

Joy Is Not the Opposite of Justice

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0:00] The morning table church. For those of you here and for those of you online. Was this podcast called Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.

Where divinity scholars from Harvard. Began to use the way that they engaged with sacred texts. To read them deeply. With books that they loved.

So they would take a chapter of Harry Potter. Focus it around a theme. And talk about it. And then they use something like Lectio Divina. Or Ignatian Imagination. Or some Jewish traditions like Havruta and Pardes.

And an ancient Christian tradition called Florilegia. To explore these books more deeply. And treat them as often they would a sacred text.

Not because they thought that they were like, oh scripture. But a way to go deeper into what they were reading. And one of them that I mentioned briefly. Is this thing called Florilegia. And Florilegia is Latin for bouquet of flowers.

[1:23] It's a practice that when you're reading sacred texts. It's you pay attention to the little sparklets that bubble up. The little flowers. So when you're reading you might catch a word or a phrase.

And you write it down and move on and keep reading. And at the end of your time. You look at those. That list of words or phrases. And see how they interact with one another.

And what new thing is created in that moment. Now my little ADHD brain. This is brilliant. I'm a polyamorous reader. I read multiple things at the same time.

So Florilegia is very exciting to me. Because I can pull these little sparklets. And make connections that wouldn't necessarily normally be there. But I want us to do that together today.

So here's my challenge to you. That during the sermon. I want you to invite you to practice this with me. Get something to write on. Even if it's the notes app on your phone. Or the church.center place that you can take notes.

[2:24] And at the end of the sermon. I'm going to ask the congregation. To shout out sparklets that came up to them. Like a word or phrase.

That during today's sermon. Caught the side of your eye. The little. Gave you a little itch in your brain. Just bubbled to the surface. And that I'm going to take those words.

I'm going to write them down. And while we're doing communion. I'm going to attempt to turn those into our benediction. So that our benediction comes to us. From us.

And the Holy Spirit working together. Like I said. Could fall flat. And you can all blame me. And that's fine. But I just want to invite you all to be a part of the process. And we're going to even start that.

I'm going to read the scripture for today. From Matthew. And you can use that as like the template starting ground. Start looking at. What are those sparklets? Those little tiny flowers that bubble to the surface.

[3:19] So Jesus gave these two little back to back parables. It's just three verses. And it goes like this. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field.

Which a man found and reburied. And then in his joy. He goes and sells everything that he has. And buys that field. Again. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls.

On finding one of great value. He went and sold all that he had. And bought it. So we've been on this sermon series of dangerous imaginations.

Where we are reading parables of Jesus. Through a lens of Afrofuturism. There have been a lot of different people that have spoken into it. Really great stories.

Really interesting perspectives. But I'm just going to frame ours today around some of the works of Octavia Butler. And some other things. You will find Buffy the Vampire Slayer today too. So get excited now.

[4:24] But Afrofuturism at its core. Says that instead of the white dominant culture being the driving force of shaping destiny. It imagines a future.

And writes the non-dominant cultures into the roles of shaping that future. And in the process what it does is shift things from being inevitable. To being changeable or malleable or shapeable. And in that they're also changing the narrative of sacrifice. Of what and how we are to give up of ourselves and what we have.

In order to make that future possible. Afrofuturism is the antithesis of self-denial and escapism. One of the things that it holds and brings and weaves through.

Is a belief in integration. Both as the wholeness of the person. And the connection to the whole community. And in the process.

[5:28] What comes out and bubbles forth. Is the importance of emotion. Of beauty. Of pleasure. Of being together. Shaping a world into what it could be.

And Octavia Butler. In her seminal duology. The Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Talents. She weaves this harsh and brutal story. That bears eerie similarity to our world. Complete with a charismatic rich businessman and charlatan. That ran for and became president. With this slogan of make America great again. An increasingly militant and violent group of Christian nationalists.

That support him. A rise in prisons. Addiction. Illiteracy. Distrust of public institutions and public schools.

Police corruption. Global climate disaster. All made more devastating by wealth inequity. All of this is central to the world that she imagines.

[6:32] The very present butler first published the first book in 1993. And the second in 1998. And they began in the books in 2026.

Fun fact. And one time she was asked by a student reporter. If she believed that the worlds that she created in these novels were inevitable. She told the young man that you simply had to look at the things that we were neglecting.

And the choices that we were making today. And carry them through to conclusion. He then asked her. Okay then. What is the answer? When he wrote of her response in his college's newspaper. He ended that article with a quote from Butler. There isn't one. It was bleak and heartbreaking. But Octavia Butler read this story.

