

The Gospel According to Harry Potter¹

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“Spoiler Alert: Some plot elements of the final book of the Harry Potter series are revealed later in the sermon. There is a warning before that happens.”

First Reading: From *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, by J.K. Rowling²

Harry had just discovered his teacher, Professor Quirrell, in pursuit of the sorcerer’s stone for the evil Lord Voldemort. Quirrell bound Harry with ropes, and planned to kill him after he found the stone. Harry tried to distract him with questions, and was surprised by his answers.

“[Lord Voldemort] is with me wherever I go,” said Quirrell quietly. “I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it.... “

Later, after Harry has magically found the stone, Quirrell tries to strangle Harry, and finds that his own hands start burning instead. Harry fights back by grabbing Quirrell’s face. After being rescued, Harry asked Professor Dumbledore:

“Why couldn’t Quirrell touch me?” [He replies:]

“Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good.”

Second Reading: From the *Gospel of John*, chapter 15³

“This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”

Sermon

One of the fun things about Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is learning to fly on a broom. But the first time that the students go out for a lesson, Harry Potter’s classmate Neville Longbottom was not so lucky. He was so nervous that he zoomed up into the air, then crashed down to the ground and broke his wrist. Their teacher took a crying Neville to the medical center, sternly warning them all to stay on the ground or risk being expelled. Then the class bully, Draco Malfoy, grabbed Neville’s Remembrall, a small magical ball that helped you

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² J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, (Scholastic, 1997), pp. 291, 299. Situation summarized, and words in quotes are from the book itself.

³ Gospel of John, 15:12-13.

remember your lessons. Harry said, "Give it here, Malfoy." But then Draco Malfoy flew up high into the air on his broom, and said, "Come and get it, Potter."

So Harry faces a dilemma—does he obey the rules and the direct order of the teacher? No, he is so angry that he grabs his own broom and flies up after Draco. He discovers, with a "fierce joy," that flying a broom is easy for him. He yells at Draco, "Give it here, or I'll knock you off that broom." He aims at Draco and zooms toward him, narrowly missing. Draco gets nervous and throws the Remembrall up in the air, shouting "Catch it if you can." Harry dives after it, and catches it a foot above the ground, just in time to pull his broom up straight, and topple gently into the grass.

Of course, by then Professor McGonagall had arrived, and now Harry is in trouble. She marches him off the field, while he worries that he will be kicked out of school after only two weeks. But—instead of punishing him, she takes him to see the Gryffindor house Quidditch captain. (Now, for those who don't know, Quidditch is the favorite sport of witches and wizards, something like soccer in the air on brooms.) "The boy's a natural," she says, "I've never seen anything like it. [First time on a broomstick and] he caught that thing in his hand after a 50 foot dive." So Harry, to his surprise, is invited to join the Gryffindor Quidditch team.⁴

Author J.K. Rowling has said that the underlying theme of the Harry Potter stories is the "choice between what is right and what is easy."⁵ Harry and his friends at Hogwarts are not only learning Potions and Spells and Magical History. They are also learning how to be good people as they grow into maturity. One of the first challenges of growing up is to learn the difference between following the rules, and doing the right thing. Harry and his friend Ron are always getting into trouble because they don't follow the rules. They are curious and brave and loyal and want to help the people who are having a hard time. Usually, this is exactly what gets them into trouble.

Their classmate Hermione is just the opposite. She starts out as the epitome of a goody two shoes who follows all the rules. She is the best student in the class, has read all of her textbooks ahead of time, and always knows the right answer. I can identify with Hermione. When I was a kid, I was taught that obedience was a virtue. I believed that the Ten Commandments were rules from God to tell us how to live. Catholic children were supposed to confess any disobedience to our parents or teachers as a sin against God. In fact, the very first sin of Adam and Eve was said to be that they had disobeyed God, by eating fruit from the tree that he had forbidden them to eat. I wanted to be good, so I tried to follow the rules. I tried to study hard, listen to the teachers, and obey my parents.

⁴ *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, pp. 147-151.

⁵ Wyman, Max. " 'You can lead a fool to a book but you can't make them think'," The Vancouver Sun (British Columbia), October 26, 2000, quoted in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_debates_over_the_Harry_Potter_series#_note-Baltimore

Harry and Ron can't stand Hermione. She is always telling them what they should be doing. Most of the other kids dislike her as well, and one day she overhears them, and goes off to cry in the girls' bathroom. Then a giant troll gets loose in the castle. All the students are told to march straight to their dorms, but Harry and Ron remember that Hermione wasn't in the dining hall to hear about the troll. They go off to warn her, and end up encountering the troll as it is about to attack her. They rush to her aid and bravely but comically manage to knock out the troll.

