

April 2, 2017

Sunday Sermon: “The Green Bag”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

My aunt died seventeen years ago this August in Staten Island, NY. I was at Kingston, MA then drove down to New York on Friday and saw her die in a hospice on Saturday. I stayed a few days to straighten up affairs in her house. She was of Norwegian Ancestry and the house was filled with Norwegian mementos and reminders of her ancestry. She and my mother were first generation Americans and the Norse identification has died with them. She was born a Peddersen and other family names were Neilsen, Steinersen, Thorsen, Mathiesen and Johnsen. So you can now see how at least Norwegian Lutheran children were born into sin. (I'm sorry)

One of my joys of growing up was the visits I made to my grandmother's house in New York City. Though born in then city, I was raised in the western part of New Jersey along the Delaware long before it was fashionable to live there. In fact the area of New Jersey I was raised in was the Sticks, the sticks with smelly cows.

The only significant community memory from the county was that it was the home of the Lindbergh Trial and that was well before I was ever thought of. Well, the trip from the sticks to the city took up to three hours in the fifties with two lane roads and six cylinder engines, so each trip to Grandma's was well planned in advance. For weeks before, I would anticipate the trip as an adventure into the city.

My grandmother's house was a big old house that was on a high ivy covered stone wall about twelve feet high. On the top of the wall were cement planters that were always filled with geraniums and many large trees surrounded the two-story building. On the top floor was a porch, a widow's walk, from which you could see the ships coming into New York harbor. From there on a clear day you could see all the way to Sandy Hook New Jersey in one direction and Long Island in the other. During the Second World War she operated it as boarding house for Norwegian Sailors, she even had a green parrot with some colorful language.

But more important than the building was what occurred inside. During these visits my grandmother always had interesting visitors. Being Norwegian all my grandmother's friends were characters out of a Garrison Keillor story. They all spoke with strong accents and ate foods that I would never have in the sticks of New Jersey, dishes like fiskaballs. One such dish is called Lutifisk which is an unappetizing salt cod soaked in lye that only a stomach that is used to years at sea could possibly keep down. I was told that eating Lutifisk would put hair on my chest, which is probably true, but it appeared to me that the lutifisk probably just shifted the hair from their heads to other places on the body, like their ears. Other food I liked was blood pancakes that are eaten with lots of sugar and of course the staple was plain boiled potatoes. But the overall most exciting aspect of the trip to Grandma's house for a five-year old boy was that the house was not child proofed. Everything was at my level.

My home was of course childproof, but grandma's wasn't and Norwegian homes are always filled with nicknaks, and for a five year old this was magic. Two that I remember particularly were wooden carved figurines of a Gnome and a Troll. The Troll I liberated from my aunt's after she died and the Gnome became mine when my mother died. Both disappeared when I moved here.

Now, I found out many years later, Gnomes and Trolls only exist in two locations. One is New Jersey, but these gnomes and trolls were of the garden variety and some witch must have put a spell on them as they were absolutely stationary and as hard as rock. They seemed to exist only for amusement and as pet sanitary facilities. The other place where they existed was Norway and these were of the breathing variety of little people which seem to exist in all cultures. Trolls, are generally evil and are known to live under bridges or in mountains, but I now understand exist somewhere on the internet and I don't really understand what they do there. Gnomes are just mischievous and live under the roots of trees. One story I remember was of a gnome who wanted a green hunting bag.

Now hunting bags are more common in Europe than they are in the US, so I will explain that these are bags that hang over your shoulder and have many pockets with flaps covering them. They are carried when one walks in the wood to forage for flowers or mushrooms or to carry when you hunted to put in your game. Well, this gnome wished for a green hunting bag. In fact he was obsessed about having a certain green hunting bag. He dreamt and

day-dreamed about this bag. He visualized this bag thousands of times, he knew every stitch that assembled the bag, and he imagined its color and could almost feel it against his body as he walked through the woods thinking about his obsession. One day, it was probably his birthday; he was given a green hunting bag. His dream had come true, his most ardent wish had been granted, he owned his hunting bag. Now we would expect him to be happy, but he said, "It is a nice hunting bag, but it is not as green as I had imagined."

It was not as green as he had imagined. How many times have we found life not as green as we had imagined? I believe we have all experienced the sadness of disappointment at receiving some long sought desire. The newly constructed house that had more structural problems than the old one; the Italian restaurant where you went for that special occasion was saturated more with garlic than violin music; the sleeping under the stars which became stewing in a wet sleeping bag, the college degree that really didn't get you the job you thought it would. The Rocky Mountains were not quite as massive, the blue Mediterranean of National Geographic fame had a few miles of brown near the shore, my grandmother's house when I saw it last looked like just another house. Things are not as green as we imagine.

I remember the first time I got to touch a Soviet produced aircraft. This was back during the high point of the cold war. The Foxbat or Mig 23 was the fastest aircraft in the record books, certainly faster than anything I ever flew.

