

Underdog Stories, Parables, and Gospel
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“Underdog Stories, Parables, and Gospel” Homily Pilgrim Church UCC, June 14, 2015 (Mark 4:26-34)

Americans seem to love underdog stories. Stories about people or competitors who are least likely to win. Stories about people who deal with adversity or come from disadvantage. We're drawn to them; they inspire us. The classic football movie Rudy is a true story and an underdog story. Daniel “Rudy” Ruettiger Jr. has a dream to play football for Notre Dame—he doesn't think he'll start, let alone be a superstar athlete. He just wants to put on that Fighting Irish uniform and be on the football field with the team for at least one play during the regular season. Rudy comes from a working-class family where his own father thinks his dream to play football for Notre Dame is foolish. What Rudy has going for him is perseverance, a big heart, and just plain grit.

Rudy doesn't even have good enough grades; he lands at Holy Cross across the street and befriends a priest who offers him encouragement when everyone else thinks he's crazy. Rudy eventually gets into Notre Dame and tries out for the football team. He gets assigned to the practice team where he's battered and bruised to help the lineman get ready for their Saturday games. People can't help but notice that this kid may not be much to look at, but he sure has heart. He finally gets to don the Fighting Irish uniform and play in the last game his senior year to cheers of “Rudy!” coming from the packed stadium. In real life, Rudy played for three plays, did indeed sack the quarterback from Georgia Tech, and was one of the only players in Notre Dame history carried off the field by his teammates. It's no wonder that friends of mine on our Wadsworth High School football team would mention Rudy with this wistful, goofy look on their faces!

What's not to love about underdog stories, especially when the hero wins in the end? Yes, they can be predictable. Yes, you've heard or seen them before and probably will again. Yes, they sometimes idealize sacrifice and hardships, glossing over all the hard stuff to get to the victory. Yet, they speak to the human condition in unique ways. Underdog stories give us hope.

Jesus of Nazareth was an underdog—coming from a poor family in the middle of nowhere in Galilee most likely a day laborer before he hung out with John the Baptist and began his own movement of Jewish reform. Jesus taught people who didn't have a whole lot going for them—people who struggled to put food on the table, care for sick relatives or seek healing for themselves. There's a reason the Lord's Prayer says, “Give us this day our daily bread.” People were struggling to understand how God could possibly be at work among them when life was so hard under Roman occupation.

Jesus taught his followers using parables, stories that make comparisons between everyday objects and ordinary experiences and eternal, transcendent realities. Professor Arland Hultgren, who wrote a commentary on the parables in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, affirms that there are many things scholars debate about Jesus. But there are two things we know that are beyond historical doubt. That Jesus was crucified in the first century of the Common Era. And that Jesus taught in parables.[1]

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like scattering seeds on the ground that will sprout and grow in time even if we don't know how. Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed—smallest of all the seeds on earth. But it can become the greatest of all shrubs so that

even birds can nest in its shade. Jesus is telling us that the kingdom of God (where the first will be last and the last will be first; the realm where we'll gather around Christ's table no matter who we are or where we're from) will come to fruition. This seed that I'm planting, he's saying to us today, will sprout and grow. We may be starting off small and even insignificant, but we will blossom and provide shelter for those who need our compassion. Words of hope, comfort in the face of uncertainty, a reminder that if we're working to help God create a just world, our words and actions will bear fruit in time. We just need to have some faith.

Jesus' parables used everyday objects and actions like scattering seed on the ground and sowing the tiny mustard seed to help us remember that God's realm will come to fruition. Even when times are tough, if God is with us—who's ever really against us?

As today is Gospel Music Sunday, it's worth noting that like underdog stories that give us hope and parables Jesus taught way back in the First Century that still move us here and now, music can speak profoundly to the human condition. Gospel music specifically has its roots in the rich traditions of the African American Church. Gospel songs sometimes tell stories about people overcoming hardships or ask God to be with us as we struggle for better lives and a better world. "Guide my feet while I run this race, for I don't want to run this race in vain." Gospel songs help us give thanks to God and celebrate with joy exuding from our spirits that God is good all the time. "I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus. Hallelujah!"

Noah played "When Israel was in Egypt's Land" as our prelude. The chorus is: "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land; tell old Pharaoh to let my people go." Now imagine those words sung by a man or woman enslaved at one time in our country's history. "Let my people go" takes on more meaning. Through storytelling from the Bible in the midst of a song, slaves could communicate their lived experiences in heartfelt ways.

Most of these songs that we're hearing and singing today are from the African American Church tradition and emphasize that music speaks deeply to people grappling with sorrows and expressing thanksgiving for God being with us no matter what. These are stories from the perspective of underdogs who did not always triumph in the end. When W.E.B. DuBois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* he interspersed African American music throughout his book, writing, "They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart. . . ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine."^[2] African American churches began to fuse spirituals, sorrow songs, and hymns into the worship service in the late 1800s and Gospel was eventually born!^[3]

Thomas Dorsey is one of the greatest figures in the history of Gospel music; he was an accomplished jazz and blues musician. In 1932, his wife died tragically in childbirth along with their infant son. In his grief, he wrote "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" the last hymn we'll sing. It was Martin Luther King Jr.'s favorite hymn and mourners sang it at his funeral. When reflecting on the experience of writing "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," Dorsey explained his process by saying: "I buried Nettie and our little boy together, in the same casket. Then I fell apart. For days I closeted myself. I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve Him any more or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well." And then a week later: "It was quiet; the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows. I sat down at the piano, and my hands began to browse over the keys."^[4]

Precious, Lord, take my hand. Lead me on, help me stand.

I am tired. I am weak. I am worn.

Through the storm, through the night. Lead me on, to the light.

Take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me home.

God is still speaking—through underdog stories, the parables of Jesus, Gospel music, and so much more. We need only open our eyes and our ears and our minds and our hearts and pay attention, experiencing God all around us. We need only hold onto hope when we face moments of doubt and uncertainty. We need only sing with love in our hearts: “Take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me home.” Thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, 1.

[2] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 154-155.

[3] <http://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-gospel-music-definition-history-...>

[4] C. Michael Hawn, "History of Hymns: 'Precious Lord, Take My Hand'", *Disciples Ministries of the United Methodist Church*, <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-precious-lord-...>