Coat of Many Colors: Dolly Parton, Julia Kristeva, and Rural Discipleship

Abstract

Dolly Parton's song "Coat of Many Colors" paints the picture of a mother who sews a coat for her daughter while telling the story of Joseph's many colored coat, bringing the daughter great joy. Steeped in the rural values of stewardship, knowledge of place, and making do, Parton's song pairs well with Julia Kristeva's understanding of Christianity's potential to refine suffering into joy through addressing the suffering present in life. This fusion becomes the pattern for a rural Christian practice of blending scripture and craft to respond to the struggles of rural working-class life.

“Back through the years / I go wandering once again / back to the seasons of my youth,” begins Dolly Parton’s famous autobiographical song, “Coat of Many Colors.”¹ The song describes an impoverished mother who uses a box of rags to sew a coat for her daughter. While she sews, she tells daughter the story the of Joseph’s many-colored coat from the Bible in order to empower her daughter as she wears a coat made of fabric scraps. The daughter, very proud and excited about her coat, sings in the refrain of the song: “Although we had no money/I was rich as I could be / In my coat of many colors / My momma made for me.”² As the song continues, the daughter wears the coat to school and the kids make fun of her for her coat. In response to the children’s teasing, she tells the story from scripture and about her mother’s love for her.³

Parton’s song provides an example of what Michael Corbett calls the rural virtues of stewardship and “making do” as one sees fit. He writes, “Rural practitioners take up each of these discourses—ways of using land, tools, time, and space—to do identity work and build and develop regimes of self-care that allow for independence.”⁴ However, more than simply “making do,” the mother enacts what Julia Kristeva calls the Christian genius of pushing past oneself to

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² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

creatively refine suffering into beauty and joy. The germination of this from the seed of “making do” into an expression of Christian discipleship lies in the mother’s use of scripture in order to fertilize the coat of remnants with a spirit of imaginative hope; providing not only a material need, but a spiritual-emotional sense of worth and value within the reality of rural poverty. I see, within these song lyrics, the roots a pedagogy of rural discipleship; which, through the use of scripture as leaven, enables person’s practices of “making do” to reveal the realm of God in within their communities. Therefore, this paper intends to briefly describe rural life and value, the potential for Julia Kristeva’s Christian genius, and the use of scripture, in order to enable a practice of faith familiar with the back roads, fields, and woods of the rural United States.

“Back through the years I go wandering, once again.”

Driving home from my parents’ house on Highway 18 from Earl to Glen Alpine, through the foothills of the North Carolina Mountains, I pass by the rural landscapes of my memories. I drive past fields, some full of soybean and others grown over with kudzu. Farm stands brim with produce next to weathering old barns and sheds. New car dealerships and box stores overshadow the empty factories of the once strong furniture and textiles. Churches advertising chicken pie suppers and fair grounds prepping for their fall events dot the roadsides as the sun goes down.

This is my experience of the rural. It is one particular experience. If I ask someone from West Virginia about rural life, they might speak of coal mines, someone from the coast of Maine might speak of fishing, and central Alabama residents may speak of logging and paper mills. The communities outside the urban areas of the United States are diverse and unique. Still, through this diversity, Jerry Johnson identifies several durable issues most rural places face, particularly within their educational world. These include outmigration and population decline, and continual concerns about both economic vitality and social-cultural reproduction. He begins to address the needs and potentials for addressing these durable issues, and particularly in regards to community and economic viability, states, “A rural future requires imagination,” and references the potential an educational approach centered on community-based schooling approach grounded in place and purpose, as opposed to a model which trains to students to believe a non-rural existence is the best (if not only) option.

Grounding education, or in my case, Christian formation, within the rural realities of space, time, and culture necessitates an assessment of the nuances of rural life, belief, and values crucial for the fostering an imagination within the kudzu fields and broken down barns. Michael Corbett names three of these virtues as “Stewardship, deep place-sensitive knowledge, and

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7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. 333.
making do as one sees fit on known and loved land and sea.”9 The mother in Parton’s song utilizes these virtues and allows her imagination to imagine a coat for her daughter when she only had rags. However, beyond simply “making do” the mother further enables this act of craft and necessity to become an act of love, compassion, and discipleship through her use of scripture and intention as she makes the coat and shares it with her daughter.

“And I didn’t have a coat. And it was way down in the fall.”

From the very beginning, Parton’s song is an act of confession, bringing to light the struggles of a rural family. This is possible, in part, because as Julia Kristeva argues, Christianity reveals a deep and important recognition to the right to pain.10 She lifts up the beatitudes, particularly “Blessed are those who weep,” as Christianity’s extraction of suffering from secretiveness and shame. In lifting suffering from the well of humiliation and guilt, Christianity creates the potential for dealing with suffering in creative and communal ways.

