

Lent 2 B February 24, 2018

Disappointment

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

There are a lot of disappointed people out there. Many of the ones I've been hearing from lately are the folks who are disappointed in the newest Star Wars movie called *The Last Jedi*. I don't know if you all enjoy the Star Wars movies or not, (I've personally been a fan since I was 4 years old) but whether you love the movies, are ambivalent about them, or have never seen one, there is something to be learned about the recent disappointment expressed by some fans of the franchise.

One of the main reasons some fans of Star Wars are disappointed in *The Last Jedi* was the way one of the iconic characters was portrayed: the hero Luke Skywalker. If you are unfamiliar with Star Wars, Luke is one of the main characters in the Star Wars movies and could be considered the one who takes the classic hero's journey. He was raised by his aunt and uncle on a farm and grew up believing his father was deceased of no one of importance, yet Luke was no farmer and longed for adventure. The accidental arrival of two robots set in motion a series of classic hero journey events: Luke met a wise old man who was really one of the last of an order of mystical knights called Jedis named Obi-Wan Kenobi. Obi-Wan told Luke that he knew his father and that his father was in fact a Jedi Knight too, but was killed by the evil villain Darth Vader, who not only killed Luke's father but most of the entire Jedi order too. Obi-Wan also told Luke he could become a Jedi himself, if he had some training. Luke joined Obi-Wan on an adventure that resulted in rescuing a princess who then rescued him and destroyed the evil Empire's killing machine. A happy ending for the first movie.

In the next movies, Luke went on to receive some Jedi training, and ended up facing Darth Vader in a fight with light swords (which is how Jedi's fight) and in that battle discovered that the menacing super villain he and all us fans had pretty much come to believe represented absolute evil was really his own father. This was understandably revolutionary for Luke. He escaped that fight but was told by his mentor he was going to have to face Darth Vader again and, he had to kill him. When Luke said he couldn't kill his own father, Obi-Wan shook his head with disappointment and told Luke not to be a loser. Obi-Wan advised Luke to bury his feelings and face up to his destiny.

I have always loved the Star Wars movies; my siblings and I watched them repeatedly and they were often the inspiration for our imaginative play. One thing that has always bothered me about the movies is that someone was always telling Luke Skywalker what to do. His family, his friends, his mentors, even his enemies were always telling him to stay put on the farm, or become a Jedi, or stay out of danger, or reach out with his feelings, or keep his feelings in check, or to embrace his anger, or kill who they told him was his arch enemy. No one let Luke think for himself, and it seemed to me so many characters were trying to make him into the hero they needed or wanted or thought he should be instead of letting Luke be the kind of hero he felt called to be.

In the end, Luke did not kill his father. Instead, in an act of what I consider to be heroic courage, he refused to fight, and when the villain called the Emperor, who was the ultimate bad guy behind Darth Vader, tried to kill Luke, Luke did the last thing I expected. He became vulnerable. He let the Emperor torture him and called out to his father for help. And in that act of vulnerability, something happened, his father responded by stopping the Emperor but took some beating himself in the process. Which is how Darth Vader died, and Luke's father was renewed and became good again just before dying. Thus, Luke became a hero, but not by destroying Vader in an act of violence. What I admired about Luke Skywalker was he found a way to end the destructive cycle of violence by being vulnerable and it was his vulnerability that brought redemption to the Star Wars galaxy.

In the new movie, *the Last Jedi*, Luke Skywalker is not a classic hero, he is a hermit on an island on a planet at the edge of the galaxy and disappointed with himself because he was unable to stop the evil dark side from returning to the galaxy and refused to take up the mantle of the wise teacher to show the new Jedi in the galaxy the ways of the Force. While many fans were upset by this, I saw a pretty consistent character trait, as I believe many fans forgot it wasn't Luke's sword fighting skills, nor his clever wit, nor his super strength that won the day in the past. It was his courage to be the kind of hero he knew he needed to be, a hero motivated by loving his enemy, a hero brave enough to be vulnerable. Perhaps a lot of fans are also guilty of making Luke Skywalker into the hero they wanted him to be.

