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“The Relief of Being Average”

Romans 7:7 – 25 (from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*)
Mark 10:17 – 18

Text: Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”
. . . Mark 10:18

This morning’s sermon, “The Relief of Being Average,” may well be one that some of you perceive as heretical. After all most of us have been raised to “do better”, to strive for excellence, and to live by the motto, “anything worth doing is worth doing well.”

This morning you will hear almost the opposite. And yet, I feel that what this sermon will be in accordance with Scripture and, perhaps as importantly, needs to be said in this community. It can be summed up in one sentence: “It is O K to be average.”

I want to say that the sermon is one continually grows out of years of struggle. And, I realize that in preaching this sermon I will be open to the criticism that if we are relieved at “just” being average then we will continually settle for mediocrity. So given those reservations, I would like to say that this sermon is meant to be a corrective to a life-style that my pastoral-sensitivity finds to have been destructive to the lives of many – including, at times, my own.

You see, too often we labor under the illusion that everything we do has to be the best that can be done. But the hidden message that accompanies such an attitude is that you have to constantly try your hardest, because with hard work you can always do better. But as we learn in goal-setting or long-range planning, words like “more” and “better” can become almost satanic for they can never be achieved. It is a set-up for certain failure. After all, how can we be satisfied when no matter how well we have done something, the goal of doing it “better” is still before us? “More” and “better” can never be.

In my ministerial and counseling career I have talked with too many people who have “failed” – at least in their own eyes – at being what they perceive to be normal. The trouble is, their perception of normal is colored by the myths of excellence, perfection, and being the best in all they do. And as their story seems to unfold, the harder they try at being better, the worse they seem to be – because they have failed at being as good as so-and-so, or at being able to provide as well for their children as their childrens’ best friends’ parents.

Being “average” is contrary to an ideal that has been ingrained in us by our particular part of the Western culture. Our culture has a way of seducing us into believing that what our society sets forth as normal and acceptable ways of living is the

correct and right way of behaving. But our faith frequently goes contrary to society; and today's message, I firmly believe is a case in point. You see, it's O K to be average.

Paul talks about being average in the 7th chapter of Romans as he also tells us a little about the difference between society's expectations – the way of the flesh – and the way of faith, the path of the spirit. Paul writes (as paraphrased by Peterson):

I know that all God's commands are spiritual, but I'm not. . . . What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. (from Romans 7:14 and 15)

I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to be bad, but then I do it anyway. (Romans 7:18-19)

We get caught up in society's expectations to always be better, do better, It is not unlike how Paul reports he, before he was converted, got caught up in the letter of the Pharasiac Law. And when this happens it becomes self-defeating, almost like we were born with a deficit in character value. We think of themselves as below par, as inferior.

A young man once said that on the day he left the farm and a passel of brothers and sisters to go to college his father said, "Be somebody. Anybody can be a nobody." The young man reported years later in a therapy session the interpretation he put on the advice of his father was, "You're not much now, but work hard and study hard and someday you'll be a decent, qualified person instead of a nobody-dirt-farmer like me. You're nobody now, but education will fix it."

But education hadn't and the young man was depressed.

Most people have been told in some form or another that their present being is unacceptable, but if they worked on it, they would eventually be qualified to join humanity. Messages were continually being sent, usually by osmosis, that they were inferior. No speeches were made, but the idea was in the air. Expectations, internal messages almost from birth creates a script in people that we can always do better. Onward and upward was the theme song playing in the background.

It is ironic that well-intentioned parents (this is the preacher's time of personal confession) often send daily messages to their children that the children are stupid, or irresponsible, or frivolous, or lack decision-making capabilities, et cetera. But I think you can get my gist – the message many of us received (and perhaps have given) from very loving parents was, "you're not much now, but if you work real hard, someday you might . . .!" The assignment was "be superior" (perhaps even perfect?); and you can be if you just keep working at it.

But how? By climbing, achieving, progressing daily, getting ahead at least semi-annually, improving, polishing, producing? Degrees, certificates, money, better job on the way to an even better job, bigger home, more security, better friends? The list is endless. Achieve superiority was the command. We don't really know where it is, but it's out there somewhere – and you'll find it, ***when you are good enough.*** You ***must*** find it, because until you do you're still inferior.

The hidden messages from society go on and on, constantly telling us we can be better – that no matter who we are now, or what we do, it is not good enough.

One of the things that I have discovered in my life is that when I get to feeling down and a bit out of sorts, it usually occurs when I have realized that I am not perfect or superior. Then, as my personal pattern usually goes, I begin to feel inferior. It's kind of a self-inflicted punishment for not being able to be the best – as if I could be. It was a terrible swing of emotions. And I can hear echoes of Paul and his life as Saul, when he obsessed under the Pharasaic Law:

I know that all God's commands are spiritual, but I'm not. . . . Yes. I'm full of myself – after all I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. (from vss:14 – 16)

Why, I don't know, but for the longest time in my life, it never occurred to me to make peace with being average. Not that it isn't Scriptural – for we read in many places about the different gifts that each of us have, which in turn means that we can't be good at everything. We might also recall in Mark's Gospel, that when a rich man came up to Jesus and said to Him,

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus strongly rejected the implication and said to the man,

“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” (Mark 10:17b – 18)

But be average? It was worse in my mind than being inferior. At least I could be “perfectly” inferior. But how do you be perfectly average? Nobody wants to be average, I thought. I had bought the cultural brainwash that drones on incessantly, **“you can do better than that!”**

Of course I can! But where does it stop? Where can I get off this achievement wheel and get some rest?

