

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 12

Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

July 29th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

Some Harry Potter Theology

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Last Saturday, along with millions of other households across the country, a long-anticipated box showed up outside our door. It might have been delivered by owl post for all intents and purposes, the way it mysteriously appeared.

Yes, it was from Amazon.com, yes it was the last installment in the Harry Potter series, and yes, I am going to talk some about Harry this morning – but I promise a no spoiler sermon!

The mystique was so catching that before I even knew the box had arrived, Daniel had gotten a hold of it and transported it up to his room. Being, along with his family, a good “muggle” – that is non-magical person – he tried opening the box with a pair of scissors, and when I finally found the box in his room, the box was already half-opened for his efforts, and the pristine volume’s pages slightly gouged. So even before I opened *The Deathly Hallows* – which was to occupy much of my time for the next couple of days – Daniel had made it our very own.

Next day was Sunday, and after the 10 o’clock service, I noted some of our youth emerging with the same book tucked under one arm as they left. I wondered quietly if my sermons were really *that* boring, and I couldn’t resist asking, “Brought your Bible?”

How we all love a good story. The fifth book of the series had just been released as a movie and was a box-office smash. J. K. Rowling, who began the adventure for us over 10 years ago started writing about Harry Potter while sitting in coffee shops in England and struggling to make ends meet while raising a family. Today, she’s worth more than the Royal Family!

And Christians are wrestling with each other on what to make of this phenomenon. *The Christian Post* this past week devoted at least five articles to the subject of *Harry Potter*. James

Dobson on one side, along with Focus on the Family, clarified that *Harry Potter* was not healthy for Christians – too much magic, too many wizards and witches, apparently, which made it somehow anti-biblical. Ted Baehr went on to state that the world of Harry Potter had to do with the “elite” and “occult” where “secret knowledge is the way to power and success.” In short, Mr. Baehr seemed to be arguing that Gnosticism, an almost primordial heresy for Christians, was making a comeback.

Yet at the same time, numerous other Christians both at home and abroad were applauding *Harry Potter* as Christian themed and even Christian allegory, very much of the same sort that C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien penned in the last century. I confess that I’m in this latter group. Condemning *Harry Potter* for being too full of magical people and creatures seems to me to miss the forest for the trees; the substance for the context. It was fascinating to note that while condemning *Harry Potter* on these grounds in one breath, the same leaders would embrace *The Chronicles of Narnia* or the *The Lord of the Rings* as avowedly Christian – both containing much magic and magical creatures!

The other criticism leveled against *Harry Potter* from Linda Harvey of Mission America was about Harry himself, who “nurses and feeds grudges,” and for that, he could not be a suitable role model for children. Perhaps not, but I wondered, what child growing up hasn’t nursed grudges at one time or another and learned how to cope with hardship, struggles, and harsh realities? The substance of *Harry Potter* is not found in Harry’s dark sides, either, it seems to me.

For there is real grace in the series – grace that I would call definitively Christian. From the very beginning, Harry Potter, while still only a child, is reminded that he has been given something that far and beyond all magical prowess and knowledge protects and preserves his life from the machinations of Lord Voldemort: love, friendship, a sense of good, and an inner moral compass about what is right – even if he doesn’t always do it. Being part of a community, being surrounded by people who love and watch out for him, Harry has an advantage that Voldemort cannot even fathom.

Harry’s is a human journey, and, dare I say, a Christian one. Whether or not we want to see him as a Christ-like figure, there are many throughout the series who put their lives on the line – and lose them – for the sake of what is good and just. That is indeed Christ-like. And Harry himself picks up odd friends who are ostracized by others. He is different, even in the magical world – he has lost both parents, carries the heavy burden of popular titles such as: “The Boy who Lived” and “The Chosen One” (and that is a Christ-like name if ever there was one!) and must survive

the emotional pressures of summers living in a less-than-welcoming household. He must also deal with the weight of prophecy and how that relates to his choices as a unique individual. It is hard not to see the echoes of Christ's life in Harry's. In my view, this makes him all the more real. For Christ, we believe, lives on in the hearts of the human family, and his life is mysteriously found in ours. That's what incarnation means.

So despite barely a mention of God, I think J. K. Rowling has succeeded in capturing many imaginations by creating a world very much like our own: where good and evil are real, but where most people, magical or muggle, aren't completely one or the other. A major part of Harry's epic adventure is learning that about himself and others, of coming face-to-face with the parallels between himself and the dark wizard Voldemort. Of wrestling with inner as well as outer darkness, and struggling for the light, for truth and all that is good and hopeful, and for those who are marginalized.

With respect to our Christian brothers and sisters who condemn the *Harry Potter* series, I feel it important to point back to the underlying themes in today's familiar reading from Genesis. God has condemned Sodom and Gomorrah – and I should stress not so much for whatever sexual practices have been happening there (the text is really not so clear, and the popular notions we have about that are more about *us* than the biblical story) – but rather Sodom and Gomorrah incur God's wrath for their brazen lack of hospitality and, indeed, their violence towards strangers: even God's own messengers.

Yet a divine condemnation is grounds enough to push Abraham to question God. If there is only a small number of righteous in Sodom, will the wrath come? The priority for the biblical authors and the agenda pushed forward is simple: generally-speaking, our world – and, for that matter, the world of Harry Potter – is one where good and evil are inexorably mixed up. This is true for the community as well as for us as individuals.

God's response, and indeed promise to Abraham is the same made to all of us:

Even where there is only a little bit of goodness left, it is worth preserving, worth cultivating all the darkness around notwithstanding, worth celebrating, worth lifting up. If God destroy the good with the evil, there would be little if anything left. It's a cautionary tale to all of us who are quick to condemn the broader culture, and forgetting that the Spirit is at work there, too, even in stories about a boy with a strange scar and his friends learning to love and hope in a complex and dangerous world.

Grace and goodness are like seeds planted, growing inside and out to a world that is crazy and mixed up, where pure evil and pure goodness are rare, but the epic struggle between darkness and light must somehow continue. This is a teaching that J. K. Rowling imparts to children worldwide with the story of Harry Potter.

I promised no spoilers for those of you who have not yet read the final installment of the *Harry Potter* series. I will only say this morning to those of you who have yet to read it that there are surprises left – particularly surprises about where goodness is to be found in the characters we have come to love and loathe in the series. Its popularity and success is a testament to the perennial themes of hope still very much alive in the human family:

Hope in the Good News: that what is just and true will prevail. Goodness will ultimately win the day. Life has more power than death. And even more so where we remain close to that rootstock of all grace: a Love beyond all loves, a Love that breathes new life into the world, even where we least expect it.