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.

Main Points:

My argument, inspired by the lyrics of Dolly Parton, is based in the idea that scripture can become a creative partner in the lives of rural working class communities. In the song, “Coat of Many Colors,” Parton’s mother infuses the creation of this coat of stitched together rags with love and joy through her sharing with her daughter the story of Joseph’s coat of many colors.1 As the song continues, Parton attempts to explain the value of her coat to her schoolmates through telling them the story from scripture her mother told her. In the song, Parton acknowledges her family’s poverty and the family’s struggles with having money for a coat. Parton’s mother exhibits what Michael Corbett names as rural virtues.2 The mother practices stewardship through the use of rags given to her family and she manages to “make do” as she sees fit through tying in scripture, her sewing skills, and knowledge of the needs of her family.

I see Parton’s mother as an example of what Julia Kristeva calls “Christianity’s difference,” that is, it’s potential for acknowledging and addressing suffering.3 Kristeva sees Christianity as removing the guilt of suffering, allowing for its acknowledgement and sharing in order to address it and refine it into joy, through word, community and practice.4 Scripture becomes not so much the vessel, as the catalyst, infused into the situation with the hope that the suffering might not be alleviated or removed, but addressed and transmuted.

The use of scripture as a catalyst for engaging the suffering present in de-industrialized rural communities provides the potential for encountering the pain and grief present in the closing of factories, farms, and mines; the isolation and dereliction present even in the ever more connected


3 Kristeva, Julia. This Incredible Need to Believe. Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

4 Ibid. 81, 83-84.
world, and the struggles present in the material struggles of persons and communities facing their present economic realities.

My end hope for such a discipleship practice is the reviving of persons and community, giving them the faith and hope to reclaim their existence and value in their present circumstances and to discern their potential future.

Methodology:

My primary methodology will be literature-based analysis of the poetic power of scripture to interpret and interweave a new joy and hope into the struggles of rural working-class communities. I draw my understanding of poetics from Heather Walton’s chapter on poetics as a method of Practical theology in The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology.5

My understanding of rural communities comes from personal experience as well as readings in rural sociology, education, and ethnographic studies. The engagement with continental philosophy and practical theology will allow for an interpretation and inspiration of scripture through a rural lens in order to theorize a practice of discipleship in the thick of the realities of rural struggle.

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