

"In The End"
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About a month ago, I began watching a new show on Netflix. On Friday evening, I finally watched the last episode available on Netflix. Like the previous seasons of the show, the episode ended with unexpected twists and turns leaving cliffhangers for the next season. Which would be fine, but as it turned out the show has been cancelled! All those plot lines just stopped midstream with no satisfying ending. The main villain has not been overthrown and humbled. The struggling hero has not been vindicated. I was *not* happy!

I don't think I am alone in seeking some kind of satisfying ending to a story. Am I? Anyone else watch all six seasons of the tv show *Lost* only to be left with *that* bizarre ending?!

When I introduced this year's theme of ["Story" in September](#), I shared the idea from writer Will Storr that every story basically amounts to "something changed." The story then traces the arc of that change in the protagonist. Will they learn from the challenge before them? What will they become *in the end*?

This question of the ending pulls the story forward. Dramatic conflicts ache for resolution. Will the attraction lead to consummation, a declaration of love? Or will the couple be thwarted or too afraid? Will the liar, the thief, the murderer get away with it? Or will justice be served? How does the story *end*?

Generally speaking, dramatic stories have two kinds of endings: comedy or tragedy. Designating a story as a comedy does not simply mean it's "funny". Rather, a comedy means a happy ending—an ending where the protagonist meets the challenge wrought by change and grows in character or fortune. The prince finds Cinderella and slides the glass slipper on her foot. Scrooge transforms into a generous man, embracing Christmas. The Death Star is destroyed by the Rebel Alliance. Or, as we heard in [today's story, Harriet](#) makes it back home in time for her birthday party.

Tragedies, on the other hand, end badly for the main character. Tragedies can simply mean a sad ending with the dramatic tension ending in loss. The wealthy young Rose loses her newfound love, Jack, when the Titanic sinks. Tragedies can also be stories of downfall, typically due to a character flaw that we can see, but the character often recognizes only when it is too late, if at all. Romeo and Juliet both lie dead. Or, as I will explore in more

detail in my sermon in two weeks, Antigone's uncle revokes her punishment, but she has already died.

Tragedy and loss. Triumph and joy. We can analyze films, books, and stories of all kinds in an effort to place them in one category or the other: comedy or tragedy. But our lived reality is endlessly more complicated. As poet William Blake infamously wrote:

*Joy and woe are woven fine,
A clothing for the soul divine.
Under every grief and pine
Runs a joy with silken twine.*

Joys and sorrows are an inseparable reality in our lives.

As many of you may recall, the morning of September 11, 2001, was a gorgeous fall day with a clean, cloudless blue sky in Boston and New York. I was in Princeton, New Jersey enjoying the same weather and a quiet, relaxed morning before starting in on some homework for seminary classes. Do you remember? I also remember the beautiful Spring weather on April 19, 2013, when the city was locked down during the manhunt for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev following the Boston Marathon Bombing. At the time I was living west of the city in Sudbury. While not legally required to shelter-in-place, it felt wrong to go anywhere. I remember spending hours that day with a shovel in hand prepping my garden for spring planting.

Horrible things can happen beneath blue skies. And wonderful moments occur in hard, even tragic situations. Babies are born during Nor'easters or in the warzones of Gaza or Ukraine. Weddings and graduation ceremonies still happen if its raining. Again and again, we encounter the inseparability of joy and sorrow, gift and loss.

On this nearness, humorist Erma Bombeck writes, "There is a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humor and hurt." Dwelling as we do within the tightly woven fabric of life's complexity, the line is indeed thin between very different experiences. There is an ongoing wobbliness to living that tips and dips between both sides of that thin line. Life is not ever just one or the other. Like the dog in Katherine Williams poem, some days you're in a dark house with a full bladder; some days you're frolicking after tennis balls or rolling in the ocean sand. Life is an ongoing weaving together of comedy and tragedy—an ongoing song of dissonance and harmony.

We are each beautiful *and* we are each broken. And that's ok. In the end, our shared reality is a wobbly path along the thin line of joy and sorrow, comedy and tragedy.

To see the world in this way is not to surrender hope for more beauty, more joy, more kindness and justice. We may never be able to reach perfection, never be able to eradicate all suffering, but we *can* do our part in shifting the balance. We can relish the joy and beauty we encounter, refusing to let the ugliness of hatred, destruction, and injustice fully eclipse the goodness that remains. We can act to alleviate harm in a person's life and in the wider society. We can do our part in our time and place within a larger, complex world.

Yesterday and today, against brilliant blue skies here in Boston, uncertainty and fear grips tens of thousands awaiting the renewal of their SNAP (food stamp) benefits. Until the courts reopen on Monday, there is much we do not know about what happens next. A rapid increase in the number of children going to bed hungry in a nation of so much wealth is a tragedy. And, I wonder, how many of those same children will still smile or laugh, love and be loved on those days they are hungry? *Joy and woe woven fine.*

On that morning of September 11, 2001, I dropped my son off at preschool, then returned to our apartment. I poured Cheerios into a bowl, added some milk, then sat in front of the TV to watch CNN for a few minutes while I ate—only to inadvertently watch live coverage of the attack. That breakfast was entirely supported by WIC, the food supplement program for low-income pregnant women, infants, and children. From the time I was pregnant, I relied on WIC for support. Today I have family and friends who rely on WIC as well as SNAP benefits. Do you?

Amidst the flood of headlines, it may be easy to forget to look beyond the tragic headlines and to remember what it is we are fighting *for*? Yes, there *is* a lot of complexity in the world. The morality of feeding hungry children does not seem complicated to me. What are we fighting for? Feeding hungry kids is a start.

More broadly, I believe we are fighting for an ethic of abundant love that sustains compassionate care for people—for immigrants, trans folx, black lives, women and children. We are fighting for the beauty of diversity—for the inherent worthiness and dignity of every person, not just for the people who look like us, think like us, or act in the ways we want them to. And we are fighting for peace. Which is to say, we are fighting for a world where our collective energies work together to foster Life, rather than destroy it with bombs, erode it with inaction on climate change, and cheapen its value through violations of human rights. We are fighting for a more beautiful, loving, and just world.

We are not fighting for a perfect world devoid of any tragedy or brokenness. That is not our reality. But we can fight to protect, foster, and create more beauty and goodness in our densely woven networks of connection. We can fight to remember *why* we fight.

I have a proposal to help us remember. Recently a congregant shared with me that each year they set an intention to follow between the fall time change and the Winter Solstice. Seven weeks starting today. Over these seven weeks, I invite you to pay attention to what you think is worth fighting for and document it. Take a picture. Clip an article. Write it down—maybe as a poem. And then share them here. You can bring them in or email them to me or the office to be printed. We'll then put them up in the narthex for all to see. Let us work together to name the beauty amidst the brokenness, the joy amidst the tragedy, the good for which we fight.

Unlike a tv show, film, or book, we cannot know the ending of the human story—nor even be certain of how our own individual story wraps up in the end. What *is* clear to me is that we all must navigate the wobbly thin line between comedy and tragedy. We honor this complex reality in our ritual of sharing joys and sorrows where we bear witness to the beauty and brokenness in one another's lives. And we sing our pledge to hold one another in love through it all. Our song may be wobbly in its harmony, perhaps even a bit off-key and dissonant as we each bring our unique voice. That's ok. That's part of the beauty of belonging to a diverse, complex, human community. Let's celebrate that. Let's fight for it. And let's keep fighting for our values of abundant love, human dignity, and a Life-sustaining world . . . even if we're not sure how the story ends.

Blessed Be. Ashe. Amen.