

FOR ALL THE SAINTS

by Birmingham Unitarian Church

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt

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One of the elements of my personality that can be either a blessing or a curse is my inordinate desire to establish perfect records. For instance, I made it through twelve years of public school with all “A”s on my report cards—until the last semester of my senior year, when my involvement in a student prank against a teacher with no sense of humor resulted in the lone “B” that ruined my perfect record, a fact that still rankles all these years later. Three weeks ago, when I missed being with you on a Sunday morning due to a case of food poisoning, I have to admit that I was more distressed by losing a perfect attendance record for Sunday services, having never failed to appear when I was scheduled to preach, than by my food poisoning symptoms. Though I have collected my fair share of perfect records, scores, tasks, even what I consider to be a perfect record in choosing wonderful household pets and laptops and sneakers that did not disappoint, I seem to keep reaching for another measure of perfection. While this trait does result in an admirable consistency in many areas of my life, I can see that it also suggests a certain narrowness of focus and regularly annoys those close to me.

But then clergy are, as a rule, notoriously perfectionistic, which is part of what draws people like me into the profession. Spirituality of all kinds, at all times, holds out the glittering allure of the possibility of becoming perfect once and for all, through salvation or being taken in the Second Coming, through enlightenment and nirvana, through entry into paradise as a result of good works, through the extinguishing of pain and desire in sustained ascetic disciplines, through a variety of methods and paths. Stick with it long enough, and anyone of us will be perfect. So I figured that by making a career out of spirituality I might get there faster than most.

An old British seafaring story tells about a sailing ship that set forth on an ocean voyage with a variety of goods to be traded in foreign lands. Among those goods was a dozen or so young horses, trained but not yet put to work, vital and full of energy, so much energy that they sometimes kept the crew awake nights with their snorting and neighing, hooves clattering on the wooden floors of the hold where they were kept. The crew had added a young stable hand for this voyage, whose duties were to feed and care for the horses, and otherwise stay out of the way of all the experienced sailors.

After many days of moving along briskly, the ship reached one of those dreaded areas of the seas where winds stop, so that the forward momentum of any ship crossing such an area stops as well. The captain of the vessel knew this leg of the trip was coming, and he had his crew ready with oars to keep the ship moving. But his crew was a small one, in order to save money, and the area of calm was an unusually large one, and before long the crew was exhausted from rowing and still the ship drifted, the sails limp.

At first the captain decided to just wait out the calm, convinced that soon the sea breezes would start up once more. When day after day passed without the slightest stirring of a breeze, however, the captain realized he would have to take drastic action. So he summoned the stable hand up from the hold and said, “Put the horses in their

harnesses, now, and put the liveliest one in front as a leader.” “But why—in the middle of the ocean should I harness them?” the stable hand replied. “You don’t ask, you do as I say, and now,” the captain ordered.

While the stable hand gathered his little herd and fitted them into the harness he had used to load them on the ship back in the harbor, the captain had other crew members fitting together a kind of ramp that led from the deck down into the water. The harnessed horses came up from the hold, were led over to the ramp, and at the captain’s command, with coaxing and soothing from the stable hand, they headed down the improvised ramp into the still sea.

Then the captain turned to the stable hand, who held the reins for his harnessed herd that had already begun treading water, and said, “Get them moving south—I want them to tow the ship out of this calm area.” And the stable hand, who now understood the captain’s plan, enthusiastically gathered the reins, called to his horses to head out, and off they went, swimming slowly at first then gathering speed, towing the great vessel behind them, led by the best horse of the herd, a magnificent black stallion.

On, on the ship went, the rest of that day and through the night, the horses swimming without cease, the stable hand giving them encouragement, until the next day’s afternoon, when the first signs of a breeze began to fill the sails. After ensuring the breeze was not a momentary event, but indeed the ship had finally left the area of calm behind and was back in the path of the trade winds, the captain gave a terrifying order to the stable hand: “Cut the reins, and let the horses loose.” “What? You can’t mean that—just leave them here in the middle of the ocean? But they saved us!” Realizing the stable hand would not do as commanded, the captain signaled to another crewmember, who came over and snatched the reins from the stable hand’s grasp. Then the captain himself cut the reins.

And the horses who had swam for hours, who had towed the ship back into the winds, were left behind, neighing continually, neighing ever more faintly, as the ship sailed away.

Perhaps the one place in an ordinary life where we might acknowledge the presence of a kind of perfection is infancy. When a baby is born healthy, regardless of any quirks like large ears or big feet or an oddly shaped nose, admiring parents and relatives and friends are likely to see the baby as being perfect, utterly lovable in part because of that perfection, utterly perfect because of that love. Many traditions, from religious ones to artistic ones to literary ones, imagine infancy as a time of perfection because the baby has not yet been corrupted by the darkness in our world, or because, as Wordsworth put it, we come “trailing clouds of glory” and as infants are still close to our heavenly origins. Those psychological perspectives that interpret our initial selves as kinds of “blank slates,” unformed and wide open to being influenced, suggest a perfection that is the result of being pure potential, capable of becoming just about anyone, anything.

