

“The Age of Entitlement”

A sermon delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church on Sunday, October 25, 2009

Today I want to begin by drawing your attention to that very American answer to holding nearly all of the food groups in the palm of your hand: the hamburger. Two competing companies seem to be duking it out to win the hearts of the America.

Burger King, which premiered the assertive slogan “Have it your way” in the 1970s, is currently promoting self-admiration and entitlement on its food wrappers. One proclaims: “You’re special, and you deserve a special sandwich.” In a cross-promotion with the NFL, Burger King also printed bags that said, “You are a BK champion. You eat to win. You grab life by the horns and food by the bun. Big bites, mighty wings, and eating face-first are just a few moves in your MVP playbook. We salute you, champ. And every bite you take. Go on, eat like a champion.”

Hardees also has a new campaign. In order to compete with McDonald’s Big Mac, they have created the “Get what you deserve” campaign, which has a picture of their Monster Burger next to a Big Mac. What you evidently deserve, according to Hardees, is three quarter-pound meat patties and two buns – not Big Mac’s mere three pieces of bread and two patties. Don’t you deserve that?

Have we lost our minds? We have come a long way since the frugality by necessity of the Great Depression. We have come even farther from the “I’m Okay, You’re Okay,” self-proclaimed “Me” decade of the 1970s. And we have arrived at a financial crisis, an exuberant debt load, and consumerism nearly replacing every other American value. We have entered into America’s Age of Entitlement. Historically, *entitlement* meant having a social position or a claim to ownership granted by some legitimate authority. Having a title (or being *entitled*) meant having a clear claim to a social rank or piece of property, such as a lord or duke in British society; a legitimate authority grants that title. It became someone who behaves as royalty even though he is not, and believes he isn’t like everyone else. A fraud, in essence. Maybe you know someone like this, who acts as though she’s better than you?

Maybe you remember a time in your past, maybe before you were shaken by life’s circumstances, when you yourself may have felt this way? That you deserved more than other people.

One of the reasons why I come to church is to remember that no human being grants me value in this world. My value is between God and me. I have inherent value, and I believe everyone else does as well. I come to church to remember that my titles may be something I earned or something I was

granted, but that does not make me better than anyone else. Our survival as a people, I believe, actually depends on helping people to shake this irrational belief that they deserve more than someone else. Entitlement culturally destroys practices of reciprocity, and of obligation, duty to our fellow man, and gratitude for what we have. I believe that the world would in fact be better off if more people realized that they are one (or a few) bad choices away from losing their job, ending their relationship, or going to jail. I used to think a lot about those choice points and I think it did me good. I know this is dramatic, but when I would drive to school to teach in Dallas, I would drive past some really drug-infested neighborhoods and I would think. "I could, in fact, go shoot heroin right now...and everything in my life would change." And I would shake off my chills of a path not chosen and go teach my students, feeling like no matter what happened that day, I had not made that choice. Today I drive past the homeless shelter and the jail.

But this was not, in fact, my choice alone. *Everything* in my life up to that moment had actually supported me to make a different choice: when I was born and to whom, my opportunities in life, my friends, my brain chemistry...many of these data points driven completely by chance. When we see ourselves in the drug addict, the homeless, the laid off, the incarcerated, we treat them and the world differently. And the one thing I believe we are all entitled to is to be treated like a human being. To not be dehumanized as other – or object – without a similar complex network of experience leading them to their present moment. Entitlement is not simply a confident attitude or a healthy feeling of self-worth; many of us struggle with feeling worthy and confident. Entitlement is when people are either oblivious to others' needs, or simply believe that others' needs are not as important as their own. It is the belief that we are deserving of some particular reward or benefit more than someone else, even when the driver is completely random, like some of life's circumstances.

I don't know if you know this, but I really do enjoy a good game of poker. Poker can bring out the best and the worst in people. Poker is about playing the hand that you were dealt, well. Sometimes you are dealt a really great hand. And other times...not so much. We are wired as human beings in such a way that when we see other people's random good fortune, we have difficulty celebrating it. "I should have had that ace..." we think. "They had three good hands in a row...it's my turn." We can even demonize the one who is lucky: "A Natural Straight...JERK!" We can find ourselves even celebrating another's loss – they got what they deserved. It takes conscious effort to remember that the card selection is in fact random. It is so bizarre that we are hardwired to think the world is fair, when you don't have to look that far to discover that it actually is not. People do not get what they

deserve. Some do, some do not. Some because they are in their own way, some not because of any fault of their own. The world is not fair, and so it is up to us to bring that fairness to the world. That's why you cut the cake and your friend gets to choose. When there is only one clear winner, for some reason that entitlement button is tripped; that's what happens to us.