One of the dirtiest words in our culture is “average,” and it gets knocked out of us early. The holy word seems to be “superior.” The cathedral is “improvement.” The hymn is “anything worth doing is worth doing well.” The motto is “second to none.” The ultimate product though, is despair.

Some time ago Deb and I came across a wonderful article written by Linda Weltner.¹ I want to share a good part of it with you.

“My husband plays the tuba . . . badly. No, wretchedly; with unforgettable in-expertise.

“After my husband played “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” at my older daughter's wedding, as a way of welcoming our son-in-law's Irish family, his father created an award for Jack that read, in part, “for a spontaneous public performance which demonstrated an originality so stark that it stunned the audience, rendering them incapable of meaningful response.”

¹ Linda Weltner, *The Boston Globe*, May 20, 1993.

“This did not hurt my husband’s feelings. He knows the impact his music has. This is a man for whom practice means playing all the notes, right or wrong, at least twice. His tuba, purchased at a yard sale for \$100., looks like it has been run over by a truck. His entire repertoire consists of five songs which run the gamut from “Happy Birthday” to “So Long, It’s Been Good to Know You.”

“Still the phone rings and people ask him to do a gig at some special event, an occurrence which happens more frequently than I might hope. He doesn’t get nervous or decide to polish up his technique a bit. He glows. He basks. He’s unabashedly delighted. And delightful!

“At his first note, audiences burst into hysterical laughter, and the more earnestly my husband attempts to render a recognizable melody, the harder they laugh, until they leap to their feet, choking and cheering. I understand why he’s in demand. What has been harder for me to accept is how my husband can be perfectly capable of enjoying his tuba solos without ever aiming at competence.

“This is not the way I was brought up. Whether it was swimming, tennis or ballroom dancing, my mother made sure that I began with lessons. The pleasure in doing a thing, I was taught, was in doing it well, and so my whole life has been about mastery, whether I was skiing, sewing or cooking. . . . If I felt I’d end up doing something badly, I politely declined the opportunity to begin.

“That seemed a perfectly sensible way to operate until I started dancing for exercise three months ago. At the beginning, I gave myself time to learn the steps, but I’m no longer a novice. What’s happened now is that newcomers are catching on while I’m still struggling. I’ve come to the reluctant conclusion that these complex patterns of movement we do may never come to feel like second nature to me.

“You know what? I don’t care.

“I can’t believe it myself. I feel like stopping people on the street and informing them, “You don’t have to be good at something to love it.” I want to tell my daughters, “Forget about having to meet your own high standards before you can have a wonderful time.” I’ve learned that it’s possible for me to tune in to how good it feels to move without having to submit my performance to my superego for approval.

“But my husband and I are proof of how rewarding it can be to sing or dance, to play a musical instrument or a sport, to study a foreign language, or calculus, or anything that doesn’t come easily. All you have to do first is to free yourself from the prison of excellence.

“As *Nike* says, “Just do it.”

“Oops, add one more word. Just do it . . . badly.”

At last, I found someone else for whom it is O K to just be average.

Being average means making peace with the variety and different gifts and graces for different people. It means that I am good in some things and bad in others; and that’s what it should be. It means admitting I have areas in which I am very smart, and areas in which I am . . . well, basically ignorant. Being average means knowing that I don’t

have to make my smart, perfection; and my ignorance, inferiority. How trite it is to say that none of us are perfect. But how smugly egotistical to add, “but we must be on an endless quest to attain perfection.”

(Incidentally, that favorite Wesleyan verse of Scripture, “Be perfect like your Father in heaven is perfect,” is actually a mis-translation. John Wesley made a doctrine of “going on to perfection” out of that verse. But now we know that there is no word in the Hebrew or Aramaic that means what we understand perfect as – “without flaw”. A better translation would be to be whole, complete, or mature; which understands human limitations and mistakes.)

Average says “no” to the verse, “when I am good I am very, very good; and when I am bad I am horrible.” That is the old superior-inferior swing. Average says instead, “When I am good I really am pretty good – not perfect, just fairly good; and when I am bad, I am not all *that* bad.

And what’s more, *God’s grace* says, “I accept you now and you don’t even have to sign up for a self improvement course.” And *grace* also says, “Quit bragging about your inferiority,” and adds, “God has already taken care of that.”

When Paul talks about “the good I would,” in this morning’s Scripture, Paul is admitting he is not able to pull off the superior, perfect life. That ended with his conversion from adherence to the Pharisaic Law that grew to be almost as complicated as the IRS laws. Paul now knows who he is – a person with a particular set of gifts; gifts that are given by the Spirit to each of us as individuals; gifts given so that we might all know the limits of our humanity.

This means that some of us are good at certain things and not so good at others. And lo and behold, it is O K that other people might be better than us at certain things. Really! That shouldn’t be a threat to us. Why can’t we like ourselves by just being average like the rest of the world, pretty good at some things and not-so-good at others?

What a relief!

I invite you to pray with me.

Lord, teach me that I’m not as bad as I think I am – so I don’t have to seem better than I am. Amen.