

*Be Excellent to Each Other*

A sermon delivered at the Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario  
Sunday, January 19, 2014

**Reading #1: “Whatever Is True”** Philippians Chapter 4: verse 8

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

**Reading #2: “Be Excellent”** from *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure*

*Bill and Ted are high school students who spend so much time forming their rock band that they’re flunking history. With the help of a man from the future, and a time-traversing phone booth, Bill and Ted travel to the past to learn about the world from some of history’s most influential personalities. In this scene they travel into the future, and see some of the effects their lives have produced.*

**One Of the Three Most Important People in the World:** It's you!

**Ted:** Yeah! It's us!

[to Bill]

**Ted:** Who are we?

[the strangers start playing air guitar, so Bill and Ted play also; more people come out and join them]

**Ted:** Bill, I think they want us to say something.

**Bill:** What should I say?

**Ted:** [shrugs] Make something up.

**Bill:** Be excellent to each other.

[room murmurs appreciatively]

**Ted:** Party on, dudes!

[room approves]

**Bill:** [to Ted] Good one, dude.

[to room]

**Bill:** Well, we gotta get back to our report.

**Ted:** Yeah. We'd take you with us, but it's a history report, not a future report.

**Bill:** Later.

**The Three Most Important People in the World:** Later.

**Sermon/Reflection: “Be Excellent to Each Other”** by Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

Last Sunday, Pope Francis baptized 32 babies in the Sistine Chapel. Pope Francis told their mothers, including one who was married in a civil service [a marriage not technically recognized by the Catholic Church], to have no qualms about breast-feeding their babies right there.

“If they are hungry, mothers, feed them, without thinking twice. Because they are the most important people here,” said Francis, in the same room where he was elected [March 13<sup>th</sup>] as the first non-European pope in 1,300 years.

On Christmas morning Pope Francis left his prepared script to give an invitation to atheists to join the prayerful in “desiring peace.”

And last March Pope Francis referred to those who belong to no religious tradition as “precious allies” in defending the dignity of man, working for peace and protecting creation. [*Christian Century* 1-22-'14, 18]

And I said to myself, “Excellent! What excellent things to say.”

To be excellent is to be remarkably good, exceedingly superior at something.

You might be excellent at sports. Or in music. Or a superior gardener or knitter.

Or you might be unusually good at math or science. Or a really welcoming Pope.

Excellence is the name for a set of luxury Caribbean resorts for adults only. And *Excellence* is a magazine about Porsches. Indeed, an excellent vacation experience, an excellent automobile.

The term “standards of excellence” has been bandied about – some stocks are “excellent” performers. We hail a company – or maybe it hails itself – for its “business excellence.” In modern public relations and marketing “excellence” has become an overused buzzword.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excellence>; accessed 13 January 2014.

“Excellence” tries to convey a good impression, a superior performance, a locus of flourishing. And so we have “Centers for Excellence” everywhere.

Center of Excellence in higher education and in teaching. A Center of Excellence for disaster management and humanitarian aid. A Center of Excellence for assisted living. A Center of Excellence for [US] Homeland Security.

Here in Canada also live a myriad of centres of excellence. [Of course, you spell “Centre” the correct way.] A Centre of Excellence for early childhood development; one for corporate social responsibility. Even a Centre of Excellence for volleyball. Who knew?

And, there exists a Network of Centres of Excellence throughout Canada.

Everyone doing their level best to be the best at whatever they are doing.

The Golden Rule asks us if we are doing our level best to be the best at however we are being, however we are behaving. Are we excellent to each other?

For the ancient Greeks the greatest good, the greatest excellence, was a concept called *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is the happiness that results from a life well-lived, a life that is flourishing.

The person most likely to flourish is the person of practical wisdom, the person who acts in accordance with the Golden Mean.

The Golden Mean is the desirable middle between two extremes, between the extremes of excess and deficiency. For example, in the Aristotelian view, the virtue of

courage, if taken to excess will manifest as recklessness. If courage is deficient it shows itself as cowardice.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_mean\\_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_mean_(philosophy)); accessed 16 January 2014.

