

## Foolishness and Worth – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14: 1, 7-14

Thursday evening I was in my COR 101 film lab watching the first half of the epic film “Lawrence of Arabia” with the 20 new freshmen in my class. If you haven’t seen “Lawrence of Arabia,” you aren’t alone; none of my students had seen it, and I just watched it from beginning to end for the first time last year after a student’s grandparents recommended it to me. Since then, I’ve watched it multiple times.

“Lawrence of Arabia” is loosely based on the autobiographical account of Oxford-bred T. E. Lawrence and his adventures as a British officer. He worked to unite the various tribes of Arab Bedouins against the German-supported Turkish armies during World War I. The film opened in theatres in 1962 when I was a toddler. I guess my parents didn’t think I was ready for 222 minutes of desert warfare at that point in my life. The film was a huge success, taking seven of the ten Academy Award nominations it received—Best Director, Best Picture, Best Color Cinematography, Best Color Art & Set Decoration, Best Sound, Best Music Score, and Best Film Editing. In a tight race though, Peter O’Toole who plays Lawrence lost the Best Actor award to Gregory Peck in “To Kill a Mockingbird,” another great classic you should experience if you haven’t already.

“Lawrence of Arabia” is not typical of the kind of movies I usually enjoy. First of all, I dislike and avoid war movies. Secondly, there are no female-speaking parts in this film. We get a few glimpses of women and girls serving heaping baskets of manna to ravaged warriors, but nothing beyond that. Women have no voice in this masculine world of the Arabian desert. Yet every time I watch the first hour and a half of “Lawrence of Arabia,” I imagine what it must have been like to sit in a 1962 theatre watching this movie in the latest film format, Super Panavision 70. At one point in the film an American reporter asks Lawrence why he loves the desert, and Lawrence answers that “it is clean.” At home in our dirty living room, that desert still feels clean. Its vastness and beauty are overwhelming—the different shades of brown, the way light changes what you can and can’t see. In a large, old theatre it must have felt like you were a part of the desert along with Lawrence.

Unlike Teresa Holden who preached last week, I can’t remember all the details of the movie “The Ten Commandments.” But as I watch Lawrence I can picture Moses and the children of Israel wandering around in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. In the film’s first hour, Lawrence is transported from a minor cartography position in Cairo to the desert where he becomes the charismatic, self-appointed prophet and leader of multiple warring tribes of Bedouins. He leads them across the seemingly impassable Nefud Desert. He is their Moses. At one point when he is questioned about crossing the Sinai desert with only his “children,” his

two servant boys, he responds: “Moses did.” With promises of gold, Lawrence leads the tribes in an assault and capture of the beautiful port city of Aqaba from the Turks. But once they escape the desert and take Aqaba, their “promised land,” the Bedouins, like the Israelites, rebel. They chastise Lawrence because they don’t find any gold and they plunder the beautiful city they have been seeking.

Our scriptures today tell us that we, like these Bedouins, can be a foolish people. Both our Old Testament reading and our Psalm remind us of how the Israelites failed God. In Jeremiah we hear God presenting a very strong case against the Israelites and their offspring. Instead of being thankful for God’s leadership “in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives,” the Israelites foolishly “defiled [God’s] land,” “went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves.” According to the prophet, people become what they worship. By squandering God’s purpose and plan for them, Jeremiah says the Israelites have become worthless to God. These are strong words. These are frightening words. They remind me of the hell, fire, and brimstone sermons I grew up with—that my mother loved—that sent me home scared on Sunday nights and kept me awake for hours as I debated the fate of my soul and waited for the rapture.

Scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier argues that Jeremiah’s criticism continues to the Israelites’ children’s children, to the Israelites of Jeremiah’s time. Jeremiah accuses the priests and other leaders of his day of not really knowing God and of ignoring the law or Torah. Instead they preach what they “hear in the cult of Baal.” They have “changed their glory for something that does not profit”—false, empty gods. God, “the fountain of living water,” wants to fill them, but they have built “cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” They have abandoned God’s glory for worthlessness.

Israel’s failures and God’s anguish over them are recounted again in Psalm 81 which we read together earlier. The Psalmist calls for an abandonment of false gods and a commitment to the one true God. Both these texts remind us that humans can be a very foolish people. We don’t listen, we make poor choices, we disobey.

If these first two texts are telling us how not to live foolish, worthless lives, our two New Testament lessons are giving us instructions for good, worthwhile living. In our Gospel passage from Luke 14, we find parallels between Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees’ behavior and the cases presented against the Israelites in our first two texts. As is often the case, eating brings the people in this story together. Jesus is at a meal, this time at the home of a “leader of the Pharisees.” In verses 2-6 that are omitted from our reading this morning, we learn that Jesus has already offended his host and the other guests and violated the law by healing a man of dropsy in the midst of a dinner party on the Sabbath. Then, according to Luke, after observing the guests grabbing up the places of honor at the table as quickly as they could, Jesus tells a parable in which he boldly criticizes them for this kind of behavior.

Seating at a dinner in other cultures can be very important. When we lived in Norway, in an effort to prevent us from offending anyone, we were instructed in correct seating protocol. Norwegians don't jockey for the best seats at the table, but there are standard procedures that dictate who sits in particular seats. The guest of honor is typically seated to the left of the host, and it is that guest's responsibility to give the "takk for mat" (thank you for the food) speech after the main course. The more formal the dinner, the more lengthy and detailed the "takk for mat" speech typically becomes. At a large dinner we attended to celebrate the completion of a colleague's doctorate, for example, the speech was quite lengthy (at least 20-30 minutes), and it included vivid descriptions of everything from the luscious green beans to the sparkling cutlery.

Seating at the Pharisees' table was equally important to them. It demonstrated their worth or importance, but Jesus found their actions worthless because they were trying to bestow honor upon themselves. In contrast to their self-promoting behavior, Jesus challenged them toward charity and grace-filled ways of living. Instead of sitting in the best seats at the table, he tells them to sit in the worst. They shouldn't give themselves honor; they should earn and be awarded honor by others. Instead of inviting their friends, relatives, and neighbors for dinner, they should invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Throughout Luke's gospel, we see Jesus defending the poor and including them where they wouldn't otherwise be permitted. Here again Jesus shockingly reverses the prevailing behavior of the world. He shows them how to live lives of worth for God and one another—not lives in which they will be honored immediately, but according to Jesus, lives in which they "will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

I don't think we are a whole lot different than the Israelites or the Pharisees; at least I'm not most of the time. We may not have statues of fertility gods in our living rooms, but we may place too much value on our homes or other material possessions. We may not plunder the good gifts that God gives us, but we may forget God's faithfulness to us while we were in the desert. We may not grab the places of honor (if there are those) at the dinners we attend, but most of us choose seats by our friends or at least by people we know or want to know. We're more likely to invite people like ourselves to our homes for dinner than the disadvantaged.

Soon we will take our places at the table because Christ has made a place here for us all. As we do that, let's remember that God continues to call us away from our foolishness to the life that Jesus demonstrates in our gospel lesson and the writer of Hebrews reminds us of in the litany of virtuous actions presented in chapter 13. "Let mutual love continue." "Show hospitality to strangers." "Remember those who are in prison." Honor marriage. "Keep your lives free from the love of money." "Be content with what you have."

Let's not be overwhelmed by the enormity of what is asked of us here. Any love we share, and any good we do pleases God. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, [we can] continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name." Let's "not neglect to do good and to share what [we] have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

God is asking you and me over for dinner today. Will you come?