

ONE SENTENCE CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

A Sermon by The Rev. Janet L. Abel
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Embarrassment about My Addictions

There are times in my life that I get addicted to certain television shows and/or movies. It has happened to me over the years, not a lot, but nevertheless it has happened. One of my more embarrassing admissions is that once upon a time the producers of “Beverly Hills 90210” decided to rerun the show at 11:00 o’clock at night. I had never watched it when it was first shown, but I started watching it at 11:00 p.m. If I were out, I found myself making up excuses to rush home and feed the cat because I had to go and watch “Beverly Hills 90210.” That was very embarrassing.

I think soap operas are silly, but there are not many of them left on the air. At my other job as a chaplain in a nursing home, there's always one on. I think it's “The Young and the Restless,” and there are people who watch it, so I know who Victor Newman is. The word is that he's not a nice man, but I don't know the details. He's had a heart transplant, among other things, and he's had a very active life.

When I was in college, I got hooked on “Days of Our Lives,” and a whole bunch of us would cut classes to watch this show. Those were the days before TEVO and DVR when you couldn't record a show and watch it in the comfort of your own home at night. That was another bad habit.

A New TV Show Caught My Attention

An addiction that I recently developed is a show called “Wentworth.” It's on Netflix, which has opened up the world to us with movies and television programs from all over. This one is filmed in Australia, and there are four seasons on the air. People you probably don't know are in it, but for the most part, they are amazing actors. People I've never seen before, but they're fierce and unglamorous, and they portray a world known as Wentworth Prison. I'm not a huge prison movie fan. I've seen a lot of them, but I haven't always loved them, prison being a tough place, of course.

I got drawn quickly to the first episode. Wentworth is a woman's prison, and there are guards, of course, and the warden, called a governor in Australia. The story is about their lives, what brings the inmates into prison, their backstories, the jockeying for power among the prisoners themselves. It is dark and violent. But you can't look away.

There's another reason why it's so habituating, I think. I've been analyzing it, trying to think why I am so addicted.

You might remember a sermon that Art preached not long ago, about the archetypal hero, the hero's journey. A man named Christopher Vogeler did a lot of studying about the hero and the hero's story, what

makes a hero, and what makes certain stories so universal in their appeal.

The Oldest Story to Be Told

It goes back to the work of a scholar named Joseph Campbell, who did a lot of research about this, and he wrote a seminal book called “The Hero of a Thousand Faces.” This is the oldest story that has been told, almost from when time began, a long, long time ago, in Babylon. In seminary I had to read stories about a hero named Gilgamesh, who went on adventures, and that story has been retold and retold, and the more you hear this particular hero’s story, the more universal that story seems. These stories use archetypes that we all have within us, and we respond to them, particularly the hero. And when you tell that story in a certain way, it’s a huge hit.

Christopher Vogeler adapted the work of Joseph Campbell, and based on it, he wrote a seven-page memo on the subject of the hero archetype or the hero’s journey, which he then sent to the bosses at Disney. Disney took it seriously, and ever since, that studio has been churning out enormous hits based on that memo. The first one was “The Lion King.”

Vogeler did this back in 1985, and as you know, Disney has been putting out big hits based on the concept of the hero and the journey.

We can think of other stories that are really huge that follow these tales of heroes who have adversaries, who have challenges, who leave their ordinary world and go into that special world of heroes and face their challenges and sacrifices, and they go home at the end of the story. Examples are “Star Wars” and “Harry Potter.”

“Wentworth” has it too. One of the stories of the first four seasons is about a woman who has been beaten by her husband for 18 long years, and she can’t stand up straight. If there’s anyone who can’t stand up, it’s a woman named Bea Smith, who has a daughter she loves. She could have gotten a divorce, could have left Harry, but instead she snapped and tried to kill him, gets caught, and is put into Wentworth Prison.

One sentence can change your life. That prison, of course changes her. It changes her greatly. And in the end of the story, without giving too much away, she does in fact end up seeing the sky. And what she sees in that sky is love and freedom and peace.

Jesus and the Bent-over Woman

In our scripture lesson for today (Luke 13: 10-17), we read that Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, as is his custom, and he sees this woman who is bent over, and she’s been this way for 18 years. He calls her over to him. She doesn’t respond at first because the people in the synagogue are likely to get mad at Jesus for breaking the Sabbath law by healing her, but this isn’t her idea.

She goes to the temple on the Sabbath to worship, I’m sure. He calls her over because she wasn’t going to go one more day enduring such suffering. Jesus heals her then and there with one sentence, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Immediately, she stands up, and finally she can see people and she looked them right in the face. She can see the sky, and she praises God. The people in the synagogue say, “Why did you do that? Six days you can come here for healing. Don’t come on the seventh.” And Jesus of course immediately points out the hypocrisy. If you have an animal that needs to be fed, you

would do so on the Sabbath. Why wouldn't you heal someone on that day?

At the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, there is a little story when Jesus goes to his local synagogue in Nazareth, and he decides to preach to his neighbors. He states his theme for his ministry by reading from the scroll of Isaiah: "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." It's the theme of Jesus' ministry: freedom and recovery of sight for the blind.

The Inequities of Jail Sentences

In our local paper, a recent op-ed piece was written by Cynthia Tucker. I read certain authors a lot and skip others. I admit this bias, but I do read Cynthia Tucker, who wrote on the very obvious inequity of jail sentences in our prisons. We know that African Americans are certainly more likely to be stopped by the police. They are far more likely to be arrested, and they are much more likely to receive very harsh sentences, much harsher than white people.

