

The Arc Toward Justice – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

We've always tried to talk with our daughter Mathea about the books she reads and the movies she watches. When she was small, we were typically the ones directing the conversation, but somewhere along the way, our roles were reversed a bit. Now when we see a movie, musical, or play together—especially one Mathea likes—she nearly always begins a conversation afterwards by asking us: “who was your favorite character?” Most of the time that’s a fairly easy question to answer. I like Hermione. I like Professor McGonagall. I like Thor. I like Captain America. I like Sam Gamgee. I like Legolas. I like Spock. I like Baloo.

But sometimes, especially now that her reading and viewing tastes have broadened, Mathea’s question is more difficult to answer. I don’t always find a character in every story that I feel I can like. Sometimes I’m not sure I should like any of them—none of them seem good or just—and yet novelists and playwrights (storytellers) manipulate me into liking their characters even though those characters fail horribly.

Take the 2014 Tony-Award-winning musical comedy A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder that Mathea and I saw a few weeks ago. In it, the young protagonist, Monty, kills off the seven relatives who stand between him and the earldom. As I watched Monty maneuver each of these relatives into humorous yet deadly situations, I found myself feeling a bit guilty, hoping he would succeed in murdering them one by one. And I’m sure I wasn’t alone. Clearly the playwright intends for the audience to sympathize with Monty despite his moral flaws and despite the lack of justice in the story.

But A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder should be classified as a farce—it uses humorous exaggeration to tell Monty’s story. We can laugh it off. We can joke about how one heir was decapitated when Monty added too much weight to the character’s barbells and he dropped the barbell on his neck, and how another character was stung to death by bees because Monty doused his clothing with lavender. We can laugh at the story and its characters without advocating murder. We can walk away from the story without critiquing or mourning its lack of justice.

But what do we do with the morally unsettling stories of protagonists like Walter White in TV’s “Breaking Bad” series or Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray? In the very popular “Breaking Bad,” after being diagnosed with stage three lung cancer, high school chemistry teacher Walter White turns to a life of crime—using his chemistry skills to produce meth-amphetamine—in order to ensure his family’s financial stability following his death. While White’s choices are clearly illegal as well as immoral, repugnant, and destructive to others and himself, “Breaking Bad” viewers have found themselves at moments hoping that White doesn’t get caught, hoping that justice isn’t realized.

Most of you probably haven’t read Oscar Wilde’s Victorian novel The Picture of Dorian Gray. Even though Wilde got in a lot of trouble for writing it and I found it thoroughly unsettling, I would argue that it’s great fiction. Like Walter White, Oscar Wilde’s protagonist Dorian Gray repeatedly makes choices that lead him on a continuing downward spiral. Dorian Gray “sells his soul” for a fountain of youth—beauty and sensual fulfillment—and while he outwardly continues to exude beauty and youthfulness year after year, the initially flawless beauty of the portrait of himself that hangs in his home transforms to reflect the increasing age and ugliness of his soul. Antiheroes like Walter White and Dorian Gray give me an upset stomach. They keep me awake at night. I long for repentance and

justice. I abhor their moral depravity, but I'm drawn into their lives by the power and complexity of their narratives.

So where am I going with these morally depressing stories? To Jacob, of course. Jacob might not be in quite the same class of slime-bag antiheroes as Walter White and Dorian Gray, but I've always been conflicted about how to view him for these very same reasons. He has some really serious character flaws. Does he experience repentance? Is justice reached in his story? In the end I'm conflicted about what to do with Jacob and his story. Is he one of the great patriarchs of our Judeo-Christian heritage as he's often presented? Or is he simply a trickster who selfishly steals from his own family and even challenges God to get what he wants? Where is the justice in his story? Why is he here, and what should we do with him?

According to Hebrew University Professor Emeritus Yair Zakovitch, in the oral tradition that predated the Bible, Jacob was "the archetypal trickster, cunning and wise, whose exploits produced endless laughter among listeners." People knew who and what Jacob was because they had heard and told stories about him all their lives. But that's not exactly the Jacob we have in Genesis now. Jacob, our protagonist, elicits more frustration than laughter. Zakovitch argues that biblical writers wanted to put their own slant on Jacob while still allowing their readers to recognize Jacob as the man they knew. Zakovitch identifies two methods writers used in crafting Jacob's character. Their first tactic was to tell "Jacob's acts of deceit" along with his punishment for those acts so as not to suggest his behavior should be emulated. Second, "writers also took pains to justify Jacob, each writer according to his own needs, ideologies, and methods." Zakovitch believes that "the tension between these two tendencies is what created a character of such depth and appeal, a character that continues to fascinate and, despite his morally questionable acts, to capture our imagination and sympathies."

In our Old Testament reading today, we only have one episode from the long Genesis account of Jacob's life, but I think you know the broader biblical story of Jacob that Zakovitch is analyzing. As you'll remember, Genesis sets up the adversarial relationship between Jacob and Esau even before they were born. They struggled in Rebekah's womb, and when they were born, Jacob came out grasping his twin brother's heel, already fighting him for a better place in the world. The story recounts how Jacob talked his brother Esau out of Esau's birthright and how he dressed up like Esau and deceived their father Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing. But along with these acts of deceit, we are given kernels of justification for Jacob's actions. Esau agreed to exchange his birthright for a meal, and Rebekah encouraged and assisted Jacob in securing Esau's blessing from Isaac. The story also suggests that there was a kind of justice in Jacob's story as well. Jacob paid for his deceptions by being exiled from his family, by being tricked into working fourteen years rather than just seven in order to marry Rachel, and by having his favorite son stolen from him later in his life. So rather than focus solely on his "acts of deceit," we see movement toward justice across the long years of the Genesis account of Jacob's story, and we begin to develop sympathy for Jacob as the deceiver becomes the deceived.