Entitlement is when everything is focused on your own experience, your own outcomes, and your own needs, often at the cost of someone else's. Twinge and Campbell, authors of a book called *The Narcissism Epidemic*, write, "Entitlement is like a ghost...difficult to see in solid form, but increasingly wafting its cold, cloudy fingers into everything...it is fun while it lasts...You live in a fantasy in which the world owes you more than you contribute. You can feel entitled to a flat screen TV without earning the money to pay for it. Park in a handicapped space because you are in a rush...graduate from college and expect a fulfilling job with a six-figure income right away" But this world is a fantasy world.

The real world has changed since I was in college. Evidently today, Twinge and Keith Campbell claim, students are telling college professors, "You work for me." In a recent study cited in their book, one third of the students thought they should be able to reschedule their final exam if it conflicted with their vacation plans. The work world is also showing signs of The Age of Entitlement. Employers have whole sections of books and trainings on how to handle the new (narcissist) employee. This new entitled employee, whose job it is to stand behind a cash register and smile, today needs to know why they are expected to smile, and ask repeatedly to be recognized for it. Today's employees are looking at "what will the company do for them," rather than "what will they do for the company." And some companies are actually hiring "Praise Consultants" to help employers who don't know how to appropriately praise this new breed of employee, to appropriately praise their workforce (with lots of confetti, I have read.) What planet do these people live on? It used to be that *not* being called into the boss' office, *not* being reprimanded or fired, was in fact clarity that we were doing a good job. Do you remember that? Times have indeed changed. People now are seeking praise for even the most obvious thing expected of them. People want to be celebrated and honored in the workplace for the slightest effort.

You can also find entitlement, of course, in pop culture, where the American hero has become someone who strikes it rich with very little effort. The *real* American hero – who is much rarer these days – might just be someone who gets up and works all day, someone who makes a living and doesn't incessantly gripe about it, because (as they say in the Midwest to any misfortune) it could be worse. They could not have a job, or a home, or their health. And based on where we live compared to the rest of the world, for the most part we can say it could be worse. Following the financial crisis,

which Oklahoma has likely only seen the beginning of, really, there has got to be a great “AHA,” where this country wakes up and realizes the value of savings, the importance of limiting wasteful spending and debt, and that if you are working at all you are damned lucky. So what are we in fact entitled to? A job? Healthcare? Our bonus we were supposed to get before the market collapsed? These questions are on the minds of many in the world today.

People are ranked in life, and prisoners often end up at the bottom. Most of you know my spouse is a public defender, and I am ever worried about the Petri dish of the jail that she goes into regularly in order to visit with her clients, especially during flu season. I asked her whether the inmates were going to be vaccinated. It made sense to me: a large population living under the same roof should be high priority, right? She laughed and said there were likely folks who believe they should not be vaccinated at all. But that is the kind of mentality I believe that gets us into trouble, because our lives are so interconnected. I do not believe an inmate deserves to die of the swine flu, no matter what he has done. But if you can't go that far yourself, at least consider the fact that it takes hundreds of people in contact with these inmates everyday to *keep them* incarcerated who will be affected: lawyers, correctional officers, sheriffs, etc. Reminds me of, “Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

The story that Randy read this morning was written by racial justice advocate and author Tim Wise. When we heard him deliver that story at TCC, Randy and I were blown away. It was in the context of understanding the situation we are in regarding racism in this country today, and yet I think it works as a much broader metaphor. Entitlement asks *why should I* take the time to clean that three-day-old crusty pot of gumbo that I neither made nor benefited from? Yes, why? I shouldn't have to. I don't deserve to be punished with work for another's mistake. So it's not only about gifts and rewards, it's also about not doing more than our “fair share.” Did I mention that the world is not fair? It is up to us to bring justice to this world. And why try to salvage the pot in the first place? It's funny, I bet some of you thought like I did when I first heard that story: “I might have just made that pot of gumbo disappear into the trash. Throw the whole pot away!” Very American of us! That's entitled! Let somebody else deal with it, add it to the dump, give away the problem. In Wise's metaphor this is not an option.