And she wrote an answering essay. Because that isn't exactly what she said. What she said was. There isn't one. There is no single answer that will solve all of our future problems.

[7:37] There's no magic bullet. Instead there are thousands of answers. At least. And you can be one of them if you choose to be.

Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism. With its mother Octavia Butler. Have at its core a delicate balance. It is solidly rooted in the reality of what is.

A no holds barred. Sober. Unflinching look at the state of the world around us. And where it's headed. But then it holds that intention. With what could be.

Possibilities that are not wishful thinking. Or fingers crossing. But a possibility of change of systems and inequities. That we can all choose to invest ourselves into.

It isn't whitewashed. Or willfully ignorant of reality. But has at its core. Joy. And beauty.

[8:37] And community. The choosing of doing life together. Both the hard parts. And the quiet nights. And the making of music. And the laughing together. And physical intimacy.

Finding a way to mine. The thousands of possibilities. Out of the what seems inevitable. Because the kingdom of heaven is like.

A treasure hidden in a field. Which a man found. And then. Reburied. And then in his joy. He goes and sells all that he has.

And buys that field. And again. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant. In search of fine pearls. And in finding one of great value.

He went and sold all. That he had. And bought it. In Butler's duology. The story centers around Lauren Olamina.

[9 : 39] And the community that she creates. Out of the ashes of the world. As she knows it. Calling it. Earthseed. Earthseed reimagines faith. Beginning with this premise.

That God is change. If God is change. She thinks. Then God shapes us. But then we in turn. Shape God. And the possibilities become infinite.

The small survival community. In the midst of chaos. Holds on to the possibility. That their destiny is in the stars. That they can be fully human.

And imagine taking root across the galaxy. And the duology ends. With this becoming a reality.

Olamina in her journey. Begins to write the verses of Earthseed.

And interspersed with her story. Are verses like this. All that you touch. You change. All that you change.

[10 : 36] Changes you. The only lasting truth. Is change. God. Is change. And from this beginning.

She crafts a community. Of spreading belief. And accompanying action. That eventually goes to the stars. Moving into space. And discovering new worlds.

She invests herself. Her health. Her safety. Her hopes. Into this fledgling group. That becomes a movement. That changes the course of humanity. She writes this verse.

God is change. And hidden within change. Is surprise. Delight. Confusion.

Pain. Discovery. Loss. Opportunity. And growth. As always.

[11 : 32] God exists. To shape. And to be shaped. This is a shift. From the set rules. And tenets. And surety.

Of the religion. Of that time. Into the malleability. And the unknown. It's a pivot. From the future heaven. That comes. After the hell.

That is endured. On earth. To the possibility. Of crafting the earth. To be the heaven. That we so long for. For the kingdom of heaven.

Is like a treasure. Hidden in a field. Which a man found. And reburied. And then in his joy. Goes out and sells. All he has. And buys. That field.

Again. The kingdom of heaven. Is like a merchant. In search of fine. Fine pearls. And on finding one pearl. Of great value.

[12 : 30] He went and sold. All that he had. And he bought it. You may not know this about me. But if I had a magic wand. And I had to say the words. Expect a patronum.

My patronus would be. Buffy the vampire slayer. It is not hyperbole. For me to say. That Jesus used Buffy. To help me make it through. The hardest time of my life.

About 20 years ago. I was a youth leader. And at one point in time. My youth group that was there.

Had just a myriad. Of crises and needs. Addiction.

Pregnancy. Self-harm. Sexual identity. Understanding. Abuse. We had two deaths. In the greater youth group community. In 18 months.

Like it was a lot. And I spent a lot of my time. Just trying to keep. My kids as heads above water.

And it was sucking me dry. And then.

[13 : 26] And I'm not going to lie. It sounds really weird. But Jesus brought me Buffy. And I would think. Every day. Buffy goes through hell. And then she comes back. And does it again tomorrow.

And if Buffy can do it. Then I can do it too. Because God put me in this role. For a reason. Right?

But then Jesus used Buffy. To teach me. That the sacrifice. Where I burned myself.

To nothing. Was not the plan. So I don't know. How many of you know. About this show. I mean. I think we see Buffy. Right here. She's still a blonde teenager. At the time the show started. The part where she was the slayer.

Like. That was the worst thing to her. The anathema. Of everything she wanted to be. And every day. She lived in this tension. Of being unable.