John Grisham, a novelist and a lawyer, wrote this about inmates: "Young and black, almost all of them. And according to the numbers, they're in for nonviolent drug offenses. And the average sentence is seven years. Upon release, 60% will be back within three years. And why not? What's on the outside to prevent their return?"

Thanks to shows like "Wentworth," I have been thinking more about prison, how it doesn't actually help for the most part. I realize it's there to get violent offenders off the street, but for people who are nonviolent, for people with drug addiction, what good does it do? "Wentworth" aptly portrays the fact

that some people who are there are not only not helped, but they actually become criminals by mixing with other criminals and having terrible things happen to them.

How do we help all those people who are bent over with oppression, with jail, with addiction, with grief, and help them stand up and see the sky? Now I know and you know that the answer is far more complex than one sentence. We know that, but we have to start somewhere. Sometimes, all it really takes is one sentence. We have to notice. We have to stop and say something out of love and care.

Meeting Grieving Parents in a Lighthouse

Very recently, I had a terrific vacation in which I decided to stay in a lighthouse. I told this to many of you. I went on line, and put up on google, "lighthouses to stay in," and up came a whole bunch of them. A lot were in Maine, but one was relatively close. It was on Lake Ontario, 20 minutes north of Rochester, in a little town in Hamlin. It's a bed-and-breakfast. The lighthouse-keeper's house is where you can stay, three bedrooms, a working lighthouse right next door. It's the brightest light on Lake Ontario. I know more about this subject now than I used to. And there's the Erie Canal. I know that some of you have taken wonderful trips on the Erie Canal and didn't get lost. I went there too.

But I stayed in this lighthouse for a couple days there north of Rochester, and it was really beautiful. Wonderful house, wonderful breakfasts. The house was gorgeous, well decorated in the Victorian style. The lighthouse-keeper and his wife live next door in the carriage house. You even have the run of the main house. In the back of the house — it's right on the lake, it looks like the ocean, sounds like the ocean — is a big octagonal

room with huge windows, just lovely. There was an older couple there when I first arrived, and after they left, another couple came in.

They had been given this trip by a ministry that helps grieving parents. A man and a wife, whose son, Greg, died four years ago in a bad motorcycle crash. They actually lived nearby in Chile. It's pronounced "Chilay," and it's spelled like "Chile." And they were really bent over with grief. The husband and father in particular could not straighten up, because sadly he had just lost his job. I had a feeling it was partly because of his intense grief.

The wife, named Janet, was doing better, but their world had been shattered by their loss. They had other children, one of whom was a veteran from Afghanistan, who was really struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. He too was bent over.

So at first I thought to myself, I'm only going to be here for two days, and the new couple, given this lovely lighthouse trip, even though they lived practically next door, it was a way to get away and be with each other and just have a good time. And I thought, uh oh, I do this for a living. I'm a palliative-care chaplain, and here I am with these grief-stricken people, but we had a really good time. And yes, we talked a long time.

The husband opened up to me. Janet — we discovered we had the same first names — thought I was just like her sister, and we really connected. We spent both mornings and evenings sitting in that octagonal room and talking about love and loss. We didn't just straighten up magically, but they're doing better, thanks to this getaway.

We have to stop. Show our love and care. And sometimes it just takes one sentence.

That recognition and one sentence to get the ball rolling.

Joy at the Olympics

I also love the Olympics, both summer and winter. They both offer great pleasure when the world comes together to compete and to cheer these young athletes, who have worked so hard, and sometimes an amazing story happens. No, I don't mean Ryan Lochte, that's an unfortunate story that received a lot of press. You know, young and stupid, you get drunk, you lie. These things can happen too.

The Olympics really are just an amazing thing. So often the world comes together because the news is bad. But sometimes in this case, the news is really good. We know Rio has its problems; so does Brazil. But something really amazing happened. Back in 1996, I will never forget watching the gymnastics, because a young girl named Kerri Strug — Do you remember this? — she made a vault, and you realized while she was running that she was really hurt. But I think her ankle might have been broken, and she still made the vault over the horse, which gives me the willies.

I think back to gym, maybe some of you do that too, we remember just trying to get over that horse, but the gymnasts just flip over it, and Strug did this and made that landing, and it stuck. Then she collapsed, crumpled to the mat. She was really hurt, but she did that for her team. I'll never forget it.

Two Distance Runners Tangle and Fall

But something even more wonderful happened this last Tuesday, in a race that you didn't hear a lot about because an American wasn't favored to win. (That's our news coverage. It really kind of bugs me. I like news

that kind of covers all the athletes.) But it was the women's semifinal 5,000-meter race when two distance runners got entangled. Their names are Abbey D'Agostino of the United States and Nikki Hamblin of New Zealand. We know their names now because of what happened. They fell, and when Nikki fell to the ground, she was really out of it. She was running and suddenly, as she said, "I was down on the ground. I was just completely stunned."

The other woman, Abbey, tapped her on the shoulder and said one sentence, "Get up, get up, we have to finish this." And so she did. And then Abbey fell right to the ground because she had hurt her knee terribly. Her

ACL, her meniscus were both completely torn, she had to have surgery, and she's not going to be running for six months. She falls and Nikki stops and helps her up, and they both finished the race. True Olympic spirit. Now I was kind of hoping that there would be a movement for Abbey to carry the American flag at the closing ceremony, but the gymnast, Simone, is going to carry it, which is good too. This is the real Olympic spirit.

This is the kind of spirit that Jesus is talking about. There's one sentence that can change a life. That can lead to freedom, that can help somebody who is bent over stand up and see the sky.

Amen.