Of course, when the teachers arrive they are in trouble again, but this time Hermione breaks a rule. She tells a lie to get them off the hook—she says “I went looking for the troll because I—I thought I could deal with it on my own—you know, because I’ve read all about them. . . . If they hadn’t found me, I’d be dead now.”⁶ Harry and Ron can hardly believe their ears, but after that, Hermione becomes their friend. As the story says, “There are some things you can’t share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them.”⁷

One of the great questions in ethics and religion is the nature of our relationship to authority. I was a little slower than Hermione in challenging authority. For the first twenty years of my life, I tried to follow the teachings of the Catholic Church. But the more I read about Jesus in the Gospels, the more I wondered. Jesus was always getting into trouble with the religious authorities of his time. They routinely accused him of breaking the rule that no work should be done on the Sabbath day. Once it was his disciples that he defended, for picking grain on the Sabbath. But most of the time he was challenged because he dared to heal people on the Sabbath. For Jesus, taking care of the needs of the suffering was more important than the rule about doing no work on the Sabbath.

Most Unitarian Universalists have a story about learning to question authority. For me, it was in the context of political civil disobedience. I was part of a protest against nuclear weapons. A small group of us had gone to be a part of a larger protest against a Weapons Bazaar in Chicago. I was terrified of getting arrested and going to jail. But I was more terrified of standing by while my government accumulated weapons that could destroy the whole world. So, I faced my fears, and walked across the boundary line of the security guards. We had broken the law, but that time, they did not choose to arrest our little group. Later that year, I was part of another protest against a nuclear submarine in Niantic, Connecticut. That time we were arrested, and taken to jail, and I spent two days and one night in the women's prison.

There is a powerful transformation that happens when we face our deepest fears, for something we believe in. I had made a choice to follow my conscience, rather than to follow the rules. It energized my life, and helped my spiritual journey to unfold. Later, there were other choices that led me beyond the boundaries of what a good girl was supposed to do. I left the

⁶ *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, pp. 177-8

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Catholic Church because of its history of sexism, and became a feminist witch. I left my marriage, and came out as a lesbian. In order to be true to my conscience and true to my deepest callings I had to step outside the boundaries that other people had created for me. I am sure that many of you have faced similar choices during your own unique life journeys.

In Rowling's fantasy universe, witches and wizards struggle with the same ethical issues that we face in our world as ordinary human beings. Magic is merely another tool that can be used for good or ill. Harry and his friends question authority. But they don't break the rules merely to break the rules. They are trying to figure out what values are worthy of their deepest allegiance. They want to help people, and they are loyal to their friends. If a friend was in trouble, it didn't matter if they had to roam the castle halls at night, or go into the Forbidden Forest, or ignore a rule—loyalty and compassion were more important to them. And finally, they are trying to figure out what they can do in the face of the evil that is haunting their world. Because they come to understand that good cannot be good, if it stands by while evil threatens all they hold dear.

The ultimate villain in the Harry Potter stories is the evil Voldemort. He is a powerful wizard who tries to use his magic to rule over other beings—akin to despotic megalomaniacs like Hitler or Stalin. In his view, there is no good or evil—only power. He despises the weak. He is ambitious, cruel, and disconnected from other people except as they serve his own purposes. He sees other beings in categories and hierarchies—the wizards are better than ordinary humans, who are known as Muggles. His eventual plan is to subjugate the Muggle world under the power of the wizards. But even his view of wizards is bigoted: some witches and wizards have Muggle parents, and he views them as unworthy of being full citizens with those from wizard families.

But evil is not just something found in awful villains. Harry and his friends have to wrestle with their own temptations from fear, pride, and a desire for revenge against those who hurt them. Everyone struggles with feeling better than others, or feeling less than others. Most of the wizards—including some of our heroes—are prejudiced against house-elves, who are a tiny race of virtual slaves doing all the cooking and cleaning. Hermione, understanding prejudice herself because her parents are Muggles, starts an organization to improve the lot of the house elves, and works to free them from their slavery.

The values that Rowling holds up are kindness, respect, and dignity for all beings. She values courage and sacrifice in the struggle against evil. Ultimately, we are each called to fight evil, and each of us has a role to play on behalf of righteousness. And the most important power, the most important virtue, in the struggle against evil, is the power of love.

