

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

1.22.2017

A scene from *Recent Tragic Events*, by Craig Wright & Matthew 4:12-23

Choose to Play the Part Written for You

Do you believe in free will? Is this even a question that interests you very much? Is it a question that keeps you up at night with worry? No, right? If we think anything about it, it's probably to affirm our free will. We are, in general, the masters of our destiny and even if/when we experience tragedy beyond our control, we have the capacity to shape our reaction and the way we grow and change. We love stories about overcoming obstacles.

Worrying about free will – whether we have it or not – seems like something for intro to philosophy students. I know this because I was a philosophy major and I spent a lot of time reading guys from the 19th century who were pretty vexed about the whole thing. So, it was no surprise to me when I read *Recent Tragic Events*, a play very interested in the concept of free will, that the playwright prefaces the play with a Schopenhauer, one of those 19th century dudes, quote about fate versus chance.

Just to give some context about the scene we've watched, the play is about a blind date that Waverly, an advertising executive, and Andrew, an airport bookstore manager, go on on the day after September 11th. They are far away from the events of the previous day; they live in the Twin Cities. But Waverly struggles to focus on her date because she's waiting by the phone to hear from her twin sister, Wendy, who lives in New York City, but shouldn't have been anywhere near the twin towers. Andrew is agitated because Waverly is bizarrely perfect for him, she has the EXACT same books on her shelf that he does, including all of Anthony Trollope

(really?) and his favorite author, Joyce Carol Oates, who also happens to be Waverly's great-aunt.

He's also troubled because he believes he's met her before. He soon realizes he met the twin sister, Wendy, and in a brief conversation with her may have influenced her to take a job at the World Trade Center.

Into this mix comes Waverly's boorish neighbor Ron, his near silent lady friend, Nancy, and the great aunt, famous author, Joyce Carol Oates (portrayed by a sock puppet). They all play a drinking game and discuss free will and determinism while Waverly's horror grows that her sister is in fact dead.

In addition, there's a stage manager who speaks with the audience twice, once at the beginning and once at the second act. In her first appearance, the stage manager tells the audience that they will be a part of the production. An audience member will be chosen to flip a coin. Based on that coin flip, actions in the play will happen differently than they would have otherwise. In other words, the audience is implicated in what happens to the characters in the play. A tone sounds many times throughout the first act, reminding us, the audience, that had we flipped the coin differently the lives of the characters would be different. As the tone sounds connect to the missing sister Wendy's life, we find ourselves more connected and responsible for her fate.

However, in the second act, the stage manager reveals that this was a ruse. The coin flip changed nothing. The play has already been written, the actions of the characters are foreordained. She even shows the script to the audience to show us that her lines are written and they cannot be changed. The story is out of our hands; Wendy's fate is out of our hands.

What to make of this mind bending story? Well, it occurs to me that in the face of traumatic events, large events, we do tend to feel powerless or hyper aware of the choices we make that lead us to certain outcomes. On September 11 we, as a nation, were shocked by how we were rendered so helpless by forces beyond our control. And then there were the many real stories of people who made seemingly small choices that led to being in the path of disaster or find safety.

On a completely different level of trauma, what a weekend for our city. Washington hosted the inauguration of our new president on Friday – a man, the vast majority of those of who live here did not vote for. People are experiencing a range of emotions from fear and rage to acceptance and hopefulness, but I don't think many residents are feeling empowered.

And yesterday, yesterday I still can't get my head around it – so many people, so many emotions. Seriously, there were so many people, if felt like a prophetic action of speaking truth to power. But I know that protests and marches have a mixed history of how much power they wield to change. I had a personal sense of extreme powerlessness as I pushed my way through the crowd until I came to a place where I could not go forward, back, left, or right. I was a small speck in a vast ocean of humanity.

In today's gospel we hear one version of the call story – how Jesus called his disciples. after John's arrest, Jesus chooses to leave Nazareth and go to Capernaum in Galilee to the regions of the Zebulun and Naphtali. Or perhaps he is moved by unseen forces to finish out a plotline written long ago. For Israelites hearing this story, they would have known that these places were not only now conquered by Romans, but had been conquered by Assyria before

that. But God promised that light would come to these forsaken lands and so Jesus' travel there is a sign that God is at work.

