

Week Six - Embracing the Paradox

Assigned Reading: Chapters 7-10

John 3:16-17

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Psalm 8:1, 3-8

1 O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. **3** When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; **4** what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? **5** Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. **6** You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, **7** all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, **8** the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. **9** O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Brief Summary:

In Chapter Seven, Kate discovers that the last tumor in her body has inexplicably disappeared. Much to her surprise and delight, she no longer needs to pursue further radiation treatment! At a routine check-up appointment months later, however, the surgeon finds another dark spot in her tests that he believes is cancerous. She worries about her family, particularly her young son, and how they will fare once she is gone. Eventually, she finds out that the “dark spot” was actually just a fatty deposit. This experience is told within the context of her reflections on three understandings of time in the Christian tradition: tragic, apocalyptic, and pastoral. Apocalyptic time, she claims, is the time in which “the veil has been lifted and now we see ourselves on the brink” (124). While perhaps terrifying in some sense, Bowler claims that apocalyptic time brings a startling sense of clarity.

In Chapter Eight, Kate shares about her struggles with her evolving sense of identity. Although she may not be cured, she can now consider herself a cancer survivor. The disease which defined her life for the last several years is now suddenly gone. She is stuck in this awkward, in-between place where she can't go back, but she's not sure how to go forward either. The tools that got her to this point are no longer effective or pertinent. Kate wrestles with the idea of “before” and “after” this significant moment in her life. In a moment of raw honesty and vulnerability, she wonders if the truths she's gleaned through her cancer journey were worth the suffering. Maybe life was better before.

In Chapter Nine, Kate reveals that she has a hard time feeling like her body is still her home after all the surgeries and treatments. She remembers when she first began her treatments, she experienced a closeness to God like never before. Everything in her life seemed to point to

God's love. As she put it, "[those] moments of transcendence [were] scattered everywhere like breadcrumbs" (176). Now, in her new reality, those moments seem far and fleeting. She must reckon with the fact that those moments, as amazing as they were, did not make her life complete. She still wants more despite this intimate knowledge of God's love because, according to Kate, there's no such thing as a finished life.

In Chapter Ten, the results from Kate's clinical trial are finally released. She was one of the few participants who responded well to the treatment, which devastates her. She begins to reflect on the reality that "so often the experiences that define us are the ones we didn't pick" (183). Additionally, she notes that no matter how hard we try, we can't solve the problem of our finitude. In other words, "there's no cure for being human" (188). Rather than fight against our limitations, a more honest approach to life requires us to embrace them. We must learn to live, she contends, "in the hard space between anticipation and realization" (194). By embracing the paradox that we're all "unfinished cathedrals," we can better understand and embrace our need for a savior.

Discussion Questions:

1. Kate discusses the difficulties many of us have talking about chronic forms of pain or suffering (124).
 - a. Do you agree with her assessment? Why or why not?
 - b. In your opinion, what makes it difficult to talk with someone who is experiencing chronic pain or walk alongside someone who is experiencing chronic pain?
 - c. Read pg.171, beginning with "I would think that..."
 - i. What is problematic about Derek's comments to Kate?
 - ii. How might this be an example of what **not** to do for someone who has experienced suffering?
2. Kate claims there is an American impulse to live with "no regrets," which inhibits people from "[acknowledging] that sometimes you wish you could just go back" (146).
 - a. Do you agree with her claims? Why or why not?
 - b. Have you ever experienced pressure to say that "you'd never go back" or "I'm grateful for the experience because it made me who I am today" after a hard time in your life? How did you navigate that situation?
 - c. What is challenging about saying "before was better" (148)?
 - i. How might acknowledging this reality offer a more nuanced approach to healing from suffering?
3. On a hike through the forest, Kate's friend reminds her that "there is no such thing as a finished life" (177). Rather, our human experience is a mixture of the mundane and the transcendent.
 - a. What do you think about this idea?
 - b. Read the first full paragraph on pg.185, beginning with "It's very alluring..."

- i. How is Kate's assertion that we can't solve our finitude helpful? Challenging?
 - ii. Why is it important to acknowledge our limitations?
 - c. Reflect on Psalm 8.
 - i. What stands out to you from this passage?
 - ii. How are humans described in vv. 3-4? How about vv. 5-8?
 - iii. What paradox is the psalmist trying to understand?
 - iv. How might embracing our humanity help us better embrace our need for a savior?
- 4. Kate describes her experience at the Batalha Monastery in Portugal. While she is there, she encounters a man who is mesmerized by the unfinished ceiling in the cathedral. At one point, he exclaims, "Don't you see? It's us! I can't imagine a more perfect expression of this life ... We're never done, dear. Even when we're done, we're never done" (197).
 - a. What do you think about this man's assessment?
 - b. Is the "unfinished cathedrals" metaphor an accurate description of our lives?
 - c. How does this metaphor align with or deviate from Christian understandings of human life?
- 5. How do the scriptures and this week's readings inform our journey through Lent?

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