I can't really talk about this adequately without sharing some parts of the final story, so if you really don't want to hear anything about the ending, I won't be offended if you want to quietly walk out of the sanctuary. Or, I can raise this magic wand whenever I am about to talk about the final book, and you could cover your ears until I lower it again. Or at the end of the

*service, I could perform a magical forgetting spell, so that you forget any plot elements that may have been revealed. *** In the written form of the sermon, I have put asterisks in front of the three paragraphs which include such details, and put those paragraphs in italics.*

The Harry Potter stories have generated much controversy in religious communities. There are some Christian churches that condemn the books because they claim they promote witchcraft and the occult. There have been book burnings and book banning. But, speaking as one who has identified as both a Christian and a witch, I would venture to say that Harry Potter is much less about witchcraft than it is an exploration of some of the deepest themes and values found in the gospels about Jesus.

The very first book begins with the story of Harry's mother Lily sacrificing her own life to protect him from the murderous Voldemort. Because she loved him enough to give up her life, Harry has a protection that is stronger than any kind of dark magic. Professor Dumbledore says to Harry, "Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark."

As Harry grows up year by year, as he learns his school lessons, and expands his magical abilities, he is also learning about the powers and demands of love. His connections to his friends are challenged by competition, jealousy, embarrassment, anger, mistrust, loss, and self-pity. He wrestles with self-acceptance, forgiveness, trust, and gratitude. Time and again, love enables Harry to gain an advantage over evil powers. This is made especially tangible by the fact that he cannot fulfill his quest alone. He relies on the strength and skills of his friends, Ron and Hermione, and also a wide community of other adults and children.

****The clumsy and timid Neville Longbottom has a role to play—he bravely confronts Voldemort when defeat seems imminent, and is able to pull from the sorting hat the magical sword of Gryffindor, the sword found only by the most courageous, and thus is able to slay the evil snake Nagini. Their friend Luna, whom everyone sees as crazy, helps to build a network of support. One of the mistakes that Voldemort makes is to discount the powers that house elves possess. Several times they come to the rescue of Harry and his friends, because they can get in and out of places that wizards cannot. Even the sinister Narcissa Malfoy has a change of heart and helps Harry out of love for her son Draco.*

****In the end, like his mother, Harry is challenged by love to make the ultimate sacrifice. Especially in this way, he is a metaphor of the Jesus story re-imagined. "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." Like Jesus, Harry Potter is able to save his friends through his self-sacrifice, to destroy the power of evil through a greater love. And as in the story of Jesus, there is a twist. Death does not have the final say.*

This is the good news. This is what "gospel" means—good news. The story of Harry Potter is a tragedy and a comedy, but finally, it is a story of hope. It is a story of the classic battle of good against evil, the battle for equality and justice. Like Harry, we face a world which is

threatened by those who use power for their own greed, and build up ever more destructive weapons to defend mighty empires. Like Harry, we face our own temptations to greed and selfishness, despair and self-pity. While many of us may happily identify with the impulse to break rules and question authority, Harry Potter also challenges us to take a further step in our ethical journey. Harry Potter challenges us to learn all of the possibilities of love in the battle for a just and compassionate world.

It will take all of our intelligence, courage, creativity and humor to save our world from destruction. We are now facing multiple hazards, from chemical pollution to global warming to an expanded nuclear arms race. In our own country racism strikes out against old and new targets, and the rich get richer while the poor are struggling to keep their homes and their health.

We can't always tell who is on the side of evil and who is on the side of good. We can't always believe what the newspapers tell us. We will make mistakes. We will find allies in unlikely places. We all have gifts that are needed for the cause of love to triumph in this world. And even then, our children will face their own big challenges. We don't like to talk about evil—those of us who believe in goodness. But if we pretend that evil doesn't exist, we run the risk of making it stronger by our denial. Evil is only possible when good people do nothing.

****One of the most helpful clues that Albus Dumbledore leaves for Harry, Ron and Hermione is in a book of children's tales. He later remarks to Harry, "That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children's tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. ...That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped."⁸*

J.K. Rowling has left us similarly helpful clues in these children's tales—sometimes what is really going on is beneath the attention of the powerful. Millions of children and adults have read and loved the Harry Potter stories. They are fun, and include silly ideas like Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. But the lessons they present are ancient and timeless.

As Adrienne Rich has written:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,
perversely, with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.⁹

Let us also choose to cast our lot with those who, age after age, reconstitute the world. Let us choose to use our gifts to build a world of compassion, equality, and freedom. And like Harry, Hermione, and Ron, let us never forget that we need a community of friends for our vision to succeed.

⁸ *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p. 709.

⁹ From "Natural Resources," in *The Dream of a Common Language*, (Norton, 1978) p. 67.