



Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale

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A fresh, creative look at the underlying meaning of the Gospels that stresses the many dimensions of God's relationship to humanity.

Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale Details

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Matt says

In this book, American writer and theologian, Frederick Buechner, discusses how we can read the Gospel through new eyes. His writing is beautiful, as there is an art and poetry to how he describes the Gospel as tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale.

In regards to tragedy, Buechner says that, “Before the Gospel is word, it is a silence, a kind of presenting of life itself so that we see it not for what at various times we call it – meaningless or meaningful, absurd, beautiful – but for what it truly is in all its complexity, simplicity, mystery...the preacher must somehow himself present this silence and mystery of truth by speaking what he feels, not what he ought to say, but speaking forth not only the light and the hope of it but the darkness as well, all of it, because the Gospel has to do with all of it” (page 25-26). The Gospel seems bad before it becomes good. It is “tragedy before it is comedy because it strips us bare in order ultimately to clothe us” (page 33).

The tragic, Buechner writes, is the inevitable, while the comic is the unforeseeable (page 57). He goes on to say, “I suspect that Jesus spoke many of his parables as a kind of sad and holy joke and that that may be part of why he seemed reluctant to explain them because if you have to explain a joke, you might as well save your breath” (page 63). “I think that these parables can be read as jokes about God in the sense that what they are essentially about is the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people, and I believe that the comedy of them is not just a device for making the truth that they contain go down easy but that the truth that they contain can itself be thought of as comic” (page 66).

When speaking of the Gospel as a fairy tale, he draws some parallels to our lives by saying, “To take the wrong turning of the path is to risk being lost in the forest forever, and an awful price has to be paid for choosing the wrong casket or the wrong door” (page 78). Furthermore fairy tales, “are tales of transformation where the ones who live happily ever after, as by no means everybody does in fairy tales, are transformed into what they have in them at their best to be” (page 80).

Near the conclusion of the book, Buechner summarizes by writing, “That is the Gospel, this meeting of darkness and light and the final victory of light. That is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, the one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still” (page 90).

This book was recommended to me when I was considering pursuing pastoral work as a profession. My friend told me that no other book more greatly influenced his preaching style than this book. I can see what he meant now. Buechner implores the reader to tell the truth when spreading the Gospel. In response to Amos 5:21-24, Buechner writes, “Nobody before or since has ever used words to express more powerfully than they our injustice and unrighteousness, our hardness of heart, our pride, our complacency, our hypocrisy, our idolatry, our shallowness, our faithlessness. These particular truths that the prophets speak were crucial for their own times and are crucial also for ours, and any preacher who does not speak them in his own right, naming names including his own name, any religious person who does not heave them at the injustice and unrighteousness of his own time and of himself, runs the risk of being irrelevant, sentimental, a bag of wind” (page 18).

Stephen Hicks says

This little book was short and sweet, but incredibly powerful as well. Buechner isn't the first person to put the Gospel in new lights so that we may reignite our reverence for it, however, his style and straight-forward prose hit harder than most that I've read. He gracefully works through the Gospel as tragedy (showing the inevitable evil that exists in this world due to man's vitiated nature), the Gospel as comedy (an unforeseeable act whose irony is profound, such as a perfect God saving a corrupt race), and the Gospel as fairy tale (the Gospel is too good not to be true and the mystery and enchantment are signs of vitality and requisites to that truth). He often spins renown bible stories with a twentieth century spin (a rich man can't get to heaven "like a Mercedes through a revolving door", etc.) which make the lines go down smoothly as you read them.

My favorite quote lies within "The Gospel as Tragedy":

"There would be a strong argument for saying that much of the most powerful preaching of our time is the preaching of poets, playwrights, novelists because it is often they better than the rest of us who speak with awful honesty about the absence of God and about the storm of his absence, both within and without, which, because it is unendurable, unlivable, drives us to look to the eye of the storm."

Or "The Gospel as Comedy":

"Sin and grace, absence and presence, tragedy and comedy, they divide the world between them and where they meet head on, the Gospel happens."

