

Sermon by the Rev. Bradley C. Dyche
8/12/2007
Luke 12:32-40

I am not one to preach on movies, or songs. I like more from the heart analogies, stories from my own journey in life, or the world as it is currently unfolding. But, at least in Croton, there is not much news except summer and parishioners on vacation. And my Father is here this weekend; therefore, airing my family's laundry seems ill advised. And this one movie, in all honesty, keeps crying out to me to riff and ponder. In fact, a parishioner a few weeks ago commented about reading the book the movie is loosely based on, "A Prayer for Owen Meany," by John Irving. And I caught the movie on television a month or so ago. I also keep telling Rachel Norfleet, who directs our Christmas pageant, that she should watch it for its particularly keen observations as to what it takes emotionally and otherwise for someone to do something as ridiculous as run a Christmas pageant. In the movie, the directress is last seen, slunk over the railing of the back stoop of the church, smoking. The movie is called, "Simon Birch," and it has a profoundly theological undercurrent. If I ruin the ending, you only have yourself to blame. It is about ten years old. And as it mocks the Episcopal Church and at least one Episcopal priest, it merits a reaction.

In the movie, there is a young teenager, Simon Birch, who is stunted in growth, sight, voice, and every other feature, except wisdom. In fact, he is so small that he is asked every year to play the plum role of the baby Jesus in the aforementioned pageant. Like Jesus, though, Simon Birch is not often welcomed into the world, because of his differences. But Simon Birch does not listen to his detractors. He believes that he has been given those "gifts" for some purpose, some design that God has for him. And through the challenges and the pain of growing up, he holds onto his notion. Simon Birch is even kicked out of his Episcopal Church. As the baby Jesus, he gets a little to handsy with the bosom of the girl playing Mary. But still, Simon believes that God will use him for some greater good.

And with all that blatant foreshadowing, you know that the moment will indeed come. On a snowy, wintry day, Simon unwittingly ends up chaperoning a church outing, even post ex-communication. It is a retreat for children who are half his age but exactly his size. They travel on a large yellow bus, and the bus bumps merrily along, the wheels on the bus, going round, round, round. The kids are even singing, when the bus-driver swerves to avoid hitting a single deer. You can imagine what happens next. The bus careens down a mountain and ends up in a lake, water coming in the windows and doors of the bus. The adults, including the priest, are knocked out. They are drowning. It falls to Simon Burch to save everyone. Because of his size, the children listen and relate to him. Because he is older, he knows what to do. And finally, only because he is small, can he be rescued through the small windows of the bus after everyone else, including the adults, has been saved. It seems like everything Simon has believed is true. He was meant to save those children. He served as the hands of God.

But the reason that I bring up Simon Birch is that I want to ask a very specific question about Simon's courageous act. It is a question that I am left with after the film, and the reason that I want to talk about the movie. Supposing that Simon Birch were a real person, would you

believe, that God created Simon Birch with all of his difficulties for this one courageous purpose? Or, did Simon Birch, who was not a typical child, become a hero because he believed that he would become a hero and then became one when the situation presented itself? In other words, was Simon Birch good because his body, his heart, was a good one innately even genetically as created by God, or was Simon Birch good because he believed that he would be good and therefore became good?

The question might seem silly, even one of semantics, a chicken versus the egg situation. And yet, Christianity hangs in the balance, because it is basically asking how we become good, and how our world will become good, even more focused on God. As with all good questions, to answer that question, I must have an answer to another question. Namely, I have to ask if God is even in the business of being puppet-master, tooling with specific genetics, to make Simon Birch-like creatures ready for specific situations or not. Does God even function as Simon seems to believe? Is the first possibility to my question even possible?

Though many people say things like, “it’s for the best,” or “it’s all part of God’s plan” in the midst of tragedies, as Simon did, I have to say that it is simply not true. God does not want us to suffer, does not cause our problems. And, God is also not in the business of sweeping down from heaven to save us, much to the chagrin of all of us at some point or another. Instead, God allows God’s creation to unfold itself, evolving and changing as we will. God has empowered us with grace and the Holy Spirit and given us an example through his Son to do that, but the responsibility to make God’s plan happen here on earth is ours. Therefore, the task to find meaning and a use in Simon Birch’s un-average-ness, was Simon Birch’s task in life, not God’s. It is simply in his situation that he chose wisely.

And so, I would say that we are not genetically pre-disposed for good or evil. We all have both, we are yin and yang. But we still need to answer how we focus ourselves and our world on the good. And I believe that the answer can be found in today’s Gospel reading. In today’s Gospel, Jesus addresses his disciples, his “little flock.” He says, “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.” And Jesus says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” And in these words, along with the idea that God does not mess with our Genetic Code, is our real “final solution,” to the question of how to become focused on God?

Jesus says that where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also. And I want to loosely translate treasures as our “actions,” whatever we do. Because I really believe that Jesus is saying here that who we are is connected to what we do. And even more, I believe that he is saying that who we are, our identity and our hearts, only come from the actions we take in the world. Our hearts come from our actions, not the other way around, which is how much of the world sees it. Instead, we cannot not forgive and still believe we have a heart of gold. And so to become caring people in our hearts, we have to first choose to be and be caring, forgiving, enemy-loving people. And so to find God, we have to choose to do good, we have to choose to give more, share more, forgive more, and simply do it.

And so, in a very real sense, Simon Birch was a hero by two counts. He chose to give meaning to his circumstances when most would have cowered and cried. He put his treasure there. AND because of that, when the situation presented itself, his heart followed, along with every other part of his scared, cold, wet body.

And this is why we as Christians are Baptized, as we baptize Lola Grace. In Baptism, we are saying that we will turn to God, accept and share the love of God, that we will work in this sometimes hostile, often mean world, toward making God's peace and care better known on this planet. Baptism is declaring where our treasure will be, even before our heart, or the heart of our world, can totally be there. But the point is, if we choose it, if we choose it on Lola Grace's behalf, and on our own, if we put our treasure there, all of our hearts, and the heart of our world, will follow.