"You Be You: or: Questioning Bad Greek Ideas"
A talk given by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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Reading: "What She Taught Me," a poem by Marjorie Saiser

INTRODUCTION

There's a *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon in which Calvin asks his dad, "How come old photographs are always black and white? Didn't they have color film back then?"

Dad answers, "Sure they did. In fact, those old photographs *are* in color. The *world* was black and white then."

As someone who grew up in the era of black and white photographs, sometimes I feel as if Calvin's dad is telling the truth: the world *was* black and white then. Photos were black and white. The television was black and white. Most movies were black and white. My parents drove a black and white 1957 Chevrolet. In the South where we lived, Jim Crow segregation was both the law and a daily fact of life: everything was divided between black and white.

Black and white; men and women; there were "town people" and "country people;" and the list went on. All molds that people were pushed into; labels.

The teacher mentioned in the poem had violated black and white social norms. Margaret Saiser concludes her poem,

>   . . . using what you have will not please
>   everybody, that marrying a man of a different stripe
>
>   is not a popular thing in a small town in the fifties,
>   and divorcing and coming home with a child
>   is even worse, and that you
>   get up every morning anyway,

and do your work.

The "again" in the phrase "Make America Great Again" is a longing for iron-clad social norms and that black and white world I was born into. As Calvin's Dad said, "In fact, those old photographs *are in* color. The world was black and white then.

Here's the fact of the matter: black and white is easy. Us and them is easy. But here's the thing: black and white is a lie.

Today, I want to think for a few minutes about how to go about exposing the black and white world to color.

ONE

Many of you have caught on to the fact that bad Greek ideas bug me. Bad Greek ideas permeate the thinking of the Western World and its many colonies and its several varieties of one religion.

Bad Greek ideas are everywhere, from how we do logic and science, to how we think about the earth, living creatures, and human relationships. But the most dangerous Greek ideas lurk in our unquestioned assumptions in philosophy and religion.

Now, I contend that all human religions are about getting down to archetypes—the big, deep things concerning meaning and purpose.

Given that, it's not a bad idea to think a bit about what an archetype is in order to separate some of the good from the bad among our assumptions.

The word *archetype* is—like those bad ideas—Greek in origin: *arkhe*, meaning "primitive," and *tupos*, meaning "model"—which is where we get the word "type." The Greeks used *arkhetupos* to describe a mold into which something is poured to make lots of copies.

Nowadays, the first thing that comes to my mind in thinking about this is molded plastic. Plastic is poured into a mold to shape, for example, a plastic cave person.

Then, dozens and dozens and thousands and thousands of plastic cave persons can be made, all very much alike. Though, of course, the mold itself, over time, wears a bit. The millionth molded cave person is not as sharp and defined as the first one out of the mold.

For the ancient Greeks, going back to the *arkhetupos* took you back to the ideal. The original.

But in our mass-produced reality, that original definition of archetype takes on a sinister meaning.

For us, molds are also about pushing things into them. We call something "cookie cutter" to say that there's no thought behind the production. Everything appears to be the same, and the product doesn't require any thought or originality.

Black and white.

We see in the idea of the archetype a danger that the ancient Greeks did not see because in the years since, Western thought has given us another concept: the "individual." In. Divid. Ual. That which cannot be divided.

To continue my metaphor: if you chop the plastic cave person into pieces, you don't have a plastic cave person anymore. You have pieces of plastic. In the case of the human individual, chopping one up is both illegal and immoral.

For the Greeks, both philosophy and religion was about getting back to the archetypes. The ideal. But human individuals are not plastic cave people. There is no *arkhetupos* in a factory somewhere.

Now, notice the that origin story of Adam and Eve does presuppose an *arkhetupos*, a factory with a mold, if you will. In that scenario, God made the first two people, the archetypes of all of humanity. The assumption is that every person coming out of the mold has the same features, including original sin.

But now we know—thanks to Charles Darwin's dangerous idea—that's not how it was. No gods molded the first people in their image. There is no archetypal person. Never was. Never will be.

I know that I sound like a broken record talking about bad ancient Greek ideas. But it's important to remember that beliefs have pedigrees and they have consequences. The

idea that an ideal exists stretches all the way back to the ancient Greeks – an ideal life. An ideal family of origin. An ideal lover. Ideal children. An ideal job. On and on. Archetypes.

But that idea is wrong. That idea is diametrically opposite of the truth of the matter. There is no factory in heaven and there is no archetype in the minds of the gods that created an ideal . . . something or other.

Watch out for archetypes. Because they can function to put your mind into a black and white world. (And, yes, I'm assuming that you agree with me that it's a bad idea to "make America black and white again.")

TWO

Here we have to make a distinction between an ideal and an abstraction. The English word *abstraction* come from the Latin, *abstractio*, meaning, "to draw away." An abstraction is what we might today call a "higher level view." An abstraction is the forest, not the trees.

So, no matter how high a view you take, plastic cave persons never become abstractions. Because, you see, even in my metaphor of the plastic cave people, I'm pointing to a concrete thing, not an abstraction–there is a plastic cave person.

So, an abstraction is a drawing away, but has the added idea of pulling disparate things together. Whereas, an ideal is concrete. The plastic cave people factory can have an inspector with a magnifying glass who looks and declares, "That one right there, that's an ideal plastic cave person, exactly what the mold was designed to produce."

An abstraction isn't like that. You can never, ever, ever actually look at an abstraction.

