Perfection” by Kilian McDonnell

*(“I will walk the way of perfection.” Psalm 101:2)*

I have had it with perfection.  
I have packed my bags,  
I am out of here.  
Gone.

As certain as rain  
will make you wet,  
perfection will do you  
in.

It droppeth not as dew  
upon the summer grass  
to give liberty and green  
joy.

Perfection straineth out  
the quality of mercy,  
withers rapture at its  
birth.

Before the battle is half begun,  
cold probity thinks  
it can't be won, concedes the  
war.

I've handed in my notice,  
given back my keys,  
signed my severance check, I  
quit.

Hints I could have taken:  
Even the perfect chiseled form of  
Michelangelo's radiant David  
squints,

the Venus de Milo  
has no arms,  
the Liberty Bell is  
cracked.

## Sermon: “Good Enough”

“I will walk the way of perfection.”

Our readings are point and counter-point: the goal of perfection, and the giving up on perfection.

I used these two readings for a study group session with a bunch of ministers, and after reading that Psalm, they all looked at me with this expression that was a combination of offended, and embarrassed for me. You’d think a bunch of ministers would have a more theological and spiritual response to a Psalm from the Bible than a general “Ew.” But that’s what it was.

This Psalm makes people feel judged. It just rubs people the wrong way. Not only does the psalmist say that he will be perfect, he says he will require that everyone around him to be perfect.

He won’t listen to gossip or slander or lies, or speak that way himself.  
He will not “endure” “haughty eyes and an arrogant heart” –a statement which actually sounds sorta haughty and arrogant.  
Even his servants have to be perfect.  
He will “walk in the way that is perfect.” No stumbling allowed!

There is something about this Psalm that feels like you have to wag your finger while you read it.

I think this Psalm is a good example of why some Unitarian Universalists might feel embarrassed to say they go to church, and more than that, to say that they actually love their church. Because out there in the world is this image of the “religious person” as judgey, haughty, finger-waggy; disdainful of all those imperfect, impure, crooked-hearted people out there.

We don’t want to get caught up in that stereotype, so we just avoid letting people know that side of ourselves. Which is too bad because it is actually a LOT of fun to break open people’s stereotypes.

For example, my husband Ben. People have a lot of ready-made opinions about what a minister’s spouse must be like. Prim and proper. Devout and pure. Good at making tea sandwiches. Things like that. That is why he tries to curse as much and as early as possible upon meeting someone new. To break the stereotype. The search committee can attest to that...

However! The more I read this Psalm, the more I think that the writer of this Psalm isn’t saying that he IS perfect. He is saying *he wants to be* perfect. He loves God, and he wants to be holy, and therefore he is striving to be a better person.

And wouldn't the world be a better place if we all, each of us, refused to listen to mean gossip and slander and lies?

Wouldn't it be a better place if we stopped sharing that kind of talk ourselves?

Wouldn't the world be a better place if we pushed ourselves to be less haughty and arrogant and tried to surround ourselves with kind, compassionate and just people?

Hint: Yes it would.

This psalm is the prayer of someone who KNOWS he is imperfect, impure, crooked-hearted. He knows it and he wants to do better:

O Lord,

Let me be wise in the way that is perfect:  
when will you come to me?

He is making promises to God, the kind of big sweeping promises that I think a lot of people make, if not to God then to ourselves or our loved ones. Sort of like New Year's Resolutions.

"I am going to be more patient...kinder...less gossipy...more truthful...more forgiving."  
The sort of goals we set for ourselves and then find ourselves breaking maybe an hour later. Or maybe that is just me.

And then the poet of our second reading gives up on perfection.

He has packed his bags,  
he is out of there.  
He's handed in his notice,  
given back his keys,  
signed his severance check, he  
quits.

What freedom there is in not trying for perfection. The lightness of step, the clarity of vision. Even the Liberty Bell is cracked.

Certainly Michaelangelo's David and the Venus de Milo are good enough, just as they are.

The topic of perfection and imperfection is ripe for Mother's Day. Mother's Day seems to inspire the most ooey-goey and sappy commercials out there, and they all describe a mother I am not sure I have ever met. There's the soft light, the voiceover, mother and child running through a field, every craft project ever posted to Pinterest. She's the perfect mother. But what about the "good enough mother"?

The concept of the “good enough mother” was first coined by a pediatrician and psychologist named D.W. Winnicott. He contrasted the “perfect” mother with the “good enough” mother, from the perspective of the baby.

So from a baby’s perspective, the perfect mother is one that instantly satisfies all the baby’s needs.

Hungry: instant milk.  
Cold: instant warmth.  
Sad: instant cuddles.  
And so on.

