

Harry Potter and His Tattoo
A Sermon Delivered to Trinity Presbyterian Church
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I have a few confessions to make. My favorite snack is Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans, my favorite sport is Quidditch, I would love nothing better than to ride a Nimbus 2000 broom and be the seeker on the Quidditch team. I've been sorted by the sorting hat into the House of Gryffindor and wish I could trade my email for Owl Mail. I think Hermione Granger is as cute as a button and she even reminds me a little of one of my fifth grade girlfriends. I am, I have to admit, a Harry Potter fan.

Now my love for the Harry Potter stories did not come easy. I remember when the craze swept the nation and I wanted nothing of it. I'm not one to jump on the latest best seller unless it is by a tried and true author. I was, in fact, shamed into reading my first Harry Potter Book. A very dear friend kept asking me why I hadn't read Harry Potter and my initial response was "Why would I read what every 10 year in the country was reading?" Then she said she was disappointed I hadn't read them. Well I could not have her be disappointed in me and we do tend to like a lot of the same books ranging from John Grisham to Nicholas Sparks so, reluctantly, I started reading Harry Potter.

What I found in Harry Potter was similar to what I found in the movie Jungle Book. As a child I thought Jungle Book was a pretty cool and funny movie. Years later when it was re-released Sara and I watched it with Kathryn and I found it had a new meaning on a different level for adults. I enjoyed it even more as an adult than as a child.

Harry Potter has been much maligned in churches across the nation, a New Mexico church even had a book burning where they burned Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling and even works by Shakespeare. The reason given is that the books are evil, that they teach children how to become witches and warlocks, that they are satanic. Scary words, these are. But these are probably the same do-gooders who want to keep the Road Runner cartoons off Saturday morning television for fear that some child will strap rockets on his roller skates and chase dogs down the road or jump off a cliff and bounce up again after landing on a spring that was just delivered from the Acme Supply Company.

Well I don't know too much about the children in New Mexico but the children I know in Mississippi are a little too smart to fall for such nonsense. I think these fears more accurately reflect the ignorance of the adults rather than the children. My friends and I all grew up watching the Road Runner, Batman, and Superman. Never once did we have the slightest bit of trouble in separating television from

reality. We do have adults who tend to confuse the two but we call them legislators and that is the topic for another day.

Harry Potter was, at first, nothing special. He was, as we find out, an orphan left on the doorstep of his Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon Dursley. He was mistreated as a child, apparently shown little love, and had to live with his cousin Dudley who picked on him continuously. Harry's address was the Cupboard under the Stairs, Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey. But Harry made the best of it. Then around the age of ten, he got the letter admitting him Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

It is at Hogwarts where most of the story takes place. Harry meets his friend Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. This threesome always manages to find some sort of mischief to get into but it is always during an attempt to do good. You see not only is Harry Potter a good read, it is a story about virtues. And I use the word *virtues* rather than *values* for a reason. As Bill Bennett says in his Book *Virutes*, values are talked about by people as if they are something you possess like beads on a string or marbles in a pouch. But Virtues are the central part of human nature; they are not something to have but something to be.¹

By reading Harry Potter we learn the value of friendship, how do have a caring relationship with others, how to put others before yourself, and how to make personal sacrifices so that others may benefit. We also find Harry and his friends breaking a few rules to accomplish a greater good. You see Harry is not an ordinary child, he is not even an ordinary wizard, Harry is special in a way that not even he knows at first.

Breaking rules is something we are all taught to not do. Our teachers in school made up all kinds of rules about chewing gum, eating in class, talking in the halls, and sitting up straight. Some of these rules were a good and valuable part of our education, others were merely there to make life easier for themselves. As I walk through the halls on campus over the summer and see the teachers sitting in classes as students I can't help but chuckle. They have their cokes and coffee sitting on their desks even though the sign at the front of the room says food and drink not allowed. If only their students could see them now! What we find in Harry Potter is that he sometimes breaks a rule or two. I've known others who broke rules and I'm sure you have too..