Allow me to be concrete about abstractions; The concept of democracy is an abstraction. It's an idea based on a bunch of propositions concerning what democracy would look like or should look like. But democracy is not an ideal, because there is no mold for democracy and there has never been a perfect one made in a factory somewhere.

Neither has there ever been an ideal human. There isn't a human factory out there and there isn't a mold that forms perfect human beings.

To think otherwise is to fall into the perfectionism trap.

THREE

Yes, it's a good thing to have *some* ideals—that all people should and can be free, for example. Or that all people have the right to personal dignity. Or that being adequately housed or adequately fed or to have adequate health care are basic human rights. These are goods that we do well to strive for, even though we must remind ourselves not to get depressed when we as a society can't quite get there.

Where we human beings get into trouble is in forcing ideals.

In the early twentieth century, the Russians tried to force economic and political progress with the abstraction of communism. Disaster ensued.

China. Cambodia. Same thing.

The same thing happened in the case of fascism: trying to create the perfect nation or the perfect race of human beings . . . disaster.

The same thing happened when European powers attempted to create Christian capitalist colonies in Africa. Disaster.

So many US wars have been about establishing ideal free market democracies—disaster, disaster, disaster.

Pursuing an ideal and ignoring the "facts on the ground" leads to disaster. Why? Because the ideal does not exist.

Socrates was wrong about that. Plato was wrong about that. Saint Thomas Aquinas was wrong about that.

Face it and deal with it:
You don't live in a perfect, ideal neighborhood.
You don't live in an ideal city.
You don't live in an ideal state.
Or an ideal nation. Or an ideal world. Or an ideal galaxy. Or an ideal cosmos.

When you get down to the brass tacks, they all kinda suck!

Loneliness. Sickness. Death. What's up with that stuff?

I hate to break it to the people who have joined today, but even First Unitarian Society isn't perfect. We have aspirations, but we can't achieve them. Ever. To think otherwise is to be endlessly disappointed.

It's to fall victim to bad Greek ideas.

Perfection is impossible; and it is a very damaging idea. There is no mold that makes perfect humans; there is no factory of the gods.

Do a search on "top-selling self-help books" and see titles such as

> *Prisoners of Our Thoughts*
> *Getting Unstuck*
> *The Power of Habit*
> *You Can Heal Your Life*
> *There is Nothing Wrong With You: Going Beyond Self Hate*
> and
> *A Perfect Mess: the Hidden Benefits of Disorder*

(I'm thinking of charging people money to sit in my office and discover that truth: *A Perfect Mess: the Hidden Benefits of Disorder* .)

What these books tell us, with varying degrees of bluntness, is that the Greek idea of an ideal is a very bad idea.

In your order of service this morning there is a quote from RuPaul: "You are born naked. The rest is drag."

So, here's my question: when are we truly ourselves? Are we ever "truly ourselves," or is that merely another ideal we can't live up to?

What if each of us has the freedom to be a blank canvas that we can each paint as we choose?

Here's the thing: the nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche long ago proposed a radical solution to the challenges I have been outlining.

When Nietzsche looked to the future, he saw the challenges posed by the question of freedom and individuality. And, he realized that Plato was wrong. So, he made a startling and prescient declaration: abstractions enslave us. All abstractions enslave us. Religion. Nationalism. Fascism. Communism. Individualism. Communalism. Conservatism. Liberalism. Democracy . . . .

All traps.

Humanist principles sum it up succinctly: "People matter more than ideas." People matter more than ideas.

That's a hard one to reason yourself into. A fundamentalist can't get there. A fascist can't get there. The black and white world that I was born into did not prepare me to go there.

Nietzsche was very blunt about it: if you believe in an abstraction enough to die for it, not only have you lost your personal freedom, but you are prepared to take away the freedom—and even the lives—of others.

And that's neither free nor moral.

Abstractions enslave us. And so does "the ideal."

Because? Because we human beings don't live in abstractions. We can't act freely and morally in an abstraction. We live in this world, which from moment to moment appears to be a bloody mess!

Nietzsche thought long and hard about this contradiction. How can we walk forward in a world in which abstract ideals enable both our highest aspirations and our basest impulses? Lead to both compassion and murder?

Nietzsche's answer was counterintuitive but profound: each of us must become an artist—a composer, a painter, a poet . . . . Artists.

And the art we create is ourselves. Individual. Unique. Free.

We must find ourselves by embracing our own irrationality through self expression: we were born naked. It's time for drag. We must find both our fun and our moral cores in the face of constant ambiguity.

CONCLUSION

Our theme this month has been play. Psychologist Jean Piaget said, "Play is the answer to the question, 'How does anything new come about?'"

Seminarians nowadays study the work of Rabbi Edwin Friedman. Friedman was both a rabbi and a therapist and later became a consultant on the topic of congregational leadership. Most famously he came up with what is known as family systems theory, a way of considering congregational dynamics as if a congregation were a family. Friedman wrote this:

> the relationship between anxiety and seriousness is so predictable that the absence of playfulness in any institution is almost always a clue to the degree of its emotional regression.

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When institutions get too serious, Friedman said, they stop being adult.

Play. Art. The clothes you choose to drape over the nakedness. Our realities are in full color, if we refuse the ease of requiring them to be black and white.

Not only does *personal* freedom depend upon each of us becoming the artists of our own lives, but also freedom in our culture itself depends upon our encouragement and our compassion toward everyone else painting on the blank canvass of their human existences.

My ability to be the artist of *my* life depends upon your ability to be the artist of your life.

It's time we tell some of those old Greek ideas in our heads: Lighten up.

SOURCES

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