To imagine a future. For herself. As Buffy. Outside of being the slayer. She wanted to be a cheerleader. But that was an opportunity. She had to fight evil.

[14 : 22] Because of this secret calling. Because I don't know. If you know this. But once in every generation. A slayer is born. Like there are. Multiple people. Who could be potential. They're all women.

Just so you know. And the only time. A new slayer comes. Is when the old slayer dies. Or is killed.

So Buffy. Is a teenager. Freshman in high school.

All of a sudden. She has super. Superhuman strengths. Amazing reflexes. And also has to save.

The world. So Buffy. Buffy. Wants to be one thing.

But has to be something else. Because of this. Miraculous. Calling on her life. Right. She wants to have a boyfriend. But she can't even go on a date. Without risking. Her super secret identity. Being revealed. But midway through the series. There was an episode. Where Buffy goes on a vision quest. And she encounters. The first. Girl. Who was called.

[15 : 15] As a slayer. Slayer. And that first slayer. Says one thing to Buffy. She says. Death. Is your gift. And it began.

A perspective shift. That changed everything. For Buffy. Because instead of resentment. Of her calling. As a slayer. She began to understand. That the responsibility. The calling. The killer. In her. Was the very thing. That brought life. And she was able. Then to integrate. This understanding. Of who she was. Into. All of her.

Teenage splendor. With the found family. She'd created. With her snarkiness. And great wit. With her capacity. For love. And as a result. She began.

To experience. Beauty. And joy. And pleasure. In the context. Of her first. Full self. Slayer and all. And this pivot point. In change of perspective.

[16 : 10] Is everything. It opens up. The possibilities. That Buffy. Is not. And does not. Have to be. Alone. Even though. She's the only one. In her generation.

May's way. Made ways. For her. To fundamentally. Change the future. And more importantly. See herself. In the future. It changes. Perspective.

On sacrifice. And this. Was what Jesus. Wanted me. To learn. In all of this. That sacrifice. Isn't about. Giving up. The Buffy. She wanted. To be. For the Buffy. She had.

To be. In the world. As she now. Knew it. It wasn't. About giving up. The possibility. For joy. And love. And pleasure. For the responsibility. Of saving the world. Again. She began.

To see. That because. Of the love. Because. Of the joy. And because. Of the fun. And because. Of the pleasure. And because. Of the beauty. And because. Of the loss. And because. Of the pain. All of those things.

[17 : 05] That she's experienced. She could be. The person. Capable. Of her. Investing. Herself. With her community. Into changing. And saving the world.

A lot. Because the kingdom. Of heaven. Is like a treasure. Hidden. In a field. Which a man. Found. And then. Repuried. And then. In his joy. He goes. And sells. All that he has. And buys. That field.

And again. The kingdom. Of heaven. Is like. A merchant. In search. Of fine pearls. And on finding. One pearl. Of great value.

He went. And sold. All that he had. And he bought it. So Jesus. Told these two. Vignettes. Side by side. And I think.

[17 : 59] It's fascinating. To compare. And contrast. The two. Especially. In light of the lenses. That I've talked about. So far today. They are often. Interpreted. As being. Examples. Of what we should do.

To get the kingdom. Of heaven. I.e. Sacrifice. Everything. For the future glory. The promise. Of heaven. Or. We kind of see it as.

This is what Jesus did. He sacrificed his life. For the redemption. Of us all. His pearl of great prize. But I feel like. These are very reductive.

Interpretations. And it's definitely. Not how liberation. Theology. Theologians. Read these verses. I feel like. These three verses. Are very Octavia Butler. Coded. They have.

At their core. A story. Of change. And not. For the sake. Of future paradise. But for transforming. The very real. Circumstances. In the present.

[18 : 54] So let's take a look. Both of these stories. Are about. Radical transformation. Of the world. Here and now. Not about eternity. In one. A man is working.

In a field. That he does not own. He is a laborer. A.k.a. A minimum wage worker. And he finds. Life changing. Economic freedom.

The treasure. It's what the kingdom. Of heaven. Is like. In this story. Throwback to. A couple months ago. I preached a sermon. On the parable. Of the talents. And I talked about.

The quote unquote. Wicked servant. And he went and buried. His master's money. In the ground. And I talked about. How that was a practice. That was very. Common in that time. And it was legally binding.

If you gave me. A whole lot of money. And I buried it in the ground. And it went missing. I'm no longer liable. Legally. Because I did the responsible thing. So I always like to think of that little. Bit. As I read this story.

