

"Antigone"
Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Church in Boston
November 16, 2025

Here it is.

Two brothers dead by the other's hand: Eteokles and Polyneikes.

One the defender of the city Thebes. The other at the head of an attacking army.

Their uncle, the King of Thebes, declares that the invader Polyneikes shall not be buried.

Except.

Except the two brothers have two sisters: Antigone and Ismene.

Antigone and Ismene gather. Does the other know what's happened?

Their brothers are dead; the burial rites forbidden to one.

"Tell me," Antigone asks, "what are you going to do about it?"

And so, begins this ancient play by Sophocles.

Written more than 2400 years ago, the story of *Antigone* continues to raise questions that resonate still. Categorized as a Greek tragedy, multiple characters—including Antigone—are dead by the play's end. But these deaths are not the full tragedy.

As a genre, tragedy typically traces a character with a fatal flaw who learns to change only when it is too late. In this play, Creon is this character. Having condemned to death anyone who buries Polyneikes, he fiercely defends his choice and his right *to* choose as ruler—even as circumstances spin out of his control.

Creon does not change his mind when he learns that it is his niece, Antigone, who has covered Polyneikes' body in dust. Creon does not relent to her, nor to his own son, Haemon, who is pledged to marry Antigone. Creon only changes his mind after a prophet warns him that if he kills Antigone then his own child will die also. But it is too late. Both Antigone and his son are dead by their own hands. When Creon's wife hears the news, she also dies by suicide. The play ends with Creon devastated and alone.

This is not the way the story had to go. Creon could have relented. So could have Antigone. Indeed, Ismene mourned her brother's death, but chose to obey Creon's edict, refusing to help Antigone, thereby escaping a death sentence. All the characters in the play made choices about how to act within the circumstances of their lives. Indeed, what each chooses and why drives the story.

In reading or reflecting on the play, we know the questions are bigger than the particular situation. Who is right? Creon with a call for a uniform rule of law applied to all in the city, even if it be his niece? Or Antigone who denounces Creon's law as contradicting her duty to a divine ordinance and to her ethic of love? We face similar questions in our own moment. Must we always follow the law of the state or when should we heed a moral code beyond the law?

Let me ask this: who among us has broken the law? Driven faster than the speed limit? Jaywalked across the street or against traffic signals? Or maybe you have faced more serious infractions as well. I am certainly not here to judge you. I simply want us to start from the place that we all sometimes break laws—perhaps because we judge the consequences to be low. (*Who really gets ticketed for jaywalking in Boston?*) And maybe sometimes we decide to risk significant consequences—fines, jail time, bodily harm—because breaking the law is the lesser evil to ignoring our sense of what is truly right.

One hundred and seventy-five years ago, Congress passed the [1850 Fugitive Slave Act](#). While the 1793 US Constitution contained a law that enslaved persons must be returned to their enslavers, the new 1850 law enabled such returns to happen without due process. Federal marshals were mandated to enforce the law as were local and state authorities. Conversely, anyone helping formerly enslaved persons elude capture faced significant fines and up to six months in prison.

In Boston, Senator Charles Sumner denounced the bill as unconstitutional and shocking to Christian sentiments—in essence declaring that it broke both the law of the state and the divine law of morality. The [Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society](#) insisted that the law:

be denounced, resisted, disobeyed, at all hazards. Its enforcement on Massachusetts soil must be rendered impossible. ... The religious or political journal that refuses to record its protest against the law must be unmasked, exposed, and held up to popular abhorrence.¹

Can you hear Antigone in this refusal to accept a morally repugnant law? Can you also hear echoes of this law in today's federal efforts to forcefully relocate people without due process, to demand support for such actions, to threaten those who do not comply?

¹ "The Fugitive Slave Bill: Address to the People of Massachusetts by the Board of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society," *The Liberator* (Boston, Massachusetts), Vol. XX No. 39, September 27, 1850, 154, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/34607066/>, accessed August 23, 2022.

In every moment of history, each person must decide what is right to do amidst a context beyond our full control. We live beneath the power of a state. We coexist with other people with whom we share the sidewalk, the aisles of the grocery store, the economy, the internet, and so much more. We are also animals residing within an environment we do not fully control—not the weather, our absolute need for food and water, or the limits of natural resources on a finite planet. This inescapable reality of the limits to our control permeates our living, especially, I think, our experiences of tragedy.