You could read this book in half a day. Worth it.

Ben says

There are two kinds of really good books - the first you devour as quickly as possible - marathon reads... The second you savour, slowly nibbling and sipping at the edges, stopping and pondering. This is one of the second...

Chris says

Grant was correct: This was an equally great book (of a different nature) from Buechner.

Luke Evans says

Wow. Wow.

Danielle says

Telling the Truth by Frederick Buechner is a book I was excited to read but also fearful of reading for I had since tried to read his fiction and found it so complicated that I had to put it down in hopes that when I next pick it up my mind will be more mature and open to his writing style. This is nonfiction though, and perhaps that is why I became accustomed to reading this book versus his fictional work that I hope to pick up again someday, because although his style was complex and beautiful and haunting, it was very clear and mind shattering. It is funny how you feel certain emotions but can't seem to put them into words. As a writer I feel like this isn't something I shouldn't be struggling with and yet I do. Buechner is one of those special writers who not only writes these unexplainable emotions down on paper in colorful terms but also has an ability to connect with his readers and touch a part of them that is held close to their heart. I believe that all books have the ability to touch our lives but there are some authors that have the insane ability to do this so well that you feel as if reading another author would be an insult to the one you are so fond of. Indeed I was sad when I shut this book for the final time. It was truly a remarkable read.

Telling the Truth is subtitled, The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale. The book is split into four sections - the introduction, the gospel as tragedy, the gospel as comedy, and the gospel as fairy tale. I want to take a moment to address each section. The introduction really drew me into the book but it was the three main parts that had me hooked. One special trait that each section shared was that they all contained many references to Shakespeare's King Lear. I can't claim to have read the play but I sure want to read it after reading this book.

The gospel as tragedy focuses on the apparent absence of God in the real world. What does Buechner mean by absence? He is referring to the idea that people have created that God cannot be real for if he were, bad things would not happen. Of the many Biblical examples Buechner uses in this section, the one he comes back to the most is John chapter 11, the Death of Lazarus. Buechner goes to great lengths to explain the psychology of the chapter, explaining that Jesus wept for Lazarus for many reasons. Lazarus was his friend and he loved him and will miss him but he also weeps because he wasn't there to save Lazarus. Despite all the miracles, despite being the son of God, he did not save this man and God had not saved him either. So when he hangs on the cross and shouts, "my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me", he is asking, "where are you God?" Even the cross speaks of the absence of God. And yet this very scene points to the fact that God makes himself present in his absence, Buechner explains. People try to explain God but Buechner says "they are words without knowledge that obscure the issue of God by trying to define him as present in ways and places where he is not present, to define him as moral order, as the best answer man can give to the problem of his life. God is not an answer man can give, God says. God himself does not give answers. He gives himself, and into the midst of the whirlwind of his absence gives himself." (Pg. 43)

The next section, the gospel as comedy, was just as remarkable as the previous section. It paints a new picture of the gospel for the reader...to see it as comedy. I believe it was this section that surprised me the most. The whole idea of the gospel being comedy is something I never stopped to consider. Buechner uses the Biblical example of Genesis when an angel comes to tell Abraham and Sarah that Sarah is pregnant at the age of 91. In this chapter, Sarah laughs when the angel tells her the news and God asks her why she laughed and she then lies, saying she did not laugh. But it is funny, isn't it? I can imagine a comedy movie being made about the old lady who was pregnant at 91 years old. It is so funny because it is so ridiculous and Sarah knew it, Abraham knew it, and so did God. In fact, he instructed the couple to name their son Isaac which means he laughs. Another

Biblical example Buechner uses in this section is Jesus' apt for speaking in riddles. Jesus never gives a clear answer to things, nor does God. After all, how can the cross be a clear answer of God's love for us? The ridiculousness of the whole situation is laughable - and I can vouch for that since I have been around many people who laugh at this aspect of the gospel and how it can't be true. Buechner explains this technique with the technique of telling a good joke. Say you are at a dinner party and you tell a hilarious joke you heard at

work to the crowd of quiet people, all eyes on you expecting to laugh, and you expecting them to laugh too because it truly was quite funny. What if they didn't laugh though? There you would be standing, all eyes still on you but no laughter and you may start to sweat and you can't really explain the joke because that would ruin the joke so you sit down embarrassed because no one understood it. The same can be said for Jesus who stood in front of large crowds speaking the gospel. He didn't use plain language but colorful and metaphorical and comical language so that if someone did not understand, he would not explain himself for the same reason that you didn't explain your joke. It would ruin the message.