But the good enough mother: she lets the baby wait a bit. She teaches the child what it is like to experience frustration and desire. And out of this frustration, out of these unmet needs, the baby grows into an adult with the motivation and ability to take care of him or herself.

The good enough mother is still kind; patient; loving. She never shows her own anger or frustration. She *lovingly* allows the child to struggle, which ultimately teaches the child independence.

(Oh yeah, *that’s* what I was doing, sweetie...you’ll thank me later...)

The paradox is that in Winnicott’s model, the “good enough” mother is actually the “perfect” mother, because she is more perfectly preparing her child for the realities of adult life.

And of course, this imaginary good-enough-yet-perfect mother is also, it seems, not beating herself up over every decision. She’s acknowledging that life includes some pain, and it is better to learn how to deal with it in small doses  
—a late breakfast, a skinned knee—  
then it is to be confronted all at once with a harsh world that isn’t going to pick you up when you fall down.

Basically Winnicott was arguing about the pitfalls of “helicopter parenting” long before the phrase “helicopter parenting” was coined.

All people have been parented—for better or worse, terribly or good enough; and everyone has opinions about parenting. I approach parenting the same way I approach ministry, friendship, marriage, and all the rest of this imperfect, impure, crooked-hearted life.

Every day is a new day and every day I pray:

Today! I will sing of faithfulness and justice;  
Let me be wise, Lord,

Help me walk with purity of heart  
Help me, God, be good enough.

I can't do it alone. These hands are not enough. Even the Venus de Milo has no arms.

(I bet she gave terrible hugs. More like a lean.)

I think the writer of the Psalm is saying that too: saying, "God, I want to be perfect, pure, holy, I really do, but I can't, not without your help. And even with your help probably the best I can try for is good enough. So help me try, and try again, to live the way I should. I can't do this alone."

I don't think that God needs us to be perfect. I believe that we are loved just as we are, imperfect, impure, and crooked-hearted.

The best reflection of that love I have heard recently was written by my friend, Rev. Robin Bartlett, in a letter to her son Isaac, on the occasion of his baptism.

Isaac is her third child, and he is the younger brother of Robin's two daughters from her first marriage.<sup>1</sup> I'm going to read almost the whole letter, because it was really hard to find anything to cut out. This is what she wrote:

Dear beautiful baby boy Isaac,  
... I love you with all my heart. I never imagined you in my life, and now I can't imagine our life without you.

... You and your father came soon after the deepest sadness our family has experienced: a divorce and a new way of living. You came after a death of an old way of life. And you and your father are my proof that there is life on the other side of heartbreak, that Love conquers even death. You have helped us become whole and healed.

I pray that this feels like a gift to you more than it feels like an obligation or a burden. ... Your family isn't easy all the time, but it is real.

... I hope that you know that I love you the way God loves you: for all of who you are, and despite imperfection. Since I am not God, I will sometimes fail at loving you well.

I hope that you know that your family will try hard to keep you safe in our imperfect love nonetheless. I hope that we also challenge you to take risks that help you grow.

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<sup>1</sup> Full letter here: <http://uuacreligiouseducation.wordpress.com/2014/03/18/for-my-isaac-on-his-baptism-day/>

Isaac, today you are being welcomed into a community of faith with your baptism, into the Church Universal. This isn't always going to be easy, either. It will sometimes feel hard, because being a preacher's kid isn't easy all the time. And it will sometimes feel hard because the Church, just like the world, is full of people and people are not always easy all the time.

But I believe this faith, this way of life, is worthy of your attention and intention, or I wouldn't pass it on to you. I hope that you know that we are baptizing you today so that we might express our intentions to raise you well and in Love, with a lot of help from faithful people and from God who is Love.

I pray that this feels more like a gift to you than an obligation or a burden, though I'm sure it will sometimes feel like both. The Church isn't easy all the time but it is real.

And I hope that the Church will love you in the way God loves you: for all of who you are and despite imperfection. Because the Church is not God, they will fail sometimes at loving you well.

But I hope the Church feels like a safe place to nurture your spirit, and that it doesn't feel so safe that it won't challenge you to take risks that help you grow.

I hope that you might know yourself beloved. [...]

I hope you know that in my eyes, you are perfect just as you are, and in who you are becoming. That I don't care about your achievement in school, in sports, on standardized tests, in your ability to get into a good college or get a good high paying job. I just want you to be brave and kind. That's the only kind of achievement that matters in the end.

With all of my love as long as I live,

Mommy

Dear ones,

I hope that you might know yourself beloved.

I hope that you might know that it is your very imperfections,  
your stumbles and mistakes,  
your crooked and singing heart,

That make you perfect in my eyes.

Let us sing of faithfulness and justice!

Let us take our crooked hearts  
and raise them up in praise and thanks  
for all that is good enough.

*Amen.*