Once there he calls the disciples and they dramatically drop what they're doing – living their lives, making a living – and choose to follow this stranger. We might imagine that in reality, it took a bit longer. The fisherman got to know Jesus and made some considered choices about following or not. But the narrator, the author, is at pains to emphasize that their choice happened immediately. And the readers know that God is at work, keeping promises to build a kingdom of justice, love, and mutuality even while individuals made a choice to go and make it happen.

We can, as enlightened modern people, be a bit uncomfortable with the idea of trusting the God is at work, that God is working to fulfill ancient promises. We trust in our own ability to shape our destiny. But we are overwhelmed by events outside of our control. Trusting that God is at work, in us and through us, but also through others in ways we cannot see and feel can make us feel easier during those times when we feel powerless, when we feel like a small speck in a vast ocean. It can even be comforting to know that we are not in charge.

Nor do we have to give up our own agency to hold this view. Joyce Carol Oates, in the play, is the one who cuts through all the awkward, stilted dialogue, the bluster from Ron, to say yes we feel powerless dread and sometimes we are swept along by the tides of history. However, we make choices. Human beings make choices to fly into buildings, to not fly into buildings, to help one another, to vote, not to vote, to protest, not to protest. These choices have meaning and they have power. That this dramatic and uplifting dialogue is spoken by a puppet is extraordinary, and is more than just a joke, though it is kind of hilarious. The puppet

emphasizes that this is the work of a writer, the dialogue, the speech, the sense of hope and a way forward that the speech brings happens because the author wrote it that way.

Being human has all kinds of drawbacks, but one remarkable thing is the ability to hold together two things at once. Duality is an important theme in Recent Tragic Events – Twin Cities, twin towers, two identical but different Joyce Carol Oates, and of course, twins – Waverly and Wendy. As the play progresses, Waverly realizes she will have to be both of them as it appears more likely that her sister is dead.

Holding this duality of playing a part in a play already written, but also bearing the responsibility for how we play our part in it is good news. It's good news for those of us who feel the kind of existential dread that can come when we know that our choices are important and that we can make bad decisions – how will I use my time and talents, who will I spend them with? How do I make such a choice? And it is good news for those of us who feel overwhelmed by powerlessness, an inability to change the course of our lives or take meaningful action to make things different.

Somehow, for me, it's easier to relax, take the plunge, hear the call, make the decision to act with all the love and courage I can muster when I trust that my part has already been written. We don't have to tie ourselves in knots over free will like the distinguished philosophers of days gone past. We can decide for ourselves, each day, if we are going to accept our part in the play, if we are going to today, get up and follow Jesus. AMEN.

See below for the scene from Craig Wright's Recent Tragic Events performed at the morning services at St. Mark's on 1.22.2017

JOYCE: The moments are only connected because you choose to see them that way. You're the one who's creating the perception of inevitability because it suits your purposes for some reason, not the other way around. I think what you're asking is a very good question, but it can lead to some very dangerous ethical conclusions.

RON: You have to forgive me, but I passionately disagree with you.

JOYCE: I'm no stranger to conflict.

RON: Then let's go.

JOYCE: Let's go

RON: Ok

JOYCE: Ok

RON: This morning I was watching TV and Katie Couric was interviewing this fireman. And she was being, like, all meaningful, and she said "Can you possibly explain what it feels like to be searching through this rubble for your friends?" And I wanted him so bad to say, "I don't know, Katie, can you possibly explain what it's like now that your husband's dead?" But no, he said, "Oh, we're all doing our best, Katie, you know, we're out there working with broken hearts." Broken hearts!

JOYCE: And you don't think his heart was really broken?

RON: No! He's a fireman, you know what I'm saying? He's a tough customer! And even if his heart was broken, Ms. Oates, he wouldn't say it! But now here he was on TV and so he says "broken hearts" because he has already agreed in his mind to let himself be scripted by this media machine that wants to con us all into thinking we're surprised!

JOYCE: And you weren't surprised, by what happened yesterday? You weren't surprised? Because I was.

RON: I noticed it happened, don't get me wrong. It was new information. But there's a difference between not knowing something's gonna happen, and acting like it's a surprise. I mean, when you go to the bathroom, Ms. Oates, is that a surprise?

