

Life is Beautiful
Galatians 3: 23-29, Yr. B, October 4, 2015

The Lovely Bones, a book turns into a movie presents a psychological odyssey that interrupts our usual understanding of justice. The book is about a teenage girl called Suzie Salmon after being murdered by her neighbour Mr. Harvey, she watched from heaven how her killer and her family managed their lives. Through this book, we are led to see how the spirit of vengeance damages the family and Suzie herself. We are led to consider the idea of letting go as a way to conduct ourselves in this absurd and hurtful world.

The main character Suzie who has departed from the troubles of this world, supposedly freed, becomes the prisoner of her past, and engulfed by emotions. Suzie let the crime and her past that she cannot undone to engulf her, even in a reality where she has been set free.

It speaks to a common human experience where we choose to dwell in the past, play victim rather than moving on. Our minds are our own enemies. To let go, on the other hand, is to free the terrible event from crucifying us one more time. Forgiveness is the best gift we can give to ourselves and to our future.

What about justice? Can forgiveness be done without justice? By letting go, are we not turning a blind eye to justice and to the wellbeing of society? The ultimate justice being portrayed in the book is: "We will all die." Death is portrayed as the final justice.

Suzie's killer was not captured by police and put to jail. Instead, it was as a result of an accidental death – falling off a cliff. Is this justice or is it not?

The way he died was similar to the way he hid his acts. Justice in this sense is: He got what he sowed. However, the fact that he killed so many women and was able to get away with it suggests the lack of justice in some ways. Although it could be read this way, the movie doesn't condone inaction. Suzie's older sister's courageous act to identify the killer is one example.

I believe the book speaks to a different audience, especially those who feel disempowered and frustrated because the wrongdoers were never brought to justice in the way we hoped for. When injustice and absurdity seem to reign without a sign of fairness, what can we do? For the writer of this book, nobody gets away. We were led to entertain this thought provoking idea that even if the world seems absurd where bad things happen to good people and justice is nowhere near, death is the final justice. To conduct ourselves in the meantime, we need to turn the spirit of hatred into a spirit of love and move on.

This seemingly an absurd idea to many: Justice begins when we decide to love.

Love, not vengeance, not the spirit of getting even, is the motivation for seeking justice. I suppose it has nothing to do with not working toward a better society. But this "better society" and "justice" we work toward involves loving our enemies and ourselves in ways that hatred has no room to shine. Justice cannot be done in the spirit of vengeance. In the face of hatred, we conduct our business by putting away our weapons. In *Shepherd Me O God*, a hymn that uses Psalm 23 as the background has this line: "You have set me a banquet of love in the face of hatred, crowning me with love beyond my power to hold."

If loving our enemies is easy, Jesus doesn't need to teach us. But the reason why such an attitude is possible has nothing to do with our abilities but because we have been set free.

Another message the book gives us is: "We are here for a moment, then we will move on." It is a double-edged message for both victims and wrongdoers. Especially for wrong doers, the message to them is: Don't take away people's chances to enjoy life.

This contrast is a message of justice. For those who are still alive, this brief moment of existence is an opportunity to love.

Back in 1998, Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the prolific Christian writers, wrote in *Christian Century*, she says, "Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life."

Why am I telling you all these? How does it connect to the text we read today? May be there is no connection. St. Paul who lived at a time that many thought it was the end of the world; pain surrounded them. How do we live in this absurd world with faith in Jesus? What has God done to empower us to face such cruelty? When I read Paul who says, "There is neither Jew or Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female," I do not read him as saying there no difference between male and female, slaves and free, Jews and gentiles. Of course, these people are different. When we read the larger context of Galatians 3, Paul is talking about the role of law in the life of the church. While there are differences among us, those differences cannot be used to justify our assumed advantages and status before God; we have no excuse for not welcoming anyone just because he or she sounds different, looks different, and behaves different. For those God has called and welcome through the work of the Holy Spirit, motivated to serve and love God, we have nothing to boast because looking from the perspective of divine justice, we are all God beloved children, accepted to feast with God on the basis of grace.

I think of one of the challenges the gospel gives us is to live life with gratitude and service. Through the dying and rising of Jesus, God declares life worth living where death and pain are not the final words. Life worth living not because there is no pain, no suffering, but in spite of pain and suffering. God gives us reasons to love when there seems to be no reason to love. In less than ideal circumstances, Jesus showed us the value of praying for one's enemies, exercising forgiveness, and committing to a life of non-violence. Through Jesus, God calls us to love life as God has loved it. The idea of a life well spent has nothing to do with the absence of pain but with the presence of beauty and love; hope and peace. A spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving, not indifference or vengeance can lead us toward the path of wholeness and recovery. Jesus shows us a practice of justice that doesn't have to be an eye for an eye. Instead, Jesus shows us the beauty of forgiveness and integrity to a point where it seems absurd in the world of domination and before the eyes of the powerful.

We are called not to worry about what is next but to be courageous in living out this one time precious life with hope and peace, ever marvelous at life's inherent beauty even in imperfect circumstances. The cross calls us out to work tirelessly toward justice. But those who have worked

hard toward justice know outcomes are not in our control or always to our liking. If you have worked toward justice and tried to be the voice for the voiceless, you know most of the time, we don't get the result we want. In those moments, when we are ready to give up, God says, hang on. Failure to bring justice in our limited lifetime in human standard is not to be equated as failure in God's final justice.

For the love of God's creation and people everywhere, we choose to love life in all its forms and shun hatred in all its manifestations. To be aware of our mortality and the injustices that surround us gives us a perspective in appreciating what it means to be fully alive. We don't live in a perfect world and never have been. The gospel doesn't magically give us a perfect world to live in, but reasons to live and to hope despite imperfections. It is the awareness of imperfections that make us lovers of a just, loving and peaceful society. Awareness of our mortality turns us not to be pessimists but to be lovers of God's earth. God empowers us to be doers of justice and love. Life is short no matter how long one lives. Choose life, joy, and peace. Life is beautiful.

Let's pray