

Sept. 30, 2007  
Jeremiah 18:1-6; Luke 14: 25-27  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## *Blessing and Burden*

*(During the greeting time, I asked people to mention to each other the first movie they ever saw.)*

The first movie I remember seeing was 101 Dalmatians, the original Disney animated version. I was six years old. I had never seen a movie before. Remember we didn't have DVDs back then. We couldn't watch movies whenever we wanted. What I remember most about the movie is being terrified by Cruella De Vil. She was scary. What I didn't consciously recognize at the time and didn't tumble to until I was an adult is the play on words in her name. Cruella De Vil spells and means cruel devil. And she was. The writers knew exactly what they were doing in naming this character.

Humans have always told stories that depict the struggle between good and evil. We do so because we experience that struggle in the world around us and within ourselves. We wonder how to tune our hearts – how to be true to our own souls and to the Spirit that has given us life.

When I was a young adult one of the stories that pondered these questions and captured the imagination of young people was Star Wars. Remember? “The Force be with you.” What you may not have realized is that phrase was an intentional adaptation of “God be with you.” The writer of the series, George Lucas, spent many hours with Joseph Campbell, a specialist on religious and cultural stories about the hero's journey. Lucas' attention to those themes and their

deep psychic and spiritual resonance is part of what made the series so compelling for young people. On the other hand, the fact that he embedded those themes in a fast paced science fiction setting didn't hurt. He's a good storyteller.

A story in recent years that has captured the imagination of many young, and older, people is the story of Harry Potter. Like Luke Skywalker (of Star Wars), Harry is an orphan, who comes up against the evil forces of the universe, and within himself, and prevails.

For those of you who haven't already entered the world of Harry Potter, Harry is a young wizard who lives in a magical world, where he attends the magic school Hogwarts. This magical setting is helpful to a writer who wants to rescue Harry and his friends over and over again. There is always some bit of clever magic that she pulls out of the hat to get Harry and his friends through the danger – at least in the early books. The author, JK Rowling, is a very imaginative and fast paced writer. There is always something happening. She has fun with magical creatures and somewhat familiar things like Bertie Bott's Every Flavor beans -a take off on jelly beans, only with much nastier variations. However, as the series progresses and Harry grows up, the complexity of evil deepens in the story.

From the beginning we recognize that Harry is a special person. For example, he can ride a broomstick and catch a snitch in a Quidditch match (Hogwart's version of

flying baseball) better than anyone else. He can also speak parseltongue (snake talk) which is a rare ability. And time and time again he's the hero. We might be tempted to think it would just be brilliant – a blessing, if you will- to be Harry. Yet, by the end of the series we come to see that Harry's situation is also a burden. He has to live deeply into the reality of who he is and what his circumstances are in the world no matter where it leads him. He must shoulder his own cross and face the forces of evil.

From the beginning Harry is in a struggle with Voldemort, who is the personification of evil in the series. As is usually true in mythic tales like this, names are very significant. I remembered my French well enough to realize right away that 'mort' means death. But I didn't understand 'volde.' So when my daughter Karin was visiting a family in France this summer I asked her to ask them what Voldemort meant. They figured out it was vol de mort meaning, 'to steal the death.' It's a perfect name for the character, since Voldemort's whole aim is to steal his own death away from Death so that he doesn't ever have to die himself.

It's important to know something about the life of the author to comprehend the roles of death and love in this series. JK Rowling (on her website [www.jkrowling.com](http://www.jkrowling.com)) says that the original idea of Harry Potter just came to her as she was riding on a train. She had been working on the story for several months when as she says, "Then ...something happened that changed both my world and Harry's forever; my mother died." Her mother was only 45 years old and had been ill for some time. But they never imagined she would die so soon. Ms. Rowling was devastated. She felt like an orphan.

The Harry Potter series becomes a story about confronting death and the power of love. Near the beginning of the series we become aware of the deaths of Harry's parents at the hand of Voldemort. We also learn that the infant Harry was present at the time but was protected by his mother's love. Then, at the end of the series, after much soul searching Harry chooses to walk into his own death. Again love is the driving force. In love, he seeks to protect others. This is no light hearted children's tale. But, it is also not a new story. It is the oldest story ever told – about the power of love to conquer all.

In the concluding book, Ms. Rowling includes two quotes from scripture:

- 1) from the Sermon on the Mount  
*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.* (Mt. 6:21)
  - 2) from Paul's teaching on the Resurrection found in 1 Cor. 15:26 *The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*
- She clearly is looking at this story from a Christian perspective. She believes in the power of love to conquer all.

Although several characters exhibit sacrificial love in the Harry Potter story there is a significant difference between the story of Harry and the story of Jesus. Even though Harry willingly walks into his own death – he doesn't actually die and he goes on to physically fight Voldemort. Voldemort dies in the end; although Rowling is careful to have Voldemort actually die from his own repelled killing curse. Harry is not the initiator of the curse, which is how she works to protect Harry morally in the story.

Jesus, on the other hand, doesn't use violence. And Jesus actually dies. Yet, paradoxically it is thru his death that he comes to a radically new life, which we call

the Resurrection. The heart of the Christian message is a love so profound, so amazing, that this Love (that we know in Jesus the Christ) comes through death itself into new life.

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When I watch movies with the youth, I have a standard question at the end of the movie – “Where is God in the movie?” The first time I asked this question, some of them looked at me puzzled and said, “God wasn’t in the movie. There wasn’t even a church. Did you see the same movie we did?” Then one of them said, tentatively, “God was in the girl who reached out to...” That got us started. Now I don’t even have to ask the question, they ask it. And they have often noticed things I didn’t even see. We are learning to think and talk theologically about the stories that we are watching. I am hoping that increasingly we will think and talk theologically about the lives we are living. Remember, speaking theologically simply means God talk. We have some very thoughtful young theologians in our midst.

In today’s gospel lesson Jesus says we must each shoulder up our own cross. Part of what that means is for each of us to come to know the blessings and burdens of his/her own life, living in this time and this place. Right now. Some of those blessings and burdens are personal and individual and some we share in common. For example, one of the burdens we all share is the changes happening to our climate. It feels so overwhelming we wonder if there is anything we can do to really make a difference.

I recently read of one ten year old girl who shouldered up her cross of anguish about the plight of monarch butterflies and decided to do something about it. Erin had learned

about how the migratory patterns of the butterflies have been negatively affected by changes people were making to their habitats. She researched the situation through emails with experts around the country. One of the things she learned was how important it is to plant native milkweed to host the monarch chrysalis. So one Advent, she spent hours making plaster butterfly ornaments for family and friends. To each she attached a milkweed seedpod, instructions for planting, and a message “Butterflies need YOUR help.” These were her Christmas gifts. (p. 167, *lives to offer*, Baker & Mercer.) She might have said, “Here’s a way to tune your heart.”

How do we know what God is calling us to do in this time and this place? What is my own cross, which I must shoulder? What is our cross, which we must shoulder? In a collection called *The Book of Questions*, Chilean poet Pablo Neruda asks “Whom can I ask what I came to make happen in this world?”

That’s why we have one another. Which means we must listen to our own hearts, to one another’s hearts, and to the whisper of the still small voice of the Holy. Then when we sense that to which we are being called, may we let our lights shine,

*This little light of mine,  
I’m going to let it shine.  
This little light of mine,  
I’m going to let it shine.  
This little light of mine,  
I’m going to let it shine.  
Let it shine.  
Let it shine.  
Let it shine.*