

## **A Place in the Choir**

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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I don't believe I've ever dedicated a sermon to anyone before so I'm dedicating this one to Mr. Powell, my elementary school music teacher. I learned some valuable lessons from Mr. Powell, though I don't believe they were the ones he meant to teach.

I used to tell people that I was the one Mr. Powell told to just mouth the words, but I've come to realize that for all the Mr. Powells in my life who tried to silence my voice, there were probably many Jackie Clements in his life that annoyed him by their lack of perfection and refusal to shut up.

I actually liked Mr. Powell when I was a kid. It took a lot of years to see that just because he didn't yell when he told me to not sing, that it was any less cruel than shouting, "shut up!" at a child. That kind of judgmental non-acceptance is damaging in its own right, but what can truly undermine us is when the message becomes internalized, when we become our own critics delivering the negative messages for ourselves. It doesn't take long, or too many Mr. Powells, until you start telling yourself, "I can't sing. I should probably be quiet." Or "I'm not smart. I'll just stop trying" or "My nose is too big. No one will like me." or whatever the message was that you were told.

My problem was I kind of enjoy singing and can have a really short attention span so I would forget I couldn't sing and someone else would have to tell me all over again. Luckily, the world is filled with helpful people.

In the late 1970s, some of those people frequented Mother's Wine Emporium, the coffeehouse at the college I attended. Mother's featured weekly musical acts, most frequently folk singers. Bill Staines, composer of the song the choir just sang, was a perennial favorite. So, ironically, it was singing along to a song that assures us that everyone has a place in the choir that I sometimes got shushed by my friends. Eventually the message got put in place nice and firmly and I didn't forget. I can't sing.

The only thing is I can sing. The problem wasn't that I couldn't. The problem was that it didn't come naturally, and no one had ever taught me how. The person tasked with that particular job found it more expedient to shush me than teach me. Instead of teaching me how to sing, Mr. Powell taught me that I couldn't sing. It fell to others to teach me that I could. And still there are those moments when things aren't going so well that the old tapes play in my head and I'm sure the person next to me just stuck their finger in their ear not because it itched but to block me out.

Oh, it's so silly. Gonna lay that burden down. I can laugh about it now because I have worked to get over it. But I've seen the same dynamic at work in other people's lives and it still really angers me. In our choral festival experience this summer I watched as someone dropped out of

the choir and all the fun and companionship of the week because an internal message was playing in her head that she couldn't sing well enough to be part of the group. She insisted that it wasn't the other singers that gave her that message, and I can believe that because of the compassionate guidance they offered me. But still the message was there in her heart. She wasn't good enough to be part of bunch of people who were singing together for fun on summer vacation. Not that she wasn't good enough to sing at the Met or with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, but with a bunch of people singing together for fun on summer vacation. It made me very sad.

Oh, the things we do to each other, the messages we convey that get absorbed and become messages from the self. You are not good enough, talented enough, bright enough, thin enough, young enough. You are not enough. Criticism disguised as the quest for improvement. I'm sure I'm guilty of such unhelpful helping myself. Slap me when you catch me doing it, would you?

When Thom and I were talking through this morning's topic so he could find a Time for All Ages story, he said, "Yep! Perfection is the enemy of the good." And that's it right there. Perfection is the enemy of the good.

In one sense perfection destroys the good because if we believe that perfection is possible, we will never be happy with good. There's nothing wrong with wanting to improve or be your best, but to believe in the impossible leaves you dissatisfied with what is possible. No matter how badly I sang when I was 8, it was good enough not to be shamed in front of the whole class for it.

But there is another sense in which perfection is the enemy of the good. The expectation of perfection from your fellow human beings is the enemy of good behavior. It's the enemy of kindness and compassion, acceptance and love. Even if perfection *were* possible, would it be worth the price of making someone feel bad about themselves? Expecting perfection from human beings is futile, and letting them know that the imperfect is unacceptable, well, that is just not good manners.

