

“WHAT BOTHERS, WHAT DELIGHTS”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

On June 4, 2006

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

If you were here a month ago, you had a chance to write down on a 4x6 card some thing that bugs you that the rest of us wouldn't guess. If you weren't here, you might wonder, Why? To get into my sermon today, I need to begin by repeating a part of the sermon back then.

This was the Sunday for my “bought” sermon, the one for which someone at the church auction paid good money to earn the right to name the topic. The buyer this year wanted me to address his “concerns that, in our church, we have low aspirations for ourselves and that, as UUs, we should shoot higher and set higher aspirations for ourselves and our children.”

I decided to put his request into the larger context of the expectations we all have of other people and of ourselves, here in church to be sure, but also at home, at the workplace, and just going about our lives day to day.

There are a couple things that bother the sermon-buyer about life here at First Parish, having to do with the dress and behavior of the children sometimes and the way adults sometimes treat the building. My guess is, there are a few things that bother everyone about life here at First Parish, or anywhere else. Presumably they are not the same few things for everyone, or we could just change those things, unless we're talking about how far away from the church you have to park on Sunday morning. That we can't change without paving the front lawn, which we won't.

If enough people are bothered by the same thing, we do change, as in the case of the prelude, which was the area of greatest contention here at First Parish for years, if not centuries, until we solved it this year (I think).

Now this is an important point: To note that that was the point of greatest discord -- not the theology, politics, or style of either minister, but talking during the prelude -- was not meant to poke fun at people who cared, one way or the other. I bet nearly everyone has some thing or things that irk them more than other people would guess. And from cards that members of the congregation that day had filled out, I read a few examples.

Some of these were irritations which people don't take lightly, and that deserve some attention. They raise expectations of others that those others might want to accommodate, if they realized the situation. But they can only meet the other person's expectations if they know what they are.

Of course, they may choose not to be the least accommodating, but at least they would know what was going on. We all know how it is otherwise, when something here at church, or at home, or at work or wherever is bothersome to someone who never says a word about it until they are so bothered they burst out with a level of upset way beyond what the other person has any way of anticipating.

It is hard to think of an aspect of human relations more tricky than this: how and when to tell other people we have expectations of them they are failing to meet, and then whether and how to try to meet those expectations.

While one wants to avoid suffering in silence, one can easily err in the opposite direction and too readily and often express ways that others disappoint or annoy; or too eagerly acquiesce in others' expectations, or what we imagine them to be.

And then there is the whole question of perspective – is the expectation realistic and worth having, and the failure to meet it of serious degree? Is it a big enough deal to care about, by either party?

That's part of what I said a month ago. After the sermon, quite a number of people asked me what other irritations had been cited. Well, I'm going to tell you. But know in advance, I will then share some of the contributions I solicited last week when I asked for some things that people appreciate more than others might guess, blessings large or small, that I could use to rescue this sermon from being a depressing litany of human touchiness.

Because one way of hearing all these sensitivities could be, if people care about stuff like that, or that, we are doomed – we must be offending each other all the time! And I suppose maybe we are.

I told you it was noted to me that I say “somewheres” and “anywheres,” and neither is real word. Then given a card, one of you said it bugs you when a person plays with and crinkles paper napkins. I think I do that.

And I am guilty of the failing another person cited: I talk too fast in the pulpit, occasionally. For them. Though I wonder if someone else wasn't tempted to say that they wish I would pep up the pace of the sermons, occasionally.

What helps it cohere, this community of ours, and maybe society at large, is an awareness of our common human idiosyncrasy, that being human we all have things that irritate us that others think are fine, even dandy, while we do things ourselves that can annoy or delight beyond our total control. (We do have some control, though.)

So I am going to tell you, in abbreviated fashion, almost all the things people wrote that day, giving voice to the usually unspoken, trusting that it will not have the effect of making us all self-conscious, guilty, or nervous. Or affirmed and justified, because someone shares the very same complaint you've had for years.

No, this is a Whitmanesque litany of things to care about maybe, maybe not, a confirmation that we nearly all of us have own ways.