JOYCE: Well, kinda...

RON: No, you don't know exactly when you're gonna have to go to the bathroom but when you do, you're not surprised. It's inevitable. And I know this sounds like I'm being cynical, Ms. Oates, but this is my point: what's *really* cynical, it seems to me, is this: take a nation with the most hyperthyroid self-concept in the history of the world; kick everybody's butt for a hundred and fifty years; help plant a bunch of people on the other side of the world in the middle of a land

where nobody likes them, because you feel bad you didn't do anything about the Holocaust until it was too late, and then mess all over anybody in the Middle East who complains about it; build a pair of ultra-tall building in the most prominent city in the world, taller than almost like anything, and do nothing to protect from the air, in a world of billions of jerks; and then act surprised when something bad happens, like "ooh you got your chocolate in my peanut butter! You got peanut butter in my chocolate!" And then sell this fake surprise over the airwaves to a bunch of people who are so dead inside they can't cry until they watch 5,000 people die on TV. *That's messed up. That's cynical.*

JOYCE: I think it's a far cry, though, Ron, from the kind of political determinism you're describing and taking the next step to saying there's actually no such thing as free will.

RON: Is it that far a cry, though, Ms. Oates? Is it the farthest cry?

JOYCE: I think it is, Ron. See I was on a plane yesterday. While you were watching TV with your fashionable determinism, I was on a plane. And when the pilot made the announcement, when he said there'd been a directive given from the FAA, and we'd be landing in Minneapolis instead of New York, the man next to me started to cry. ... A grown man... Before we even knew what had happened yet, he started to cry out of a sense of pure helplessness. Something was wrong and he couldn't do anything about it, and he cried. That's how he felt on *that* plane, and all we were doing was landing in a different city. Imagine how the people must have felt on *those* planes, or in those buildings in those last moments when they saw the planes coming. That's what's terrible. Not that they died; because everybody dies. The terrible part is knowing that it's coming for such an awful reason and you can't do anything to stop it. Those people who died in those planes are gone, but the cloud of horror and dread that came pouring off those people in their final moments.. that very real, almost pornographic awareness that we live in a world almost completely beyond our control ... *that's* still here. It's everywhere, everywhere I've been today I've felt it. I feel it here right now. That's the terrible part, because where does that energy go, where does that human dread go as it comes pouring off of those doomed souls? It goes into *us*. It settles slowly down across the land like a menacing fog and it goes into *us*. And that's why Andrew feel the way he feels, I think. And I think that's why you feel the way you feel because you're both too daunted by the horrible facts of the situation to claim your own freedom to do something in response. But that kind of abdication is a lie. We're all as free today as we've ever been We're perfectly and absolutely free.

RON: But Ms. Oates what you just said doesn't make any sense --

JOYCE: No, Ron, what you're saying doesn't make any sense. Ron this event is huge and daunting and terrifying but I'm sorry, it doesn't change the fact that everything about my experience tells me I'm free.

RON: And everything about mine tells me I'm not.

JOYCE: Look, Ron, you're choosing what to say right now, to me, aren't you? You choose to say "Ms. Oates?"

RON: How should I know? I say what comes into my head!

JOYCE: (Dismissively) Oh, come on!

RON: No, I do, because that's what Jesus told the apostles. He said, when they bring you before the authorities, just say whatever comes into your head."

JOYCE: Ron, are you a Christian?

RON: That's not the point!

JOYCE: Ron, are you or are you not a practicing Christian?

RON: Of course not!

JOYCE: Then isn't that a rather disingenuous position to take?

RON: I don't know, I take the positions I'm stuck with, that's what I'm trying to tell you!

JOYCE: So you're a puppet?

RON: No!

JOYCE: Well, that's how it sounds to me, Ron, it sounds like you think you're a puppet!

RON: No, I think I'm a human being!

JOYCE: Then act like one! Make a choice! Because human beings are free! That's what makes the human!

RON: But...

JOYCE: They're free to make choices, free to say this or that, free to do this or that, free to fly planes into buildings and free to help people who are hurt when it happens!

RON: But ...

JOYCE: Without freedom, Ron, there's no such thing as human nature!

RON: But ...

JOYCE: Without freedom there's no such thing as love!

RON: No, because of love there's no such thing as freedom!