First, it allows for confession. Not confession of sin or wrongdoing, but confession of reality. For Kristeva, confession, that is, speech addressed to the other, is pain-full.11 She writes: “Communication brings my most intimate subjectivity into being for the other; and this act of judgment and supreme freedom, if it authenticates me, also delivers me over to death.”12 This death is one of the recognition of humanity and reality. Yet it brings a sort of salvation. This Christian salvation, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, is the dissolving of false worlds and realities, it is a restoring of persons to the actualities of their lives, and from Kristeva’s perspective, Christianity allows for a sharing of pain with others in community.13

This salvific sharing in the suffering of others does not end simply in acknowledging pain. Kristeva illuminates Christian shared suffering as one in which humans seek possibilities for relieving this suffering, only on the condition that “they can look it in the face, give it a name, and interpret it.”14 Parton reveals the lack of money and the need for a coat in the late fall.15 The mother work’s toward relieving this suffering through an act of what Kristeva names as Christian genius. For Kristeva, Christian genius is putting into action the divine gift of love for the other.16


12 Ibid.


14 Kristeva, Julia. This Incredible Need to Believe. 90-91.

15 Upon further exploration the causes and concerns related to this suffering might be found, but in the song we only have an acknowledgement of suffering, named as a lack of money and a need for a coat.

16 Kristeva, Julia. This Incredible Need to Believe. 31.
That is, faith, is the acting on of love, which, Kristeva writes, “pushes into Christianity’s orbit this loving desire to surpass oneself.”

Exploring the notion of genius further, Kristeva identifies the feminine and maternal genius as connected intimately to the Christian genius. The feminine genius is rooted in women’s constant connectedness to the other and living as living for the other. Maternal genius, an extension of feminine genius is shown in the mother’s sublimation of her own suffering in order to care for and support the creative growth of her child. Christian-feminine-maternal genius is the way in which Christians engage suffering. Kristeva pushes further to reveal through this genius of engaging in the reality of suffering, seeking to relieve it, Christianity refines suffering into joy.

The mother’s act of creating a coat from scraps of fabric in order to care for her daughter is an act of genius. But more significant is that the mother does not simply alleviate the physical need of a coat—which would be an act of “making do”—she inspires a sense of joy and happiness in her child. She does this through sharing the scripture story of Joseph’s many colored coat as she creates a coat of many colors for her child.

“As she sewed, she told a story from the Bible, she had read”

This intertwining of scripture and the creative act of engaging the realities of life reveals within the making of a coat into an act of discipleship. This use of scripture brings to mind a parable of Jesus: “He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’”

Amy-Jill Levine notes several significant facts about this parable. First, the active ingredients in the story are the domestic products of yeast and flour, not fancy expensive items. The notion of pieces of scripture as leaven, hidden within common everyday activities, allowed to grow, rise, and work its way through life in order to reveal something new holds potential for the kingdom of God within the empty factories and overgrown fields of the rural United States. Levine even note that perhaps, “Despite all of our images of golden slippers and harps and halos, the kingdom is present at the communal oven of a Galilean village when everyone has enough to eat.”

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid. 39.
19 Ibid. 45.
20 Ibid. 84.
23 Levine, Amy-Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus*, Kindle Location 2244.
24 Ibid. Location 2273.
of scripture-leaven does not require expensive pearls, halos, or huge banquets. It is easily kneaded into the everyday tasks.

Second, the actor in the story is a woman who mixes (or as Levine translates, hides) yeast into between forty and sixty pounds of flour; the dough is more than the woman can handle and the bread more than one family can consume. The scripture does not tell us why the woman hides the yeast in the enormous amount of flour. However, Levine speculates, she may be subversively producing more bread than any one person or family can eat, in an act of extravagant hospitality, generosity, or compassion. In this case, the woman’s act seem self-surpassing, much in the way Kristeva describes the feminine-maternal genius. If scripture is to become the leaven of the reign of God, perhaps it must be both a subversive act—the child in Parton’s song finding joy and delight in the simple fabric scraps her mother stitched together—and an act an extravagant act—the child not simply being warm, but celebrating the wealth she held in this coat, so much so she shared the value of the coat with the children.