I heard echoes of Luke Skywalker's struggle to be the hero he felt called to be in our Gospel reading this morning, where Jesus seemed to be getting the same kind of pressure from his disciples to be the kind of Messiah they wanted or needed or thought Jesus should be. We heard that when Jesus started teaching he was going to suffer, die and rise again that Peter pulled him aside and, not unlike Obi-Wan Kenobi, told Jesus that was the wrong idea. But unlike Luke

Skywalker, Jesus turned not just to Peter, but to all his disciples and said that it was them who were wrong. He even called Peter “Satan”, which doesn’t mean Jesus was calling Peter evil, he was accusing Peter of having an agenda different from God’s. Jesus was attempting to tell his disciples that his agenda was not what they had in mind, Jesus was going to be the kind of Messiah he felt called to be, one that was going to show love, was going to be vulnerable, and was going to suffer and was going to defeat death by meeting death on its terms.

In Mark’s Gospel, the cross is central. There is just no Gospel, no good news, without the cross and the suffering, death and resurrection it represents. In the days of Jesus, the cross itself was a symbol of not just a horrible death, but one of shameful punishment. The cross was not good news before Jesus, and so Jesus’ call to his followers to take up their own cross would have been shocking, as would have his words about being ashamed to be associated with the cross.

That might be hard for a lot of us modern followers of Jesus to understand, because the cross is one of our most common symbols. There is one on the spire of this very building. Many of us wear crosses on necklaces, rings, bracelets. I know of folks with cross tattoos. But I know of other people who also follow Jesus who struggle deeply the cross. We will hear more about these folks in our upcoming Lenten series on Emergence Christianity, as Emergent Christians are the ones who are taking the ages-long stance that the cross was the answer to every question and turning the cross into a question. Not because they disrespect the cross, or Jesus’ sacrifice, but because they are wondering about the contradictions the cross represents: they ask how a loving God would intentionally plan to have God’s own Son, who God repeatedly called the Beloved, brutally killed as a way to appease God.

Former Dean of the Chapel and Research Professor of Christian Ethics at Duke University, Samuel Wells, covers this very issue in his new book *Hanging by a Thread*, where he explores how Jesus and the cross have been used by people to be what they needed or wanted it to be instead of letting God be present and Incarnate in the cross. The Rev. Wells explains in the introduction of his book that many of our misconceptions about God: that God is distant and disconnected, or that God is always angry with us human beings, or God doesn’t care, or God is vengeful, or God is violent, all the stuff of the Old Testament dies on the Cross with Jesus. As does the misconceptions about Jesus people have: that he was only a gentle teacher of wisdom, or sentimental hero, or a radical political activist; when we have the courage to stand at the foot of the Cross, The Rev. Wells writes, those images of Jesus quickly vanish and we are left with suffering and pain. And I think something else. Vulnerability.

Because vulnerability is the way to the heart, and that is what Jesus became incarnate for: to show us God loves us, and to create a way for us to love God back. Jesus refused to play our games of violence and revenge. Jesus refused to let us “should” upon him, telling him he should be like this or he should do that, and instead showed us something altogether other, the holy power of vulnerability.

Perhaps it bothered me that the characters in Star Wars were always telling Luke Skywalker what to do because I sometimes felt the same way. Maybe some of you can relate to Luke Skywalker too, because there doesn't seem to be an end to the voices telling us things like how followers of Jesus should feel about political issues, or tragic events, or what women should look like or do with their lives, or what men should be like or look like, or what movies people of certain races can or should like or not like, what parents are supposed to be like, or step-parents should be like, what should offend us, what should make us angry, I probably don't need to go on. There are lots of expectations out there, and they are not necessarily all expectations that can or should be met, some of them even contradict each other, and if we listen only to all those expectations it can be so very hard to hear ourselves think, and even worse, to hear or see God with us.

The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus didn't become the savior we wanted, he is the messiah he believed God was calling him to be. Which means we can all take a lesson from that courageous Jedi Luke Skywalker and be vulnerable enough to be who God is calling us to be, even if that means disappointing some folks along the way. One way to explore what God may be calling us to be further is to take the journey Samuel Wells explores in his book and take a deeper look at the cross. Which is the perfect Lenten activity. So is the opportunity to discuss our Lenten devotional that begins this morning after coffee hour. And the Wednesday evening soup and bread dinners and program starting this week where we can learn about the changes in Christianity that we are currently experiencing, changes that may be unsettling, but can at the very same time be liberating doorways into deeper contemplation of the cross and the life of following Jesus. These are the invitation for the journey of Lent, and while perhaps not the classical hero's journey, can be one of growth and discovery. I hope you will join me.