Years ago, when she was in the third grade, my daughter started a petition at school to get Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday declared a school holiday. The petition was confiscated and she got fussed at a little by her teacher. She came home and told us about it and my response to her was that she needed to decide how much it was worth to her. Did she believe strongly enough to take a little heat and get in a little trouble? If so then she had our complete support. If not then she needed to let it go and apologize. She didn't back down. A few days

letter the petition was returned to her and shortly thereafter the school declared King's birthday as a holiday. Now I'm not naive enough to think that a petition from a third grader made a school change its policies but perhaps it did get them to think a little about it. I was never prouder of her than that day, the day she decided to put her welfare below that of something because it was the right thing to do.

One of my favorite speeches is one given by General Krulak, now retired Commandant of the Marine Corps, to the Leaders Forum and midshipmen at the Naval Academy. In this speech, General Krulak talks about the virtues and values a person holds dear. He points out that as leaders, those in the audience will be tested and tempted. They will be tried and they will have to decide and act. He says there is nothing more valuable to a leader than integrity. Integrity. Integrity and Moral Courage are fundamental traits that go hand in hand.

Were he not afraid of dirty needles, the General says, he would take everyone in the audience down to the nearest tattoo parlor and have the word *Integrity* tattooed somewhere on their bodies. But he was afraid of dirty needles so he challenged the audience to tattoo that word on their souls. Tattoo *integrity* on your soul he said. As long as it is tattooed on your soul you will never have to worry about lying, worry about stealing, or cheating. You will never have to worry about doing the right thing. What is tattooed on your soul? Look at your soul and what do you see?

If more people would follow the advice of General Krulak today's newspapers would be empty. Twenty-four hour news channels would need only fifteen minutes a day to cover the news. There would be no murders; there would be no crimes. And we certainly would not be reading about Enron and WorldCom. Those people did not have integrity tattooed on their souls; I doubt they even had integrity in their vocabularies.

On September 11th of last year I was onboard the USS Trenton at the pier in Norfolk. Like many of you, I watched the World Trade Center and the Pentagon attacks unfold on television. The difference is I was in the Wardroom of the ship with the people who were certainly going to be heading in harm's way. I was with people who had kissed their wives and children goodbye that morning and reported for duty, fully expecting to see them again around 4:30 that afternoon. In a matter of minutes that had all changed. They were now making preparation to get underway. They had no idea when they would get home again.

The Sailors I was with were scared. The average age was less than twenty on that ship and they were scared. We were all scared. We were at the largest naval installation on the eastern seaboard and felt certain, in those minutes that followed, that we were going to be the next to be attacked. I did not see panic. I did not see tears. And contrary to what many of our church leaders say, I saw no

knee-jerk violent reactions. What I saw were young men and women with *integrity* tattooed on their souls. They turned to and started to do their jobs. They knew not what they would be called on to do in the days that followed but they started preparing for anything that would be asked of them by their country. I saw their tattoos.

In the days that followed I was both proud and saddened. I was proud of what I had seen onboard the ship but I was saddened by what I would see on television. I recall one particular interview of a student on the west coast who, when asked what he thought about the possibility of a draft, replied he was not in favor of it because it did not fit in with his career plans. How self-centered can you be? People had just lost their lives, much more than their careers, and this twenty-something was concerned about his career plans. I'm not certain he has much of a soul but I am confident his only tattoos were on his skin.

My confidence was somewhat restored a few weeks later when several people from my unit were mobilized for Operation Noble Eagle. These people received a phone call telling them they had to report immediately and would be shipping out in less than 72 hours. I made it a point to go down while they were being processed to let them know I cared and to help them get through the process.

One of the Sailors being mobilized was Petty Officer Sisson. Petty Officer Sisson has been a Sailor for many years, as has her husband. She moved around the world with her husband and tried to maintain her activity in the Naval Reserve but had recently received a letter saying that she had reached high year tenure and was going to have to retire.

