

“But I’m No Saint”

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What does it mean to be *good*? Did you know that Mother Teresa, widely lauded for her work with the poor of India also faced significant criticism. In 2016, on the day she officially became a Saint in the Roman Catholic Church, CNN ran an article entitled, “Mother Teresa no saint to her critics.” Now my intention is not to demean Mother Teresa, but rather to ask...if Mother Teresa was far from perfect, then what does it really mean to be a “saint”, or an exemplar of moral living?

As the sermon title makes clear, *I’m* no saint either. By which I mean that I have done wrong, harming and hurting others as well as devaluing myself at times. Am I alone? Anyone else less than perfect?

Still, much of religious life is about striving to be better. Sometimes the focus is on better systems and social justice—like fighting for more affordable housing or smarter gun safety laws. And sometimes the focus is on the ethical choices we make as individuals—like choosing to be kinder, more honest, or equitable. From the personal to the political, religious voices have long weighed in on ethical and moral matters. We witnessed a powerful example of this on Tuesday when Bishop Marian Budde of the Washington National Cathedral pled with the newly inaugurated president for mercy for immigrants and LGBTQ folx.

Such efforts to call ourselves and others to moral action is not new. However, sometimes people are accused of going *too* far, becoming *too* rigid in their moral expectations. And what do we call such people? *Puritanical!*

The Puritan founders of our church have a bit of a PR problem. The depiction of their moral striving is often very negative. However, more recent scholarship argues that this bad reputation is the product of later critics. In the 1986 introduction to the book *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*, J.I. Packer writes:

“Informed folk now acknowledge that the typical Puritans were not wild [people], fierce and freaky, religious fanatics and social extremists, but sober, conscientious, and cultured citizens, persons of principle, determined and disciplined, excelling in the domestic virtues, and with no obvious shortcoming save a tendency to run to words when saying anything important, whether to God or to [people].” (x)

For Packer and other sympathetic scholars, the actual Puritans were just a bunch of people earnestly trying to live out their understanding of God and religion.

What *is* true for the Puritans is that religious life was neither a spectator sport, nor simply an entertainment option on the weekend. Rather, the Puritans actively pursued living out their faith in strict and precise ways. As Leland Ryken, author of *Worldly Saints*, writes:

Of course, everyone is strict about the things he or she values most highly. Athletes are strict about training, musicians about practicing, business people about money. The Puritans were strict about their moral and spiritual activities. (5)

But *why* were they so strict? I don't think it was all about fear. I think it may have been more about love.

Even so, there *was* fear in their lives—just as there is fear in our lives today. It is human to be afraid in the face of uncertainty. For the Puritans, undoubtedly there was fear in their decision to cross an ocean to an unknown place. They also faced slow or unreliable knowledge about what was happening to friends and family back in England—and whether the king would leave them be or intervene in their colonial experiment. Such unknowns must have unsettled many.

For us today, we face our own political instability as new federal leadership takes charge with rapid actions. As Bishop Budde noted in her sermon, there are people who are scared today. Parents who fear for their transgender children. Immigrant children who fear their parents will be taken away. At the same time, each of us may be facing our own uncertainties of health, finances, or relationships. Fear in the face of uncertainty is not the purview of any one historical era. Fear is part of being alive in an ever-changing, interrelated, and imperfect world.

And love is also part of being alive in an ever-changing, interrelated, and imperfect world. Love is the power of caring regard that connects us to others, to this planet, and to this Life. Love is the sincere desire for well-being, for the flourishing of Life. And yet, we don't always agree on what it is to flourish or be good.

Like how my grandma and I disagreed. Now I *loved* my Grandma Sibley. From the time we were little, she played with us grandkids, laughed easily, and spoiled us with sugary treats. She was also very religious. And, when she was diagnosed with lung cancer, she carefully wrote out her beliefs about God, the afterlife, and how to be saved from an eternity in hell. Making copies, she sealed them in envelopes and handed them out to her kids and grandkids. This came as little surprise to me or my family. Over the years Grandma was

prone to send letters of concern when she perceived someone to be making a particularly bad mistake. And we also usually didn't take major offense at Grandma's letters. She wrote from a place of love—genuinely concerned for our well-being based on her beliefs and understanding.

When I consider why the Puritans may have been so morally strict, I think about my grandma. Asking themselves and others to live faithfully and obediently to the God of their understanding was an expression of love. Grateful of God's loving grace towards them, they answered this love with faithful action. And, fueled with loving concern for their neighbors, they attempted to guide them to the right course of action. And yet, like with my grandma, we can *both* recognize their intention of love *and* disagree with their ethical viewpoints.

Have you lived in that tension of trying to maintain a relationship *and* your ethical integrity? I suspect many of us these days have frayed relationships with family or friends over moral issues. The points of possible tension are abundant. Is it right or wrong to perform abortions? Is it right or wrong to be sexually involved with folks of the same gender? Is it right or wrong to provide hormonal therapies to transgender teens? Is it right or wrong to provide bombs to Israel, to Ukraine? Is it right or wrong to have mercy on immigrants and not deport them? You and I might disagree on answers to some of these questions—or, at least, on the details and nuances of the answers.

In our private lives and our shared public life, we are all wrestling with the question what does it mean to be good? As part of a Unitarian Universalist tradition, we no longer hold to a single religious text like the Christian Bible as *the* source of moral guidance. Rather, we recognize that there are many ways people seek religious and moral insight—from varied religious texts to prophetic leaders, science, or direct spiritual experiences and insights. This multiplicity makes finding answers about what to do harder and more complex. There are fewer black and white rules and instead more questions about how to live out certain values or principles.

If you thought that Unitarian Universalist is an “easy” religion, I fear you have been misled. Just being told what to do can be far simpler than figuring out your own deepest values, principles, and guideposts drawn from a range of sources. So also, it can be simpler to be in a community where everyone is at least supposed to follow the same rules, then trying to build community across real differences. Nonetheless, as a religious community, we are charged with trying to answer the questions: what does it mean to be good? how can I be better?

Since 1630, this wrestling with being good has been part of our religious community. Part of our founding 1630 covenant speaks about being “redeemed and sanctified.” [Earlier this month](#), I talked about the idea of “redemption”—the theological concept of bridging the relational rupture between God and humanity. Being “sanctified” is more about restoring the goodness of a person. Sanctification is a *process* of working out how to do the right thing, how to be good. For the Puritans, this process meant studying their Bibles, talking in small groups with each other, and praying for understanding to know the *right* thing to do.

Although today not all of us may turn to the Christian Bible for answers as the Puritans did, I find merit in their example of diligent attention to moral and spiritual questions. As Ryken’s book title, *Worldly Saints*, suggests, the Puritans were seeking for how to live rightly *here and now*. In Frederic Buechner’s recasting of what it means to be saint, he likewise points to an ethical frame linked to *this* world. He writes:

To be a saint is to work and weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews. (*Listening to Your Life*, quoted in *Heretic’s Faith*, 187)

What if being a saint simply meant responding to the world with our best, most loving effort of goodness? What if being a saint was more like the story of *Ordinary Mary* who shares her blueberries with five of her neighbors and less like moral perfection? What if being a saint meant less *puritanical* rigidity and more lightness of heart that trusts in a larger arc to the story—a story like sharing blueberries with five strangers inspiring others’ ordinary kindnesses until goodness exponentially covers the globe?!

In a similar way, Unitarian Universalist author Frederic Muir reimagines saints as a “‘cloud of witnesses’ ... by which our lives are led, buoyed, challenged, supported, and comforted.” Any of us can join this “cloud of witnesses” by becoming those who shape the world by our actions. As Muir writes, “Each of our lives might feel ordinary, far from saintly. But each of us has the potential to be an unordinary soul for at least one other, if not for many.” (*Heretic’s Faith*, 188-9)

What if we *could* all be saints? Not perfect people, but ordinary people responding to the struggles and possibilities around us? Being “sanctified” does not have to mean rigidly manifesting ethical purity. Being “sanctified” can mean we are wrestling with how to do more *good*—both in our interpersonal relationships and in our larger world. This does not mean we are all going to agree on what is good, right, or wrong. But perhaps, like my grandma and I, such disagreements do not have to always rupture relationships.

As we move into this week and the next and the next, I cannot tell you exactly what will happen. Nor can I tell you clear, simple rules for how to behave in any given situation. What I can and will do is join you in the ongoing work of engaging in the moral and ethical questions of this moment and of this place. For centuries, this wrestling individually and together has been part of our religious community. Perhaps by striving to do *better* in our own moment we might yet become part of a “cloud of witnesses” inspiring more goodness in another time or place.

So may it be. Amen.