And then it is all downhill from there. Imperfect parents begin to teach us that we are not always lovable, that we make mistakes which can elicit powerfully negative responses from others. We have to learn, usually the hard way and with pain, how the world works, and this necessarily requires us to hide parts of ourselves that do not readily fit into the way the world works or the preferred behaviors expected by the powerful adults around us. For some of us, childhood religions also pile on with messages about our innate badness, our sinfulness, that in us which loves darkness more than light. So bit by bit the perfect infant becomes the less than perfect child, the increasingly imperfect adult, and we take up a divided life, presenting to the world the person the world demands we be, playing

by the world's rules whether they truly fit for us or not, and concealing from many others, maybe all others, the parts of ourselves that we now recognize as being imperfect, perhaps irrevocably imperfect, unredeemable, unacceptable.

For some, living so divided is just the way things are, and any resentment of the dividedness, any struggle to overcome it, dies. Those who adopt this stance may settle into a kind of cynicism in which demands for perfection are met with "whatever," apathy and a shrug. Sometimes hints of the original perfection return, after consuming enough alcohol or taking drugs, sometimes through sexual encounters, sometimes through an activity that is only possible with full attention so that one is absorbed in the activity. But any of these experiences of perfect wholeness come to an end, and the division into acceptable self and unacceptable self returns.

For others, living divided becomes in time unsustainable, especially if the division between outer and inner life deepens, grows wider. The stress of sustaining separate selves produces cracks in the wall that may manifest with a compulsive concern for being perfect, having a perfect life, being a perfect person, or in an opposite fall into depression, the result of despair at ever being good enough. Having traveled both those paths, I can tell you that neither works, both lead to no good end.

And then there is the other option of figuring out how to reunite the divided parts of ourselves in a wholeness that we once knew but have lost or forgotten, or perhaps have never known but believe might just be possible. The British story ended unhappily, the horses left to drown in the middle of the ocean, the stable hand so distraught over what happened that he took an axe to the captain, only then to be sentenced to be executed. It is probably not possible to turn around and go back to retrieve the horses left behind; is there any way to bring another herd up from some depths inside us, harness them once more to our drifting life ship, and this time keep them with us regardless of where we go? If we are serious about seeking this option, then we find ourselves launched on a spiritual journey in which the wall between inner and outer lives, between acceptable and unacceptable parts of ourselves, is taken down, brick by brick. Whether we undertake this disassembly process through a spiritual practice, in the office of a therapist or a spiritual director, as part of a small group bound by a shared covenant, or in a church community with others seeking the same wholeness, we will find ourselves challenged repeatedly to have the courage to unmask. If that courage is present, however, the disassembly work becomes a journey towards real holiness, not the stereotypical kind of holiness that is too good to be real, but the holiness that comes from wholeness, living wholly, being fully oneself, comfortable in one's own skin.

But the road to wholeness is a long one, with many a winding turn, and to keep moving requires opportunities for inspiration that remind us why we bother to do the work anyway. In traditional churches, this inspiration often comes from larger than life figures who are recognized as saints, people whose personal journeys and deeds can spur us to try harder, to persevere. For Unitarian Universalists, centuries of religious art and strange traditions may make looking to saints for encouragement an unhelpful option. But saints have not necessarily always been presented honestly by the church.

Author Robert Ellsberg has written a massive collection of, as he puts it, "saints, prophets, and witnesses for our time." According to Ellsberg, the true saints—not the heavenward-gazing halo-adorned saints of religious mythology—are the persons who "appl[y] themselves seriously to the task of being human" and "in their own

individual fashion bec[ome] authentic human beings, endowed with the capacity to awaken that vocation in others” (Ellsberg, p. 6). In the process of living authentically, Ellsberg notes that saints are often extremely difficult to live with, and usually manage to antagonize, even alienate, many of those who meet them. But so committed are they to living fully and authentically, they are willing to pay the often heavy price asked of them, to sacrifice themselves for others.

Have you had the privilege of knowing, or even being in the presence of, such persons? In our Day of the Dead service last Sunday, several of you talked of loved ones as the sort of saints who seem to live with an inexhaustible well of patience and compassion for those around them. As I listen to you reference church members who have died, I hear warm memories of the humor that enlivened your days with them, of the commitment they brought to their abiding causes, of the generosity that characterized their presence at BUC.

And those are just the persons that I’ve heard described in saintly terms since they died. I have a similar privilege of hearing you talk about one another with admiration for his courage, for her loyalty, for his integrity, for her kindness, sometimes ending such a conversation by remarking, “I want to be like him, like her, when I grow up.”

There are indeed saints among us, saints in this church, saints in our larger community. Our challenge is being able to recognize them. Saints do not tend to call attention to themselves, which may be why the traditional church decided it needed evidence of miracles to qualify a person for sainthood. Yet to live authentically and fully in a culture that encourages so much less, and to inspire others to do likewise, is nothing short of a miracle.

No one of us is called to be another St. Francis or Mother Teresa. But there is a path to sainthood that lies within our individual circumstances, that engages our own talents and temperaments, that contends with our own strengths and weaknesses, that responds to the needs of our own neighbors and our particular moment in history. So come on, all you saints: let’s get going and get marching in.