I had studied this aircraft so I could recognize it in flight and knew its characteristics, so I had a chance to escape from it if necessary. Then I saw one... it looked like it was assembled by a blacksmith. It was not the smooth, polished aircraft to which I was accustomed, but a collection of riveted panels such as hadn't been seen on a NATO plane for twenty years. Likewise, its instruments would have been more at home in a Piper Cub than an advanced fighter. The MIG was not as scary as I imagined.

The career, which at twenty looked exciting and challenging, at forty, is dull and boring. Some marriages that start with the love, enthusiasm and majesty of a volcano, peter out to either look like a match or be worse, a volcano of hate. The young baby who is seen by the parents as capable of conquering the world, grows up not quite as accomplished as they had envisioned. We turn out to not to be as loving as children or parents or grandparents as we had imagined.

The church meetings which should be a reflection of the ideals of our principles can degrade to the antithesis of those things we say we care about, like individual worth and dignity, and the democratic process. The relationships of life aren't as perfect as we imagine. Our fears, when faced, appear less substantial than we make them in our mind. Our experience of the natural and social world of relationships are not to be as we suppose. Reality does not measure up to our expectations.

As Plato said many centuries ago, the only thing that is perfect is an idea. As an idea it can exist as perfect, the expression of the idea in our material world becomes a shadow of the perfection we see in our minds. So, I am saying is that things are not perfect...yes ... and no. Yes, life is never as perfect as we could imagine it, and when we force reality to measure up to ideals or our idea of perfection we are projecting on the situation and we risk being disappointed like our Gnome.

But, no, that is not all I am saying. This imperfection, I believe, is really a gift we have in being human. We don't have to be perfect. We are permitted to make mistakes in our relationships and all we have to do is learn from our mistakes. In my reading by the biologist Thomas, he found that creation of the single cell is imperfect and in this imperfection comes its wonder, its method of change, the process of evolution, the changing of the organism toward a different structure or accomplishment. This is, I believe, the revelation of imperfection of the physical world. As a system, the universe was designed, evolved, or just happened imperfectly, but more importantly as a system that can correct itself. Our conservative Christian, Jewish and Muslim colleagues maintain the inerrant nature of the Bible and the Koran and maintain that perfection can be obtained if we humans can just follow these inerrant concepts expressed. Likewise, their concept of the world is static. Creation is and was perfect, and therefore the concept of evolution is irrelevant.

Their universe, likewise in this view, is imperfect not because of design, but because of human failure. This is a pretty heavy guilt trip. This kind of guilt was worthy of my Lutheran Norwegian mother. The Divine, they maintain, created perfection and we screwed it up. In the First Chapter of Genesis, the creation story or myth, the words used to describe creation in the Hebrew meant good. "And God saw that it was good." Good, not perfect, and good which means adequate for its purposes. Imperfection as a design characteristic looks pretty good when seen against the conservative model

and verifies our Universalist beliefs on salvation and forgiveness. We not only need second chances, but we believe it is part of the process toward the more perfect. So as parents, grandparents, friends, ministers, we just have to be good enough.

In the reading earlier in the service, Gary Kowalski dreams about the great examination that he refers to as life. This great examination in which we want to succeed is something he infers we should strive. This, I believe, is another gift of imperfection. Something we would not have if things were as good as we hoped.

Life is a process of striving and without the challenge of imperfection, life could not be that process. We need these dreams or ideas of the ideal in order to have this process of change. Now for me, occasionally, not being perfect is a problem. I feel a lingering guilt each time I fail to meet my own limited expectations. My children are quick to point these out and I am reluctant to accept them. Every Green Bag I obtain which isn't as I imagined, brings a feeling of dissatisfaction much as it brought to the gnome. I have to remember, life isn't the possession of perfection, but the striving for that ideal that makes the whole process interesting and worth doing. This awareness of how reality differs from the ideal is a basic human quality. Now this human dialogue about the contrast between the perfection of the ideal and actuality of flaws creates stress. I never seem to arrive at what I want. When I take this tact I am looking at life as a product, a place, or time, or state of mind that is the green bag of my ideals, the projection of some archetype. Life in this scenario ceases to be that process.

But there are many goals that are just plain unobtainable, personal limitations that cannot be overcome. These, I think, need to be identified and accepted. No amount of Rogain rubbed on the top of my head is going to keep me warmer in the winter, I just have to suffice with wearing a hat. At some point reality has to be faced and the idea of an ideal reality must be recognized for what it is, a goal. At some point I need to accept imperfection and find a workable solution within the confines of reality.

In social relationships, I think, we have to do the same thing. Our liberal churches and social institutions will never meet our projections of perfection. Our Committee meetings will always be too short or too long, sermons will be too folksy or too intellectual, or take too much time or stop before making that essential point or whatever.

The new minister or meeting president is not as good as you remember the last being. Our district services will never supply what is required by our congregations. Everything, in short is imperfect and it is this gift which allows us all to strive to improve every situation, every reality, and yet to continue to imagine the ideal green hunting bag.

In an ever evolving and never ending world ...Amen.

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche