

“A Rag Tag Community”

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First Church in Boston

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Reading from *Meditations for Mortals*, “Day 24” by Oliver Burkeman

The Christian writer David Zahl refers to the view of humanity in which we approach each other on the assumption that everyone’s imperfect and struggling, and prone to messing things up, as a ‘low anthropology.’ It’s the opposite of a ‘high anthropology,’ in which we focus optimistically on the great things we expect from others and from ourselves—yet which all too often leads to anxiety, judgement, resentment and burnout.

‘A high anthropology views people as defined by their best days and greatest achievements, their dreams and their aspirations,’ Zahl writes.

‘A low anthropology assumes a through line of heartache and self-doubt, [and] that the bulk of our mental energy is focused on subjects that would be embarrassing or even shameful if broadcast.’

He illustrates the point by contrasting a famous 2005 commencement speech by Steve Jobs, in which the Apple founder urges his audience to search relentlessly for work they love, and never settle for less, with these words, from the essayist Anne Lamott:

Everyone is screwed up, broken, clingy, and scared, even the people who seem to have it more or less together. They are much more like you than you would believe. So try not to compare your insides to their outsides.

Sermon

As part of my support system, I have a therapist that I regularly visit. She was somewhat surprised last week when I told her that I needed her help with my sermon. (I get the impression that she’s not exactly someone who ever attends religious services.)

“I’m going to feel like a hypocrite,” I told her. Which is to say that a sermon that encourages more acceptance of being people who make mistakes, struggle, and generally don’t have it all put together is one I also need to hear.

I'm a striver. If I were sitting in the audience of Steve Jobs' commencement speech encouraging students to "search relentlessly for work they love, and never settle for less," I'd respond, "ON IT!"

In many ways, I do believe in striving to be better, to do better, to make the world better. Again and again this has been part of my sermons. And it is there in our religious tradition. Over the last year of reimagining the founding 1630 Covenant of First Church, we have heard the call to be faithful, to live with intention, and to put our faith into action. There *is* a place for a call to action where we make choices with conviction that what we do and how we live matters.

And there is a place for affirming that no matter how hard we try, sometimes it's going to be messy.

Christian author Anne Lamott has been exploring the messiness of life for decades. She writes:

Everyone is screwed up, broken, clingy, and scared, even the people who seem to have it more or less together. They are much more like you than you would believe. So try not to compare your insides to their outsides.

I first encountered Lamott in my 20's when life felt uncertain in so many ways. A recent college graduate, I had no clear next steps. My college boyfriend had ended things, and I was heartbroken. My evangelical Christian faith had crumbled, and a new understanding of religious life had not yet formed.

Here would be the part where I could tell you, "But look at me now." And, yes, the "outsides" of my life look pretty good. It is an honor to serve as the minister of First Church in Boston. I have a strong network of family and friends as well as a nice home and various privileges that come with being white, well-educated, and a citizen. Perhaps your outsides also look pretty good? Or maybe they don't.

However our "outsides" may look, there is always more to who we are than how put together we may appear to others.

Striving to always appear to have it all together can leave us exhausted. Expecting others to also always have it all together can leave us repeatedly disappointed. Because as humans, we screw up, fall short, and generally stumble over and over.

Even our Puritan founders knew this. At the end our 1630 Covenant, the final phrase is “so neere as God shall give us grace.” In other words, after naming the roots of their faith and all their best intentions for how to live faithfully and well, they end by saying, “and we’ll need God’s help.”

The Covenant uses the word “grace” rather than help. In thinking about grace for this sermon, I learned a few things. For one thing, grace is not the same as mercy in Christian theology. Mercy is God’s withholding of punishment or judgment, whereas grace is God’s granting of favors and blessings. More broadly, mercy is extending forgiveness for a wrong, whereas grace is offering help and good things to another.

Understanding grace as this spirit of kind generosity helps to explain the link between the theological idea of grace and the adverb graceful. For example, a graceful ballet dancer smoothly moves across the stage. Graceful conveys a sense of effortless ease with seemingly no hindrance. Wouldn’t it be nice if all of life felt like that? Does it? Maybe on some days. Or, for some moments on some days!?

For a ballet dancer, that graceful movement comes from hours and years of a lot of *effortful* practice and training. For the Puritans, the capacity to move faithfully through the world with mutual love and respect for others relied on God’s grace. In other words, they believed that God gave to them inner and outer resources that helped them live well—making their way a bit less of a struggle. Of course, the reputation of the Puritans is that they were spiritual strivers. When it came to living rightly and well, they wanted to be at the top of the class. *AND* they did not expect that they could do any of it on their own. They needed God’s help. God’s gifts helped smooth out the rough path of being human.

But what if we don’t believe in God? Does that leave us with only our own best efforts and a bit of luck? I don’t think so. Because we still have one another. We can help one another. We can extend *grace* to one another. Which is to say, we can offer a spirit of compassionate generosity towards others. After all, each of us is just an imperfect person who is struggling and “prone to messing things up.”

What could it mean to be a community that extends grace to its members and to all who walk through our door? I chose the sermon title “A Rag Tag Community,” to suggest this possibility. By “rag tag,” I intend to convey the sense of being messy and a bit disorganized. A “rag tag” assembly is one that is varied with everyone showing up as they are, bringing what they have to the effort. This is not a group of well-trained soldiers in matching uniforms moving in lock-step uniformity. Rather it is a group of diverse people who come together to help one another with what they have towards a shared cause. Like church.

Now, I do think some level of organization *is* helpful. Today's vote to amend our church bylaws will help us better define how we want to be organized as a group. And we do so as a society of people who do not all think alike, nor agree on every word or phrase. We come together as a church not to enforce uniformity of belief or thought, but to create a community of mutual love and help to one another as we each struggle to find our way through life.

And we all need help. And that's ok. We're only human after all.

Life is messy and often disorganized. No matter our age, we continue to encounter new struggles within ourselves, with others, or in the larger world. We can expect that things will not—cannot—be all put together and stay that way once and for all. Instead, we can expect that people will be people, making a mess of things and bumping into one another. Expecting this of people is not to abandon any effort to do better and make the world better. Rather, it is to acknowledge that all of our efforts to do or be better are just that: our best efforts as limited, imperfect people. We help where we can. We ask for help when we need help. We extend and receive grace.

After all, we are just a rag tag community of spiritual seekers striving to love the best that we can.

So may it be. Amen. Blessed be.