I think there is also a suggestion that Jacob comes to regret, albeit somewhat selfishly, his treatment of Esau. In the section that precedes the passage we have today, Jacob flees from his uncle Laban who has turned against him. After working twenty years for Laban, Laban and his sons become jealous of Jacob's success and Jacob must flee from them as well. But before he returns home as God has directed him, Jacob sends presents on ahead to Esau in hopes that hundreds of cattle, goats, sheep, donkeys, and camels will dampen Esau's anger toward him. Perhaps to give Esau further time to "cool" or perhaps to have a last opportunity to strategize, Jacob sends his family and remaining flocks across the Jabbok River from him so that he can spend one last night alone before confronting Esau. But as the passage we read this morning reveals, Jacob doesn't enjoy that night alone. Instead he

spends the night wrestling with an unknown man. It seems possible and even likely that for some of the nightlong wrestling match, Jacob may have thought he was physically struggling against Esau. Only toward the end of the passage when Jacob wrangles yet another blessing out of this person, do we get confirmation that the unknown man with whom Jacob struggles is God.

It seems to me that reading Jacob's nightlong struggle with God as his "moment of grace" or redemption would be stretching the intent of the story, but clearly it marks a significant event in Jacob's journey as he moves toward confronting the brother he wronged. Jacob has been a struggler from the womb. This story reinforces that trait by showing us that he will risk death not only by confronting Esau but also by refusing to let go of God until he receives a blessing—even though the sun is about to rise and seeing God in the full light of day would bring him death. Just as he hung on to Esau's heel when he was born, Jacob hangs on to the man here until he is blessed and renamed "Israel." He wins the battle and gains the blessing, but we are told he retains a physical mark from this struggle—he "limps" away from the battle toward the promised land and his brother Esau.

Jacob has come face to face with God and survived. Because of this, when he comes face to face with Esau in the next chapter of Genesis, he recognizes God there as well. Jacob tells Esau, *Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God*. Perhaps it's his face-to-face knowledge of God that earns Jacob a place among the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith.

As with Jacob and Esau, the parable in our Gospel lesson for today contrasts two characters—the unjust judge and the persistent widow, the powerful and the powerless. The judge admits that he doesn't fear God or respect people, and yet he possesses complete power in this situation and culture. Without the benefit of a jury, all judicial decisions rest in his hands, and he is completely unfit for the office he holds. Pitted against him is a widow who has repeatedly asked him for justice. The judge has been ignoring her requests for a long time, and now he realizes he's tired of listening to her. In an act contrary to how Jesus has characterized him, the judge surprisingly grants her request for justice.

Coming immediately after his teaching on the coming of the kingdom of heaven, Luke's Jesus introduces this parable to the disciples by telling them that it's about *their need to pray always and not to lose heart*. Jesus reinforces this message by adding at the end of the parable that God will certainly grant justice much more quickly than this unjust judge if they are diligent in prayer and faith as they wait for the Son of Man's coming.

Like Jacob's story, the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow brings to the forefront questions of justice. In their culture widows had few rights, yet this woman's request is deemed "just" by both Jesus and the judge. Despite that, until he grows tired of listening to the widow, he avoids granting her justice. Through the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow, Luke's Jesus reminds the disciples and us that we need to keep praying for justice, but he also reminds us that we need to help bring justice to the world by looking out for the helpless among us.

In a Christianity Today interview published this month, Jimmy Carter says he believes race relations in the United States are worse now than they were in the 60s and 70s, but he expresses hope—hope that individual Christians as well as churches will take up the challenge of reconciliation work. Like Carter, we see signs of racial injustice in our world every day, and we wonder how long we'll have to wait for justice. We don't know how long the persistent widow had to ask before the judge grew tired and granted her justice. In Jacob's story, justice seemed to come in small doses spread across a lifetime. Esau probably felt it took an especially long time in coming.

Theodore Parker, the 19th-century Unitarian minister and abolitionist whose metaphor about historical progress has been often paraphrased and quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr., President Obama, and others, said: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. [But] I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

When we think about the challenges of racial injustice in our nation and world today, we don’t know how long we’ll have to keep asking, how long we’ll have to keep believing, how long we’ll have to keep struggling before justice prevails, but Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson today that we have reason for great hope: God is a just judge.

Like Jacob and the unjust judge, we are all flawed characters. But God works through flawed characters as well as more complete ones. Whether we’re Jacob or the unjust judge, Esau or the persistent widow, we have a role to play in the struggle to restore justice to our world.

What does that mean? I think it means more than putting a sign in our yard or a post on Facebook. It requires figuring out how to be the church that Christ intends us to be. It requires working to understand and to be understood. It requires taking some risks and failing. If the “long arc of the universe is truly going to bend toward justice,” I think it means sacrificing what we value most—our time, our money, and ourselves. Like Jacob, the struggle is likely to take all night and we will certainly emerge from it with scars, but the vision of Christ for the world is worth all that and more.

References

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