So what makes someone willing to clean up a mess they didn't even create? What makes someone take ownership in the problems of others? In the difficulties of another human being – or a people? Interested enough to get involved? To take action? Well in Wise's story, he has been awakened to the problem in a way he can not ignore. He has a broader view of the world now and cannot ignore

the stench; he looks the problem in the face and does not turn away. I think we must look both difficulty and beauty in the face to have the strength to do what needs to be done in this world. Tim Wise understands that ignoring the problem does not make it go away. He says we ought to clean it up, "Not because we are to blame for its creation, but because we are responsible for its eradication." Because we are alive, here and now, with the problem. People will tell you that you can't change the way things are; others will ridicule you for even trying, and oftentimes your efforts will fail. They will, in fact, likely fail more often than they succeed. But that doesn't matter, because there is redemption in struggle. Wise continues:

Win or lose – and don't get me wrong, we indeed fight in the hopes of winning true justice – there is something to be said for confronting the inevitable choice one must make in this life, between collaborating with or resisting injustice, and choosing the latter. There is something to be said for knowing you did all you could to stop a war, eliminate racism, or improve your community for the good of all. There is something to be said for a good night's sleep, and the ability to wake in the morning, look in the mirror, and never doubt that if today were your last, that you would have lived a life of integrity. For although we never know when our efforts will succeed, or even if they will at all, we do know one thing as surely as we know that the sun will rise and set each day; we know what will happen if we DON'T do the work: nothing.

This country was founded on freedom not for some, but for all, and American values ought not include entitlement. Anthony Robinson wrote in the Seattle Times:

Entitlement signals a rejection of the very DNA of America. Our national genetic code, at least at one time, was patterned on respect for the common man and woman. It was sequenced by a belief in the dignity of human life that's not the consequence of having, but of being...In the end, it's the entitled who, however rich, are truly poor. Instead of knowing life as a gift, life turns into something that's taken for granted -- or worse, begrudged. That's real poverty, and no sense of entitlement can alleviate it.

Yes: I am arguing that entitlement is actually Anti-American, at least in the America I believe in. I don't know if you heard this, but Pat Buchanan was in the news this week proclaiming that white Christian conservatives are losing their country. They *are* losing their country, Mr. Buchanan. Because it never was *their* country. It has always been *our* country, and may neither side forget it.

What does our liberal religious tradition say about entitlement? Why is this a religious topic? Next week Marlin will be preaching on our new theme for November, which is gratitude. We teach gratitude to our children to counter entitlement. We remind ourselves that we did not in fact create this day, so that we can remember that no matter what we believe about God, we can be clear that we are in fact not God, and we are not worshipping anything that is not GOD. Not ourselves, not money, not our own good fortune. We need one another. Our destinies are interwoven. Our lives are entwined and

interdependent with the lives of whomever we even might think may in fact be the least among us. Real Religion teaches us humility, helps us to understand what we are bound to. That word comes from *religare* – to bind – and I imagine the bond as threads of a tapestry. So religion is about realizing to what (or to whom) we are bound. Religion helps us remember we are not isolated in this world; that our actions are not in a vacuum.

And, I would argue, Real Religion has expectations of you, and is not merely a vehicle for dream fulfillment or a way to placate your current privilege. Our faith asks us to take responsibility for what is ours, and to pay attention to the funk in the world (that smell we ought not ignore) and when we can...do something about it. Maybe it would be helpful if we had a wrapper on our symbolic American burger that not only showed the nutrients and the ingredients, but listed the name of every single person who made that burger possible, who helped it arrive in your hand, so in our fast food world of abundance we might not forget those who make our lives possible. From the hand that fed the cow to the person that gave them the job, the person who cleans the slaughterhouse floor to the musician who plays the song that helps him get through his day. From the person that grew the tomato and the lettuce to the person who helped bring water to that field. From the delivery driver who brought it to your state to the person who baked the bread. From the person who put it in the microwave to the person who folded down that sack and placed it in your hand.

And what if the slogan read instead: “From our souls, to yours.”