[19:48] Right. That somebody buried. A treasure in that field. And somewhere along the way. It never got claimed. So this laborer. This minimum wage worker.

Goes and finds this. In a field that he's been sent to work in. Now. When he finds it. He goes and sells.

Everything he has. Which also could probably include. Part of his inheritance. Anything that he has. That gives him sustenance. He's taking a chance on this.

To go and buy that field. Which then means. Whatever's in it. Belongs to him. And the kingdom in this. And when we talk about kingdom.

I always go back to what we say. Every week during communion. When we listen to the. We talk about the Lord's prayer. It's. Your kingdom. Come. Your will be done.

[20:45] Where? On earth. Here. As it is in heaven. When Jesus talks about. The kingdom of heaven. Is it reasonable to expect.

As he's talking about. What it is like. One day. We'll be with God. Or is it reasonable to expect. That he's talking about. This kingdom. That I want you to build. Here.

Right. So this kingdom. Is about joy. It's also about justice. And freedom. And economic transformation. Change of an oppressive system.

And an opportunity. That is happening. Here. And now. On earth. This. Is that treasure. This is the actuality.

Of God's kingdom. And the laborer. Invested. Himself. Into this. He's making. A structural change. In order for freedom. To come. And is being given.

[21:41] An agency. In a world. That often sees him. As without options. To him. This minimum wage worker. The kingdom of heaven.

Is about liberation. Interestingly enough. The second story. Shifts perspective. This time. The kingdom. You know. What happens on earth. As it does in heaven.

Is like a pearl merchant. It's not the prize. It's the seeker. And this merchant. Is actively seeking. Beauty. He finds something.

That is. Greatly beautiful. And of great value. And sells. Everything he has. To go and buy it. Now I ask you. In our day and age.

In our accepted wisdom. Is this a good business model? Investing everything you have. In one thing. Of beauty. But again.

[22:40] This is about the kingdom. About leaning. Our whole selves. Into pursuing something. Outside of the wisdom. Of the world. And seeking things.

That have value. Beyond just monetary. Beyond the systems. Of injustice. And oppression. And these stories. Tell how the kingdom. Uproots.

The status quo. And irrevocably. Changes things. And that this change. Is worth investing. Our whole selves in. Not because. We have to go through hell.

To get something good. In the afterlife. But rather. Because we can be one of the. Thousands of ways. That justice. And freedom.

And art. And love. And beauty. And practical help. And remembrance. And space holding. Can happen. Our full selves.

[23:35] Invested in the possibility. Of what can be. A kingdom. That is both. The finder. And the found. Speaks of a partnership.

Not a magical. Miraculous change. On the part of God alone. Or a supernatural future. Waiting after we die. But of a crafted. Discovered. Changed.

And shaped. Communal present. And I think this is a really. Important conversation. For us to have. Firstly. Because.

Sacrifice is the unofficial. Currency of modern Christianity. Especially the sacrifice. That doesn't. Include. World change.

For example. God. Wants you to sacrifice. So you need to give. More money. Even if you don't have it. Because God will meet you. He will bless you. God wants you to give up.

[24:33] His dreams. Because his ways. Are higher than your ways. Just so you know. Also. You need to deny yourself. For the sake of the kingdom. You need to give up your youth.

To go be in the army of God. To go win souls. Because it's really important. My friend. Shared me. With me this video. Of this woman. Who is. Who does content online. But she will go to places. And then interrupt things with. I need to talk to you about Jesus. But doing it. So that she's being seen on camera. And is being very disruptive. Like she's on a plane. And she's like. You guys have to know. That Jesus is coming back. Just as the doors are being closed. Like it's a whole thing. She does this whole thing all the time. But this. Is some of the stuff. That we're taught. Is the ideal. Like the sacrificing of ourselves. To go. Let people know. That the end is coming soon. Come on. Right. But it's never. In the sake of. [25 : 28] Changing systems of oppression. Changing inequity. Making space. It's never. In that line. Also. Just as you know. Like. I think.

Sacrifice is also the unofficial currency. Of. Helping professions. And activism. Right. The problem is so big. That we have to give our whole selves to it. Or teaching is a calling. Therefore. We expect teachers. To sacrifice their extra time. And their money. And not get paid well. Because. This is their calling. And we don't ever have to address. The systemic inequities. Because that's their calling. And they should sacrifice. Being the unspoken word. Sacrifice. Becomes the tool of the system. To maintain. The very oppressive system. We're living under. And as followers of Jesus. As we must root ourselves. [26 : 24] In the very real reality. Of what is. But envision. A kingdom come. Here. And now. Where heaven meets earth.