Finally, the parable hearkens back to the story of Abraham and Sara, of surprise pregnancies, and of new life from what was once barren. Throughout scripture we see God bringing life where only chaos, barrenness, and death exist. The entirety of creation, the children of Noah, the births of Isaac, a new future for Ruth and Naomi, and the delivery of Israel from the brink of destruction all bear witness to the creation of life where no life is possible. Rural communities often feel barren or in chaos. Often it seems the only means of escape from these depressed places is outmigration. If members of the community are unable or do not desire to leave, these persons may struggle to maintain work. They are also often judged as morally inferior—more so if they receive any government aid—by long term and “successful residents.” Scripture-leaven must work to end this barrenness. The joy and delight in the fabric scraps from the song provide life to a pile of leftovers and hope to a small child in the midst of the struggles of rural life.

“And I told ‘em all the story Momma told me while she sewed”

A pedagogy of rural discipleship must travel the back roads of the rural world. It must hear the stories of lumber mills, farms, and fishing villages. It must know the skills and abilities of rural people, and it must seek to season those skills with a Spirit of hope. I take inspiration for my rural pedagogy from the work of Tex Sample and his understanding of the craft tradition of discipleship; particularly his understanding of craft tradition as not knowing about, but knowing

25 Ibid. Location 2205.

26 Ibid. Location 2253.


28 Ibid.
how to do something. Furthermore, Sample’s notion of biblical craft as knowing how to use the Bible and live the Bible in community becomes particularly important as I attempt to use scripture as leaven in rural life. 

As I explore the potentials of this pedagogy, I highlight within Parton’s song and Kristeva’s writing a need for confession of reality which acknowledges the suffering, oppression, needs, and hopes of the rural community. Furthermore, it must shake off any disguises communities place on the suffering and pain present in their midst. I further find the need for this confession to be specific and personal, noting particular concerns in the lives of individuals and community.

As the confession is heard, a response become necessary. Communities often celebrate Corbett’s virtues, expressed in skills and crafts, through fairs, festivals, and church activities. However, instead of celebrating the craft for its own sake, a pedagogy of rural discipleship works to enable acts of “making do” and the use of crafts to work toward a Christian genius of surpassing self in hopes of connecting and caring for the others in the community. Leaven is necessary for this to become an act of Christian genius. The songs use of Joseph’s Coat as leaven paints an example of using scripture to move from rural virtue to revealing the reign of God. While this study of scripture may utilize scholarly interpretation from a variety of choices, it will primarily seek stories, excerpts, and verses designed to inspire all involved in the response through the use of the ordinary items of everyday life to provide a sense of extravagance and the potential for new life.


30 Ibid. Kindle Location 1133-1144.

31 I operate under the assumption that any act of confession requires a level of trust, safety, and confidentiality. This is especially true when persons are sharing in community about themselves or their greater community.


33 In developing this pedagogy, I find it important to note that care must be taken to not provide trite and belittling phrases and actions which either minimize the reality of those suffering or only provide “hollow grace,” which does nothing more than make the contributor feel good about themselves. My hope is that my description of the “Leaven” will deter potential practitioners from doing harm under the guise of doing good. Furthermore, As the leaven works its way through the response, participants must persistently acknowledge the realities of the issue at hand and its existence with the rural community. Observation and continual reflection become important pieces of rural discipleship. As seasons change, as the particularities of a situation change, so must the response, and in many cases so must leaven.

34 For the sake of space I provide only one other potential example. Several churches I know hold regular food collection drives and some even hold regular food pantries each month. The churches have at least somewhat acknowledged the issue of hunger and food insecurity in the community, and are attempting to help members of the community “make do.” However, if the church took time to really seek and confess the suffering in the community, it may respond differently. Furthermore, along with confession, the careful discerning of a leavening agent for the response, even in the shape of a food pantry may change. Perhaps the community might choose to explore the story Elijah and the Widow (1 Kings 17) or of Jesus feeding the 5000 (Various Gospels). When worked into the responses, either of these scriptures can provide the potential for extravagant responses. The story of the widow may inspire a community seek out ways to provide sustainable and continual responses to hunger, and even to explore and engage the causes of persistent hunger. The use of Jesus feeding the 5000 may encourage persons and
“Now I know we had no money, but I was as rich as I could be”

As I serve as a Bible story leader for our church afterschool program in a rural community with a child poverty rate of roughly 30%, I consider what to choose as leaven. Of course I will teach the stories of Creation, of The Flood, of Ruth, of David, of Sara, and of Jesus, but how and why I will teach them become crucial. Leaven is not simply a memory verse or a mission statement, leaven works its way into the activity becoming integral to the nature of the product. And, if I am to take Parton and Kristeva seriously, my leavened response must constantly work to transform suffering and pain into joy through the revealing of the Kingdom of God.

communities to take on extravagant acts of feeding even when resources are scarce or limited. This may move beyond a few cans of food, to education, community responses, and acts of justice.

Bibliography