The Golden Mean suggests that we need to have the right person doing the right thing, at the right time, to the right extent to have an excellent outcome.

And so, we are generous with our time and money, but not profligate – giving it all away, and certainly not stingy, hoarding all for ourselves.

We are even-tempered, not irritable and snappy, or angry, or seething; but not listless and apathetic either.

We are honest about ourselves – about our strengths and weaknesses – not boastful, or self-disparaging.

We are friendly, but maintain appropriate boundaries.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arete\\_\(excellence\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arete_(excellence)); accessed 13 January 2014.

Above all, Aristotle tells us,



“We are what we repeatedly do; therefore excellence is not an act but a habit.”

The generous, even-tempered, honest, friendly, courageous things that we do – over and over again – our habitual ways of living become our excellent life.

This excellence is the practice of a life time.

But excellence of action, excellence of character, is different for different ethical philosophers.

For the German philosopher Immanuel Kant the greatest good is acting out of duty [out of something he calls the Categorical Imperative – “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law” – Kant’s Golden Rule<sup>1</sup> In other words: act the way you would wish that all other people would act. Thus, you should never, ever lie, not even to save someone else; certainly not to smooth a difficult situation. Reasoning what one’s duty is, and acting out of that duty, are [for Kant] hallmarks of the excellent life.

An aside – Kant thought little of women and their reasoning skills. Excellence could only be achieved by reasonable males.

For the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, the greatest good was that the least number of people suffer, and the greatest number of folks find happiness. The greatest good for the greatest number.

But, it is not your individual happiness that counts the most, but “the greatest amount of happiness altogether.”

And Mill distinguishes between higher pleasures of the mind and of right and moral living and lower pleasures, the pleasures of material happiness.

It’s a belief wittily encapsulated in his statement that “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be [Socrates](#) dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question.”<sup>1</sup>

To live the thoughtful, reasoned, just, morally upright life is – for Mill – to be an excellent person.

For feminist ethicists the fine and cultivated network of our relationships is the greatest good. To be an excellent person is to balance our needs with those of others. We do not lose ourselves in others. We maintain a balance of caring for ourselves as well as caring for others; of using both reason and emotion to lead an excellent life.

Finally in Islam there is a term – *ihsan* – that mean “perfection” or “excellence.” *Ihsan* means “to do beautiful things.” The truly good and righteous Muslim takes their inner faith and shows this faith in all their actions. *Ihsan* calls a Muslim to be socially responsible, to act with the wideness of spirit, generosity, wisdom, and kindness that his faith has taught him. To be excellent in his living faith.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ihsan>; accessed 16 January 2014.

So, all this talk of being excellent, excellence in living, and treating others as you would want to be treated yourself – where does that get us?

Well, for one, we know that we’re not always excellent. Indeed, we are pretty regularly not excellent. We’re human. Being human means that we’re usually operating on the principle of being ‘good enough.’

There was a little girl who had a little curl, right in the middle of her forehead.  
And when she was good, she was very, very good.  
And when she was bad, she was horrid.

You know, sometimes we’re that horrid little kid.

We have lots of reasons to be horrid – somebody cuts us off in traffic; our partner left us; our own kids are acting up; we got a bad, bad diagnosis, and it’s not fair. Life is not fair sometimes. And we react badly.

[Story about Sean]

Sometimes I wonder if we’re testing the ones we love, to see if they really love us back, to see if they’ll really put up with what we know is a very un-excellent self.

I’ve just read a book by a management consultant, Mark Rosen. It’s called *Thank You for Being Such a Pain: Spiritual Guidance for Dealing with Difficult People*.

Now, I really don’t have too many truly difficult people in my life right now. But, you and I know they’re out there. And it never hurts to have some tips from someone else

who's thought long and hard about the subject [and who considers himself to be one of those difficult people, too].