Petty Officer Sisson did not want to leave the service and I did not want her to leave. She requested a waiver of the high year tenure and sent it to me to be forwarded. In the Navy just about everything has to be forwarded through the chain of command, as did this request. Our usual process is to attach a brief letter that says simply "Forwarded, Recommending approval". If we are really excited and have strong feelings we send an endorsement that says "Forwarded, **strongly** recommending approval." I felt even stronger about this request so I took the time to write a full letter stating her value to the service and stressing that she was in this situation because she was doing the right thing by following her husband to a remote duty station even though it would harm her career. I closed the letter by simply saying that approving this request was the right thing to do.

We were both somewhat surprised when the request came back approved. It was indeed a rare occurrence. Now this fine Petty Officer was facing being taken away from husband for who knew how long. When I went to see her and the others off I looked at her and asked her if she wished now we had not tried so hard to get her waiver. She stood there in front of me, looked me square in the

eyes and said, "Commander, this is what I signed up to do and I am ready to serve my country. I have no regrets." I saw her soul that day and it had a great big *Integrity* tattoo on it. I have spoken to her several times since that day and she has yet to voice one single complaint or regret. What kind of a country would it be if we had more Petty Officer Sisson's and fewer west coast students?

Harry Potter also has a tattoo. Well, it is not exactly a tattoo but it is rather a scar. He has a lighting bolt scar on his forehead. We find out later that this scar was given him when his parents were killed during a fight with Voldemort. Voldemort, for those unfamiliar with the story is the incarnation of evil. He is a very powerful wizard that went over to the dark side and is struggling to regain power.

Harry also has several tattoos on his soul. In addition to integrity, Harry has tattooed on his soul words like friendship, love, kindness, and goodness. Harry is also a rule breaker. When he needs to break a few rules to do something that is for the betterment of all, he breaks them.

In the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry learns that Voldemort is trying to steal the sorcerer's stone which is hidden in Hogwarts. This stone, if recovered by Voldemort, would restore his power and his brand of evil would reign again. Harry gets wind of this and knows that Voldemort has learned the secrets to enter the chamber and steal the stone. The only option left to him is to steal the stone first so he, Ron, and Hermione sneak out of their rooms one night on a mission to get the stone.

On the way out though, they run into another friend of theirs, Neville Longbottom. Neville is a nice sort of fellow and tried to keep them from getting in trouble by blocking their way out of the room. Neville does not want them to get in trouble for several reasons but one is that, if they are caught, their house will have points taken away which could keep them from winning the school cup, the prize given to the best dormitory each year. They do not have time to explain to Neville what they are doing so Hermione puts a spell on him that causes him to stiffen and fall to the floor allowing them to pass.

Harry does eventually enter the chamber where the stone is hidden, but not without some troubles and some trials. To get the stone, Harry, Ron, and Hermione have to play a game of chess, not ordinary chess--wizard chess. In wizard chess the pieces move themselves. The knight's horse moves and the King's remove their crowns when checkmated. When pieces are taken they are destroyed. In order to win the game, Ron must allow himself to be taken allowing Harry to checkmate. Ron knew he would be harmed but he also knew there was no other way. I need not tell you that Ron also had a tattoo on his soul.

Harry eventually enters the chamber and while there he comes face to face with Voldemort's evil helper Quirrell who is sharing his soul with Voldemort to keep

him alive. During a fight for the stone, which had magically appeared in Harry's pocket, Harry touches Quirrell and Quirrell begins to die. Some time later, as he lay recovering in the hospital following the fight, Harry asks the headmaster Dumbledore some questions. One is why Quirrell could not touch him? Dumbledore explains:

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He did not 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."²

We have this same sort of protection. We have a Father that loves us so much that evil can not harm us. His love has given us the ability to tattoo our souls and stand for that which is right and against that which is wrong. We seem to forget this at times and focus on only standing for the right, but we must also stand up against the wrong. And let there be no mistake, there is wrong and evil in this world. We saw it on September 11th in New York and Washington, we saw it in Kosovo, we saw it in Bosnia, we saw it in Beirut, and we still see it in Afghanistan. Evil abounds, but we have the power to stand up to it and to prevail.