But we all carry around these fears that lie at the root of such criticism. The idea of perfection gives us a way to deal with uncertainty and rejection. To be in control to the point of perfection erases our fear of uncertainty. If we are perfect we cannot possibly be rejected. Criticizing others offers us a way to show that we are more knowledgeable or more adept. It offers a way to nudge to the side for even just a moment the message in our own head that we are not perfect, the message planted there by someone else once upon a time.

I think a great many of us have a Mr. Powell in our pasts. If not one who tried to still your voice then someone who chipped away another part of your self, who tarnished your belief in yourself. There are other ways to work toward excellence, ways that grow relationship rather than diminish self. Mimi Bornstein, a UU song leader and the Music Director of one of the congregations I served in Maine, always said that everyone can make a sound that is beautiful and holy. When we all join our sounds together *that* is beautiful and holy. It's not that Mimi doesn't have standards for what constitutes good music, but by living out the idea that every single one of us has a place in the choir she brings forth the best. Working as a church musician

she knows that creating a place where everyone and every voice is welcome is the most important thing. She knows that the good is better than perfect in beloved community.

In beloved community all the voices blend, and some just clap their hands or paws or anything they got now. In beloved community, just like in a choir, it's not about your single voice standing out above, and at the expense of, all other voices. It's as much about listening to the other singers and trying to blend with them as it is about your self-expression. It's about being part of the whole, indispensable because no one else has quite your timbre, *and* remembering that the same is true of everyone else in the room, too.

Our reading this morning talked about the many disappointments we can encounter in church life. Within it is the acknowledgment that in church we are the same messy, forgetful and even sometimes thoughtless people walking around out on the streets. Sometimes we reinforce those messages of perfection in ways that lack compassion. Sometimes we come forgetting that we are not here to be with people just like ourselves who want exactly what we want and do things exactly as we want them done. Sometimes we can forget that we come here to learn to love better, and yet I do think we come here with the expectation of finding something better than we experience in other places. We come with open hearts or we come to have our hearts opened. That makes the cutting messages of perfection that much more difficult to take. When our hearts are open those messages dash right in. They cut us to the quick.

And so it is incumbent on us, if we want that beloved community, if we truly wish to be and have the church our vision statement describes, to practice kindness and compassion more often than we practice being right.

You know you can tell someone almost anything if it comes from a place of love. But when it comes from a place of judgment, when uttered to let someone know they fell short of perfect, even the softest words can wound. If we want to erase the tapes of judgment playing in our own heads, the ones that keep us from true peace, we need to help each other dismantle theirs. We need to put being together in love above being perfect. We need to make sure that when we say all are welcome here we don't mean you are welcome to sit quietly next to me as long as you don't sing off key, as long as you don't want to sing a different song, as long as your song doesn't use any theological language. There can't be a list of "as long as" conditions attached to the welcome. Either all God's critters got a place in the choir or there is no beloved choir.

And so I've decided to just put down the burden of carrying Mr. Powell around in my head. I dedicate myself this morning to growing in compassion for Mr. Powell. Maybe it wasn't that he couldn't teach but that no one had ever taught him how. What would it be like to open our hearts to compassion for all the people who placed upon us false expectations of perfection and cut us down when we weren't? What if we could see all the times *they* have had impossible demands of perfection thrust upon them?

If we could do that then we could also sweep aside any list of conditions that make others welcome "as long as"... So I invite you this morning to think about the people you might not want to think about – both those you have known, the people who might have handed you those damaging messages of criticism and those people you have not yet met but don't particularly

want to. What would you need to set aside to be able to be here in this room, in worship, with them in body or in spirit? What would it take for there to be a place in the choir for each of them *and* for you?

For all I like to resent Mr. Powell for the sorry lessons he gave me he also ultimately contributed to my being able to claim my voice. Without something to push back against I'm not sure if I would have made a conscious effort to learn to sing, and I might have lost out on finding my own unique, if sometimes shaky, place in the choir. Thank you for that, Mr. Powell. Rest in peace.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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