And, truly, what Rosen tells us is a compendium of what ethical philosophers have told us through the ages:

“People do terrible things to each other. Relationships are ripped apart, and though there's often no physical harm, the psychic damage is even more long lasting and painful. [And] all of us have unfinished [psychic, emotional] business. We have difficult relationships in the present, and we have relationships from the past that are unresolved. How do we heal? How do we finish our unfinished business?” [146]

And Rosen gives us some suggestions:

Recognize and understand our emotions – we need to acquire the self knowledge to know what we are feeling, allow ourselves to feel our emotions, and try to understand why those feelings are arising.

Acquiring this self knowledge, and a mastery over our emotions, is part of spiritual health, of living a full and honest, balanced and flourishing, excellent life. [Nobody said an excellent life was necessarily easy.]

Understand and master our anger. Express our anger appropriately, not to inflame but to understand and rectify.

Try to cut down on criticism. We all judge others. Most of us judge ourselves, too. It's automatic. It's intuitive. But, some of us look for faults more than others. And some of us our more quick to judge, more vocal in our judgments. Slow down. Maybe say to ourselves: “Oh, there I go, judging again. What's that all about?” [241]

In reference to following the Golden Rule – do unto others as we would have done unto us – let's first consider what we would have “done unto us.”

Some of us are pretty hard on ourselves – we're our own worst critics, and so we may feel justified in being hard on others, too.

Some of us are pretty judgmental – both to ourselves and others. We might feel justified in being as curt and critical and unkind to others as we are to ourselves.

We need to rethink those parameters. We need to find some Golden Mean. We need to find some balance in our thoughts and our words. We need to rediscover kindness – toward ourselves as well as to others.

Being kind to others doesn't mean being someone that others can run over, misuse or abuse. Just as in feminist ethics, we need to strike a balance between caring for others and caring for ourselves. We need to think about boundaries – what makes us feel uncomfortable, what is beyond our power to do, what is more the bending of ourselves to another's agenda. “Be wise as serpents and gentle as doves.” Matthew 16:10. Be kind. Don't be manipulated.

Forgiveness is not something we do for another person. Forgiveness is something we do for ourselves, so we “can move into the future without being burdened by the grievances of the past.” [254]

Finally, Rosen asks us to respond with loving kindness. Those of us who have a Buddhist meditation practice are familiar with the Mehta Bhavana – the Meditation on Loving Kindness. Rosen urges that we make loving kindness a habit of the heart, an attitude we take into our daily living.

Rosen tells us: “One of the most telling indicators of the authenticity of any spiritual path is the extent to which it develops qualities such as tolerance, self-control, kindness, compassion, gratitude, humility, forgiveness, patience, charitableness, and the desire to serve others.” [238]

“By learning how to control our anger, refrain from criticism, or cultivate patience, we become better people.” [132] Better able to be better neighbors, spouses, friends, citizens. Better able to treat ourselves well, and treat our neighbor well. More able to be excellent to each other.

I spoke about the various ways to excellence: Aristotle’s Golden Mean, Kant’s call to duty, Mill’s character development and the striving for happiness for the greatest number, feminism’s emphasis on care of others and self, Islam’s *ihsan*, a call to “do beautiful things.”

My ethics mentor, Dr. Albert Borgmann, also described the indigenous people’s ethic of care for the circle of life – the self, one’s tribe, the earth – this care encompassing seven generations – the three generations past, the present generation, and three generations into the future. What Dr. Borgmann saw was an ethic of celebration – a celebration of physicality, an intricate knowledge of how one’s world worked, a generosity of spirit, and celebrations of life’s significant passages and of the cycles of the seasons. Life was noticed and celebrated.

And so we return to Bill and Ted, those intrepid explorers of history, past and present, so they could write a history report for their class.

Bill and Ted gift us with two most important ethical, philosophical teachings:

“Be excellent to each other!” and  
 “Party on, dudes!”

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed be. And Amen.