The last section, the gospel as fairy tale, is one that I consider myself very familiar with. I don't claim to be an expert on the matter but I will claim that I am very interested in the fairy tale and fantasy genre and how they relate to the Bible and share many Biblical themes. Buechner references many great works of fantasy and fairy tale such as the Chronicles of Narnia, the Lord of the Rings, and the Wizard of Oz. What these stories, and most other fantasy and fairy tale works is that nothing is what it seems. The white which is not pure but evil and Aslan is not a killer but gentle. Dorothy is a little girl yet the hero of the story. Glinda is beautiful but a witch. And Jesus is a king in spite of everything. He looks like a poor man and unworthy but beneath it all he is the son of God, a king, God in the flesh. Just as the ugly duckling transformed into a swan and the beast transformed into a handsome prince, Jesus is proof that beauty resides in unexpected places. Many people would expect that if God showed up today he would be dressed in a nice tuxedo with his hair slicked back and a successful back story on his shoulders but in fact God is the man at the soup kitchen poorly dressed for the cold weather or the young school teacher helping her students everyday after school. Like the fairy tale and fantasy, the gospel is never what it seems.

I don't think it is a big surprise to say that this book moved me in many ways and it is one that I will never forget. It is easily one of the best books I have read this year and I plan on reading much more from Frederick Buechner. The book was rich, the language was exquisite, and the content was brilliant and beautiful. I will give this book 5 out of 5 stars!

Matt Sheffield says

Well written and engaging. I recommend this to every preacher of the joyous message of Jesus for Buechner's insistence that they tell us about the truth that is too good to be true; about the prodigal love of a Father who can't wait to throw a good party; and about the smelly and uncomely beggar who turns out to be a powerful wizard. This book is like water in a desert for a hyper-rationalized, dour, or wonderless religion.

Alexis Neal says

Buechner examines the arc of the gospel using the well known genres of tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale--that is, bad news, good news, and transformation or fantasy. He begins with the tragedy of sin and the fallen world, pictured in Christ's shed tears over the death of Lazarus. From there, he moves on to the comedy of God's grace, pictured in Sarah's laughter when an angel informed her that she would bear a son in her old age. He then ties in the elements of fairy tale, familiar to us from Grimm and *The Wizard of Oz*, among others.

This was a pleasant and poetic little book. At just under 100 pages long, it's a quick read, and Buechner's fiction writing roots show through in the highly narrative style he adopts. He takes liberties with the details of the Bible stories he retells, but they're minor enough that they don't hinder the underlying themes, and obvious enough that readers are unlikely to get confused (for example, he describes Pontius Pilate as a

stressed out leader who's just given up smoking).

I don't agree with all of Buechner's statements--some of his descriptions of the tragedy of the gospel (that is, sin and the fallen world) seem to undermine the sovereignty of God, and his discussion of the gospel as comedy (the unexpected and ridiculous love of God) borders on irreverent or unclear. He describes the gospel as a cosmic joke, not because it is untrue or a prank, but because it undoes the sequence of expected events--that is, sinners deserve wrath. Given modern usage of 'joke' and 'comedy', the terminology could be confusing.

The general point of the book seems to be that the gospel is not just a bunch of theological facts, but a story that preachers must experience for themselves before they can share it with others. All of which is well and good, but the fluffy, touchy-feely language could easily be mis-read by those with fuzzier theology and a rather amorphous idea of truth. Even though Buechner does not appear to run afoul of orthodoxy here, it could be (mis)read as an endorsement of postmodern liberal theology.