Wouldn't we try to avoid tragic situations, if we had more control over outcomes? We'd have the car stop before it crashes. We'd distribute the abundant resources of food equitably, so no child goes to bed hungry. We'd protect people from gun violence, and we'd insure everyone had a safe place to sleep each night. We'd cure cancer. We'd disrupt the tragic outcomes of harm, hunger, and injustice that surround us daily. Except we are limited. We cannot always effect the outcome we desire.

To help us navigate difficult situations beyond our full control, tragic stories in literature, films, and music can serve as warnings, as catalysts to action, or as catharsis. We read a play like *Antigone* and we can *feel* the tension among the characters. Antigone wishes her sister would help her bury their brother. Both sisters wish the brothers weren't dead. Creon wishes Antigone would accept his need to provide order in a city so recently threatened by enemies—including an enemy who happened to be family. Creon wishes his nephew had never attacked. As the story moves forward, I hear a drumbeat of “if only, if only, if only” resounding beneath the narrative.

If only “it” were different. Tragic stories help us to manage our emotional reality of wrestling with all we cannot control. Sometimes, all we can do is bear witness to past tragedy—such as the dehumanizing injustice of the enslavement of millions of African Americans or the overwhelming loss of land, culture, and lives suffered by indigenous peoples. We cannot undue any of this past, but daring to confront tragic realities reanimates the humanity of people who once loved, laughed, dreamed, and lived as we do. As we gasp in horror, shed tears in grief, and vibrate in anger, the suffering of others reminds us of our own capacity to feel pain. Soberly we recognize our own struggles to navigate a world of heartbreak and loss. In response, we might find a renewed commitment to alleviate suffering in our own place and time.

Or maybe we learn to grieve what we cannot change.

Recently, my partner Bill and I watched a limited series on *Netflix* called “Death by Lightning” about the 1881 assassination of President James Garfield. From the beginning,

you know Garfield dies—it is a historic fact. And yet, as I learned about Garfield’s unlikely political rise and his efforts to challenge political corruption in D.C., I found myself desperately hoping I was misremembering history. And that’s only a television show about a person I never knew. It is so much harder to accept the tragedies that I and people I know and love have faced.

Telling, listening to, and experiencing tragic stories is part of life. This is not to counsel hopeless resignation to intractable injustice or preventable harm and violence. We may not be able to control *everything*, but there is much we *can* do. We can choose to resist injustices—to defy the King’s decree as Antigone did. Or, like Ismene, we might choose to grieve our loss but comply to live another day. We all face our own choices, *and* we will not always be in control of all the options and consequences.

That is a hard reality. It’s a hard reality when the phone rings and your loved one has been in a car accident. It’s a hard reality when news arrives of a job loss, a cancer diagnosis, an ICE raid. And such tragedy *is* our shared reality. Yet, because encountering tragedy is part of being human, we are never alone in our experience of heartbreak, sorrow, and loss.

But it’s also true that great grief can very much leave us *feeling* all alone, plunging us into a sense of isolated pain. In such moments our experience can very much feel singular—and in certain ways, yes, we each encounter such suffering in our own way, bearing our own personal story. Even so, the colors of tragedy also imbue our *shared* reality of what it means to be human.

One way that humans seek to make sense of this shared reality of tragedy is through story. *Antigone* may be an ancient story, but the experience of making hard choices in a complex world remains true today. I cannot pretend such choices are always easy, nor that the consequences will not sometimes be significant, even tragic. What I can offer is my faith that our shared reality is also one of connection, of beauty and grace, generosity and transformation. Sometimes the change of heart comes in time and a life or lives are saved. Sometimes people, churches, cities, and entire states rise-up in resistance to unjust laws. Sometimes an individual defying the law can be a catalyst for others to also change. And sometimes life simply *is* good, beautiful, and full of wonder!

But sometimes . . . life breaks our heart.

In a moment, the choir will sing the “Lacrymosa” from Mozart’s *Requiem*. As Bob writes in today’s music notes, the minor key, pulsing rhythm, and repetition of a two-note slur conveys a powerful sense of lamenting grief. Experiencing such music can be an emotional catharsis—the music becomes a voice to the emotional depths we carry within us. While at

times we may need emotional or psychological distance from hard things to help us heal, sometimes engaging with tragic stories or songs comforts us with the assurance that we are not alone in feeling sorrow. Perhaps, as we acknowledge this shared experience of heartbreak, we might become inspired to care for others who suffer as well.

May it be so. Amen. Ashe.