

“Pretend:Plays::Reality:Ritual”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, June 13, 2021

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ

website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/sermons/>

Scripture Text:

Exodus 13:3, 6-9 [NLT]

OPENING

(*Cartoon Amy Gibbs clipped and sent from LAST Sunday’s Denver Post. Who says “no such thing as coincidence”?!*)



SERMON THOUGHTS

As I said last Sunday, in this series where we’re looking at the overlap of theater and theology, the underlying idea is that both theater *and* theology work at conveying **transcendent truth** but in different ways. Not unlike trying to “keep a wave upon the sand” or “hold a moonbeam in your hands”, as the Mother Abbess sang of Maria in *The Sound of Music*.

The difference is that theater (or drama or film) *knows* it is make believe or pretend or fiction, even if it’s telling a “true story”. I mean, there’s always a script, a

cast of actors, a stage or a screen, lighting, music, effects, and most important, an audience. By definition, this is “make believe”; the theatrical production is not the actual story it is portraying.

By contrast, theology (or religion or ritual) understands itself to be engaging with reality – Ultimate Reality – even if it’s using a parable to make it’s point.

And so, we end up with the sermon title that conveys today’s message: “Pretend is to Plays as Reality is to Ritual”. The point to keep in mind is that, while theater can just be about entertainment, it can also be about education, even transformation of the viewer’s heart and mind.

By contrast, theology (or religion or ritual) is never about entertainment. It is always about education and transformation of the subject’s heart and mind because, by definition, it is about the work of describing Ultimate Reality, even mediating a connection between Ultimate Reality and human beings.

MORE SERMON THOUGHTS

One of the features of ancient Greek theater was the chorus: A group – sometimes composed of just a few persons, sometimes much larger – that had several functions, two of which being:

1. It served as a “collective character” in the play:
 - ✓ Giving advice
 - ✓ Expressing opinions
 - ✓ Asking questions
 - ✓ Sometimes even taking an active part in the action.

2. It frequently served as an ideal spectator, reacting to events and characters as the playwright might hope the audience would.

[*History of Theater* (7th ed.). Oscar G. Brockett. (1995). p. 26]

For instance, if you went to see a play of the well-known parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke's Gospel, you might experience one of the scenes involving the chorus like this...

Chorus: We invoke your attention, O Congregation gathered here this morning. Listen and learn new insights from our tale of a bitter heart.

Older Brother: Father, I am amazed. Returning from working in your fields, I hear the sounds of music, dancing, and revelry coming from your house. Tell me...what is going on?

Chorus: Your brother has come home. He spent his (as Father) inheritance in wild living in a foreign land but has now returned. I have dressed him in a fine robe and placed a costly ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. The fattened calf has been killed, and we are preparing a feast to celebrate because the one who was lost is found.

Older Brother: "The one who was lost is found"?! This news makes me angry! Bitterness is filling my heart. I will not go in to the feast.

Chorus (as Father): My joy has turned to sadness. Son, please come and join the celebration for your brother. Why do you stay outside in the dark?

Older Brother: Father, all these years I've slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your

money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf! I cannot rejoice when I am not justly rewarded as well!

Chorus: Congregation gathered here this morning:
Behold the older brother!

This is the dutiful son who stayed in his father's house and worked his father's fields with no feast given in his honor. He chooses anger and envy as his rewards. He denies himself the happiness of celebrating his brother's return.

Let each one look to their own heart, for all have harbored these feelings!

Acknowledge your own resentment when good fortune favors another. Turn away from the dark and come into the light.

[The Prodigal's Brother with Greek Chorus
(Mary Moore, 6/10/21)]

By definition, that was "make believe" – it was a skit – teaching a make believe story called a parable. And it was aimed at educating, with the chorus playing the parts of both the father and the audience. It's a wonderfully complex part of theater!

And while it may have been entertaining, it was about education: Teaching us what? To beware: The hard heart of the older brother can actually appear in any one of us.

What about ritual and reality? That's a very different scene, pardon the pun! For this, let's go back to the Scripture text that was read earlier: the story of the observance of Passover in Exodus 13.

TO THE SCRIPTURES

It is very important to note that, while Exodus 13 is part of the drama of the actual exodus from Egypt, it is also where God commands this event to be re-enacted annually. That re-enactment is liturgy; it is worship. A part of it, invoking the Greek chorus once again, goes something like this:

Pastor Steve: Why is this night different from all other nights?

Chorus: On all other nights, we eat either leavened or unleavened bread. Why, on this night, do we eat only matzah, which is unleavened bread?

Chorus: On all other nights, we eat vegetables and herbs of all kinds. Why, on this night, do we eat bitter herbs especially?

Chorus: On all other nights, we never think of dipping herbs in the water or anything else. Why, on this night, do we dip the parsley in salt water and the bitter herbs in *haroset*?

Chorus: On all other nights, everyone sits up straight at the table. Why, on this night, do we recline at the table?

[From Mary Moore's *The Family Treasury of Jewish Holidays* by Malka Drucker, illustr. by Nancy Patz (Little, Brown & Co., 1999), 105]

Pastor Steve: The general answer to all these questions and to everything else odd about tonight is that *avadim hayinu*, Once we were slaves:

Chorus with Congregation: “Once, we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us out from there with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. And if the Holy One had not brought our ancestors forth from Egypt, then we and our children and our children’s children would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. And even if all of us were wise, all of us elders, all of us full of knowledge of the Torah, we would still be obligated to perform the *mitzvah* of recounting the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

And the more one elaborates upon the departure from Egypt, the more praiseworthy one is.”

[Ira Steingroot, *Keeping Passover* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 124]

There are at least two things going on here:

1. The Hebrew people – whether faithful Jews or simply cultural or ethnic Jews – are keeping their identity alive and current, generation-by-generation, as they tell the foundational story of their tribe.
2. The faithful Jews are actually experiencing God in their midst. This is ritual; it is not theater. It may be dramatic, but it is drama/play. It believes it is dealing with and mediating reality – Ultimate Reality – not make believe.

In his book, *Keeping Passover*, Ira Steingroot writes, “The Mishnah requires that *Haggadah* begin in shame, our slavery, and end in glory, our redemption. Our liberation was not something done once and no longer relevant, but affects us to this day. No matter how old we are or how much we know, we must tell the story anew every year. Indeed, the more we tell it, the better it is.” [Ibid., 124-125]

Christian liturgy has the same purpose: The Christmas pageants, the Easter passion plays, the cantatas, baptism and holy communion, all of it...is ritual that is dealing with and mediating reality – Ultimate Reality – not make believe.

CONCLUSION

So, what's the point of all this?

1. By exploring some of the differences between theater and religious ritual, I find it easier to appreciate both to a greater degree.
2. I can allow and celebrate the way the two forms of communication differ in their approach, yet attempt to convey meaningful reflection upon and deep truths about the human condition, even if part of that is entertainment.
3. I can identify aspects of theater in religious ritual, and I can identify aspects of ritual in theater. So, I am more enriched in my experience of both.
4. And, having this background will help us with the next two segments of this series, dealing with the conflict between theater and the church, as institutions, and the roles of both in society.

Let us pray...