And as we invest ourselves. In the very real possibility. Of what can be. We have to redefine. What sacrifice looks like. Because in these parables. The sacrifice was not. In the service. Of an oppressive system. Both were disruptive. Of status quo. And they speak. Of joy. And beauty. And people being themselves. In the process. Not denial. For the sake of sacrifice. I think it's also important. To have this conversation. Because the very nature. Of dystopia. That's written in. And through Afrofuturism. And quite honestly. The world we live in right now. The pain of oppression. The consistent seeing. Of bad things. [27 : 20] That permeate our reality. Can overwhelm us. Or numb us. Or consume us. Or cause us to retreat. Into fantasy. And these stories.

Talk about the importance. Of joy. And beauty. And pleasure. In system transformation. This isn't just about. Sacrificial denial. We don't have to be the Buffy. Who thinks she has to give up. Everything that makes her. A delight. In order to fulfill her destiny. No. We get to be the Buffy. Who finds a way. To share her gift. And tip the balance. Away from apocalypse. And into hope. We invest ourselves. In the possibility. Of system change. Knowing that one of the investments.

May be sacrifice. But some of the investments. Are community building. Or finding family. In the midst of pain. Some of the investments. Are seeking pleasure. And joy.

[28 : 15] And delight. And my favorite whimsy. And creating spaces. Where light and color. Permeate darkness. Because some of the fiercest activism. Is found in feeling pleasure.

In belly laughing together. In relishing in the joy around us. Hearing the resolution. Of the dissonant chord. Move into harmony. In both of these parable stories.

Great sacrifices. Great sacrifices. And chances were taken. For the possibility. Of a present. Greater than the current. And yet delight.

And joy. And a search for beauty. Was woven in and through. Their investment in possibility. Dangerous imagination. Sees possibility.

That is rooted. In present. And our sacred opportunity. As we engage in these parables. Through the lens of Afrofuturism. Is to envision heaven come to earth.

[29 : 15] But not the heaven made by miraculous. Supernatural. Wave your wand. Immediate change. It is heaven come to earth. Through a partnership between reality. And possibility.

That we can invest our full selves into. We are rooted in. What has been. And what is. Buffy is a slayer.

A killer. Olamina's world is disintegrating. And painful. The laborer works in a field that isn't his. The pearl's cost is astronomical.

And the things that are messed up in our city. And our nation. And our world. Are almost too numerous to mention. But change. Is possible.

And the worker can buy the field. And see systemic change. The merchant can at great cost.

Acquire great beauty. Death is Buffy's gift. And Olamina can build a community.

[30:13] Whose destiny is in the stars. And you and I. Get the privilege and the joy. Of partnering with the Holy Spirit. To move to bring her.

Transformational kingdom. Of heaven. Here into the present. Just as it is. In the dangerous. And divine imagination of God. I'm going to close out today.

Not with a prayer. But with something a little different. Adrienne Marie Brown. Is the author of a book. Named Pleasure Activism. And she wrote this poem. Inspired by Octavia Butler.

And Earthseed. That I think. Captures some of this possibility. Of what change can accomplish. The compass.

Spins around. And North becomes South. Becomes simply the horizon. The direction that matters. Is forward. We conjure from the darkness.

[31:10] A future orientation. Of the people. Moving like first light. Touching everyone. Moving like water. Weeping and crashing.

Through mountains. Because nothing. Is permanent. To shape God. Shape self. Our destiny is. To take root among the stars.

Where do you think Earth is? Root. Now at the beginning.

I challenged you. To think of sparklets. To think of little flowers. That as we go along. That you picked up. A word. Or a phrase. That stuck with you.

As I was talking today. And I'm going to take just a minute. To give you the opportunity. To shout some of those out to me. And then. Spirit willing. I will craft that into our benediction today.

[32:04] So I want to hear. What are some of those words? Ticking from apocalypse towards hope. Apocalypse towards hope. Beauty.

Okay. Abundance. Sorry. What was that? Rooted imagination. Rooted imagination. Abundance and joy. Possibility.

God. Found. I'm going to come back to that. Just one second. Hang on. What was this again?

Sorry. Bubbles forth. And you said? Change is possible. Any more?

Color. Okay. Say that again. Not the plan to burn yourself to nothing.

[33:10] Okay. Okay. Say that. Insert.

Yes. I got insert up. Yep. God is change. God is change. God is change. God is change. God is change. God is change. God is change. God is change. change.