At the end of the first book in the Harry Potter series, all of the students gather for a feast and the awarding of the school trophy. Harry's house, the House of Gryffindor, had not won the trophy. They were a few points shy of victory and everyone was more than a little bit disappointed. Dumbledore, the headmaster, rose from the head table and stated that not all of the points had been awarded.

As we read in the book, Dumbledore says, "First—to Mr. Ronald Weasley...for the best played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

"Second—to Miss Hermione Granger...for the use of cool logic in the face of danger, I award Gryffindor house fifty points.

"Third—to Mr. Harry Potter...for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house 60 points."³

The points awarded meant that Gryffindor house was now tied for first place. If only they had one more point. Dumbledore raised his hand and silence swept through the room. He then said "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom. Gryffindor house had won the school trophy.

Personally I think Neville deserved a few more point because I think that standing up to your friends is actually harder than standing up to your enemies.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had broken some rules during their year in school but they had accomplished a greater good by doing so. Jesus was also a rule-breaker. He frequently saw things that were wrong and needed to be fixed and he fixed them, even if it meant breaking laws and customs of the times. He stood up for the woman who was about to be stoned and saved her life. He spoke to the woman at the well. He healed the sick. Jesus was not afraid to break a few silly rules in order to do some good.

The message we can get from Harry Potter is the same as we get from General Krulak's speech. Throughout life we will have many decisions to make. Some of these decisions are easy, and some are hard. We need no help in making the easy decisions because they are, well, easy. It is the tough ones which we need help in making. Maybe we will have time to think about the decision and even talk to our friends about it. Other times we will not have time to think very long. It is at those times that we need to check the tattoo on our souls. Do we have *virtues* that are a part of us or do we simply possess *values* that we can change at will?

Magic does not really play a role in the choices Harry has to make in the stories. Magic is there but Harry could use his magic and not have gone after the Sorcerers Stone. He, Ron, and Hermione could have easily stayed in their rooms that night and not worried about it. They were only children after all. They had a choice between doing what was right and what was easy, perhaps the most difficult type of decision there is to make.

In the time of Jesus, there were also miracles. He turned water into wine. He made the lame walk. He cured leprosy and blindness. He fed the multitude from seven loaves and just a few fish. He performed, for lack of a better term, magic. Many people had seen His work and were following him but there were others who were not yet convinced. The Pharisees wanted still more signs from Him; they needed more proof before they could tattoo their souls and follow Him. The choice of following Him was one they, like us, must make on our own. And just as for the Pharisees, there will be no miracles and no magic to make the decision for us.

Harry Potter has been much maligned by some. I believe this is undeserved and that there is much to be learned from reading about his antics. Getting children or even adults for that matter, to read is never a bad thing. Those who oppose Harry Potter seem to think our children are a little dimmer than the one's I know. The children I know are quite capable of reading about magic yet knowing there is no such thing. They will not strap Acme rockets on their skates, nor will they jump on a broomstick and think it will carry to the Quidditch match. They will, I think, learn much about life and choices from reading Harry Potter.

At the end of General Krulak's speech, he challenges the audience to take a page from the Bible and to soar with the eagles. The prophet Isaiah says that those "who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."⁴ General Krulak then closes with a poem, *The Eagle and the Wolf*

There is a great battle that rages inside me.
One side is a soaring eagle.
Everything the eagle stands for is good and true and beautiful.
It soars above the clouds.
Even though it dips down into the valleys, it lays its eggs on the
mountain tops.

The other side of me is a howling wolf.
And that raging, howling wolf represents the worst that is in me.
He eats upon my downfalls and justifies himself by his presence in
the pack.

Who wins this great battle?
The one I feed.
The one I feed.

Which one will you feed? When your soul reaches heaven, what will be tattooed on it?

What troubles us today is not J. K. Rowling's books about Harry Potter but rather a lack of tattoos...a lack of tattoos on our souls that read Integrity, and Moral Courage.

Amen

¹ The Book of Virtues, William J. Bennett, p. 14.

² J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, p 299.

³ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, p. 305-306.

⁴ Holy Bible, Isaiah 40:31.