Bottom line: This book shouldn't be the basis for any substantive theological ideas, but it's useful for gaining an over-arching perspective on the story of the bible as a cohesive whole. An easy (and quick) read.

Samuel Kassing says

I've never read Buechner before but this man can write. His prose are beautiful and he describes things with a unique quality and depth.

This little work looks at the Gospel through three unique lenses. Tragedy, comedy and fairy tale. There are certain passages that I'm going to come back to because of how profoundly beautiful they are. Definitely worth a read. Profound, sobering and funny all at the same time.

Harman says

Buechner's poetic manner of 'telling the truth' was difficult to adjust to, at first. To be honest, poetry intimidates me more often than not, less because it is poetry and more because I'm afraid I'll miss it. Academic books and journals give themselves to note taking, as they deal with the kind of ideas that we can manipulate with our minds if not our hands. But poetry and sermon deal with presuppositions and even pre-presuppositions, so as Buechner talks about the truth of the Gospel in tragedy, comedy and fairy-tale, the academic mind spends the first chapter in a cold sweat - tired and terrified of the anecdotal retelling of Pilate's experience of Good Friday, wary of the poor exegesis and strongly tempted to skip the storytelling to the real intellectual meat.

If you're going to read this book, you must overcome that temptation and embrace storytelling and poetry, let the words flow over you in their entirety and be prepared to meditate on God as you read, which above all else is not the kind of thing given to mindful nor manual manipulation. Don't approach this book as an intellectual, nor as a preacher, nor a poet, nor an Anglican or Presbyterian or Nondenominational or atheist or Muslim - approach this as a human. Be prepared and willing and able to feel pain and loss and lack. Be prepared to feel desire and joy and hope. Be prepared to believe again in fairytales. Finish this book and rush to your child's bedside armed not with a story to read, but a story to tell. Rush to your class reunion, your family gathering, your regional manager's conference with a story to tell, and tell the truth.

Drew Darby says

I don't know if I'm just sentimental, or if it's just the state I'm in spiritually, but this little book about preaching was very moving for me, especially the section on the Gospel as tragedy.

Beuchner is an excellent storyteller, and anyone who reads this book, I am sure, will come away with several memorable stories to mull over, even if the manner of storytelling may have at times felt a little quaint or dated. Having been a high school English teacher myself, the story of the teacher discussing King Lear with his students was wonderful, heart-wrenching, and almost brought me to tears.

I also was reminded as I read that most Christians most of the time don't speak about certain things. Certain realities of daily human life that we just live with are simply 'unspokens.' The rare pastor/preacher who is real enough to actually talk about these things (like Beuchner does, especially in his stories and descriptions of people--"poor, bare, forked animals" that we are) is one who, in my experience, is popular but whose ministry seems to be very short-lived.

Perhaps this kind of stuff is too real for the pulpit, but it feels like the Gospel that is preached authentically, made the true words of life that in our wretchedness we can understand and relate to. That's the kind of Gospel that stirs the soul.

Sylvester says

So much going on in this very short book, it seems impossible to review without studying further. I don't know that I always agree with Buechner, but I appreciate the spirit of what he writes. I love how he highlights the idea that great books, classics, in all their varieties and genres spotlight aspects of the truth - show it's many facets. And that books are always part of a larger community of writing - one book leads to another, to another, there are books within books - it's a book universe and has a deep rhythm and meaning that unites. Loved the chapter on fairytales.

Alexandria Skinner says

If art is a creation which captures some deep essence of truth, and in which the whole transcends the sum of its parts, then this masterfully-told story is art of a mythical and poetic form rarely seen in our Western society -- a society in which we tend to focus on the logical and empirical than the equally legitimate range of human experience in the poetic and mythic. Buechner helps draw us back to experience some of that poetic and mythical quality, and even understand some of the jokes that too seriously minded folk might miss from a less imaginative reading of the gospel story. I'm afraid anything further that I could say about this book would fail to do justice to Beuchner's essay, which reads like the yarn of a master story teller and which is framed by the image of a man giving a sermon. Instead of telling the reader "about" the gospel, as a nonfiction writer would do, Buechner leads us to experience for ourselves, and thus to better understand, the elements of tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale, as we ourselves are drawn closer through these interactions to a greater appreciation for the divine. This book is a short read and an easy to read book, but it is one that will both be read more than once and which will profoundly influence how one relates to idea and metaphor in

the grand and beautiful story -- tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale, all -- that we call the Bible.