As you might imagine, many beefs concerned transportation: drivers who tailgate, use their cars to show aggression, drive too slow or don't pay attention, honk when one is trying to enter traffic safely, block the intersection at Pelham Island Road and Route 27, take more than one parking place, do stupid or dangerous things, drive unaware in the left lane, or talk on their cell phone. Also people on the subway who stand too close, people at the airport who don't prepare to go through the security checkpoints, and gas stations that don't provide air for your tires. And finally, I quote, “It bugs me when a woman offers me her seat on the ‘T’ just because I'm a 78 year-old guy.”

I knew some people would cite matters of grammar, and they did, like using “like” instead of “as,” misusing “infer” or the words “less” and “fewer.” Saying “is comprised of...” Or saying “I” or “myself” instead of “me.” In fact, between you and I, saying something like “between you and I” won the award for the most-cited irritation,

beating out talking on a cell phone while driving, shopping carts left in a parking lot, and littering, three to two.

I only read a few of the cards last month, but one generated some discussion during coffee hour. The card said, When one is asked, “How are you?” the correct answer is “I am well,” if in fact you are, but not “Good.” But people noted, one can say, I feel good. In preparing this sermon I talked with my grammar consultant and frittered away a lot of time on the web, and I conclude that if your health and spirits are good, that is to say, you’re basically well, a good answer to the answer to, How are you? is, Fine, thank you.

Of course, the question could be, “What are you up to?” instead of “How are you?” – but that bugs at least one person, because “it makes me feel my worth is in something exciting/outside me and not intrinsically me.”

Other sources of irritation, briefly: prices keep escalating; bad design; leftovers left unwrapped in the fridge; people who come up to say hello and ignore the kids you have with you and/or don’t introduce the kids with them; people not understanding my jokes; my spouse leaving the cap off the toothpaste tubes; people who let doors close when someone is right behind them; talking on a cell phone in a restaurant; spin; bragging about self or children; people at work who can’t stop talking; people at work who don’t recycle; family members putting empty cat food cans in the whole side of the two-section sink; dog poop at Heard Farm; a town clerk who says, “Have a nice day” when I go in to pay my property taxes; society’s expectation of perfection in child rearing; cutting in line at the super market, or getting in the express line with a full cart; the liberal radio station Air America being all talk, no action; filling out your name and address multiple times of a form [and, I would add, giving information on the phone repeatedly]; SUVs; loud noises like motorcycles and leaf blowers; lawn services; untended gardens; locked doors; and, finally, “It bugs me when people join a group and assume that nothing has ever been done correctly until they got there.”

Actually, I have more complaints from the cards, all having to do with life at First Parish; but first let me balance things with some of life’s blessings that were cited by the crowd here last week. After all, there’s lyric folk music; flowering trees; the smiles of children on warm sunny days; unexpected pleasures at the Wayland Library; music that lifts my spirit; Big Papi [David Ortiz] at bat with the bases loaded; open spaces in Wayland like Sedgemoor and Heard Farm; orioles flying near Heard Pond; school; my dog; my mom; a walk by the lake; writings of King, Merton, Gandhi, Zinn and others on non-violence; seeing lupine for the first time this year on a beautiful May morning; water, in any form; bicycling on a day with a clear blue sky; being invited at work to a cookout and softball game; my birthday yesterday, “and at the end of it, 10 people that I love very much [sitting] at our dinner table”; and this constellation of “things I like but people don’t know” from one of the children: food, rugby, cars, writing, bugs, and my big brother. And finally, this pair: “listening to the birds when their song breaks the silence of winter” and “the early morning sunlight and the birds singing in the spring (and summer). These seasons are alive and they renew my life energy.”

Buoyed by the remembrance of life’s kinder moments, we might take on all those things that bug people about life here at First Parish, like announcements that are too long or too detailed, being “worked over” at canvass time, the lack of First Parish news in the Town Crier, parishioners not wearing name tags, food and drinks getting dumped in the

“coffee cup recycle” container; having people sit in my pew; talking about church business during coffee hour; people talking in church about their possessions; the paint in this room looking dirty; buying new furniture instead of shopping on eBay; one person holding the rest of the congregation hostage with his/her own agenda; that we don’t give more to local, national, and international efforts and initiatives; the lack of sermon topics in the announcements; people not using the mike or speaking into it; people talking and moving around when the choir is singing or someone is performing; and being asked to fill out a card on the pew and there wasn’t one.

People made suggestions: have a church-wide, multigenerational service day or days, along the lines of Habitat for Humanity; give a portion of the morning’s collection to socially significant efforts; have a Sunday of hymns that we all know; while we’re at it, have more hymns of a traditional reverential nature and fewer that sound like camp songs; once you get your coffee downstairs, move on out into the room; rearrange things so it would be possible for people to hang up their coats and put their name tags on before being greeted; chat with someone you don’t know at coffee hour; get the portable mike fixed, which David O’Leary is seeing to, bless his heart; turn up the heat; and have the rummage sale later, late April or May.

I’ve left out one that’s so specific I think it could be taken personally. There’s one that raises a staffing concern, and those I hope a person would take up with me, Erin, or Nathalie Thompson, the church president. Two people said we overwork some people, one of them adding that many others do nothing.

And then there is this pair: “More sermons on the war, the direction our country is going in, church and state, right to marry, sex ed in schools, workers rights, universal health care, social security, trout fishing, pollution, and more!” Another made the same point even more strongly, without the trout fishing, upset that sermons aren’t more often focused on “a government which is destroying everything in which I believe and what I have believed this church stands for.”

But the church had blessings to offer as well. I think the person who noted “music that lifts my spirit” may have thinking of services here, because he or she also noted “watching children learn to ‘sing their own hearts’ song,” a line from one of our hymns. I think the person who noted the blessing of “Warm smiles as people greet me” was thinking of life here at church. Three others cited our community itself, the fantastic people and the caring.

People felt blessed or favored by teaching the Our Whole Lives curriculum; having sermons available online for review and sharing; “the marvelous artwork that graces our entry”; the depth and meaningfulness of the discussions in the chalice circles [for which you all sign up in the fall]; the Memorial Day weekend service; the view through the windows, and thinking about all those who have gone before, who must have felt the same joy; having the windows open in the spring; the sermons; and attending services as a family.

So even with the little things that may irk us at times, or worse, this world and this community remain places in which we often delight, feel blessed, feel lucky.

I have two more cards to read, but first I want to make a few points. Certainly no preacher can raise up life’s irritations and blessings without urging congregants to focus on the blessings and not on the irritants. In the words of Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer, though neither was ordained, “You’ve got to accentuate the positive, eliminate

the negative, latch on to the affirmative, and don't mess with Mr. In-Between. You've got to spread joy up to the maximum, bring gloom down to the minimum...."

And it's true, life would be a happier place, and everyone in it, too, if we didn't dwell so much on petty stuff that makes us unhappy, and often others as well, who have to deal with our displeasure. I say good luck and Godspeed to you in the effort.

But I also say, in that effort, know that few if any of us finds it easy not to be annoyed out of all proportion sometimes, maybe by drivers who go faster or slower than us, or people who say "slower than us" when we think it should be "slower than we," or who linger to chat with the coffee pourer downstairs so we can't get to the cup that we want.

And in return, few of us, if any, never do anything that makes another person struggle to maintain composure, even without our meaning to, or maybe even noticing. Anywheres. It is the human condition.

So I champion our efforts to know what's large and what's small, all the while we try to forgive us all our trespasses, hoping we are all trying to forgive those who trespass against us, those whose sense of proportion doesn't align with our own. That's one of the wonders of a church when it works. People come together, with all of our foibles; and sometimes the foibles show through, and usually, it's okay. In fact, some of what might be foibles are outlooks that deserve to stir change, and sometimes they do.

So we struggle on together, none of us without our quirks of concern, but united in the sense that whatever irritations there may be along the way, our journey here is a blessing.

As I said, I have two final cards to quote, both on the side of blessing and delight, and both about First Parish.

"Every day, as I drive to work, I go through Wayland center and pass First Parish, my spiritual home. Even when I am late and/or traffic is horrible, I feel a sense of peace and start the day with a smile."

"I often arrive on Sunday morning tense and fretful with the cares and rush of the work week. I almost always [maybe unless Ken passes on a whole lot of complaints] leave in a calmer frame of mind and determined to do what I can to make the world a better place."

And so may it be for us all.