Laura says

You mean this book has been waiting for me all my life and none of you told me about it??

I'm enchanted. Obsessed. My book is covered in sticky tabs marking passages I want to savor. This is the culmination (but hopefully not the end!) of several years of reading literary apologetics. I've been on this quest ever since I left my position teaching English at a public high school. Ostensibly, I left because I was pregnant with my third child. In reality, I was pretty demoralized about the relentless sidelining of everything humanities. Why bother with stories anymore? I couldn't even answer the question myself.

It turned out that I wasn't the first person to ask this question, or the smartest. I met Malcolm Guite and Nancy Pearcey and Holly Ordway, Alan Jacobs and Karen Swallow Prior and Francis Schaeffer and Leland Ryken... but all this time I still hadn't met Frederick Buechner. Here were all these people defending the humanities and the reasonableness of trusting your imagination.

It's been a really exciting journey to discover that what made me feel odd in one setting was the exact point of entry into a whole other party that had been going on for years without me.

The gospel is a tragedy because "before it is good news, it is bad news." The gospel strips us bare (I swear, I wrote a whole talk on this two years ago and to see my own words reflected in another person's wisdom is akin to feeling an electric shock). Then the gospel reverses everything we expected. Then the gospel offers us a magic, something unexpected and good. I'd write more but I'm dying to just dive back in and read this one again.

Ray says

Simply the best book on preaching I've ever read. Buechner uses the simple device of tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale as three pathways to the same destination: honest, truthful, and authentic preaching that is grows out of one unshakeable principle: that the preacher must tell the truth. This is not a book that will help you tune up your sermons, or add a few techniques that will make you a better speaker. Buechner urges the preacher to always be truthful (and not afraid), and to be amazed at the pathos, the joy, and the discovery of grace that will be found in this decision. It's been 30+ years since I first read the book, but I still return to it frequently, and have found his counsel to be the bedrock of great preaching.

G.M. Burrow says

Buechner has many valid points, many brilliant ones, some that make us scratch our head, but all fascinating. He writes somewhat like Rosenstock-Huessy—that almost stream-of-consciousness prose that rolls and tumbles and spins and defies an editor's pen. The only time the spell falters is when he throws out an image simply too startling for us to swallow, and then we realize that he might have been making it up all along. Still, an insightful and provocative read.

Kurt says

103. Tellin the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale, by Frederick Buechner. 97 pages. Pastor Roger McQuistion tossed me this book during one of my church meetings with him. It is written from the POV of a writer who is also a preacher. I found it captivating because it uses literature to make its points. He begins with Pilate as a cigarette-smoking nihilist who has a picture of Tiberius in his 'office.' When Chris is brought before him, he asks Jesus, "What is truth?" Of course, Jesus responds with silence. This is the only real, possible response because words are inadequate to explain truth, or love, for that matter. What we 'say' using words in speech, writing, and literature is only our pathetic attempt to articulate that which is quite inexpressible, he suggests. As the author says, "Be silent, and know that even by my silence and absence I am known. Be silent and listen to the stones cry out." I loved how this author used literature to make his points. In King Lear, for example, clothes are removed; people are naked. The word of the play strips us all naked and "to that extent Shakespeare turns preacher because stripping us naked is part of what preaching is all about, the tragic part. Clothed in our own "accomplishments, our reputation for wit, our eloquence, knowledge, and dignity, people hope to be illuminated by a life-giving word. In King Lear, images of clothes and nakedness abound. As in our own lives, we "wear clothes as essential to survival because we cannot endure too much nakedness any more than we can endure too much silence (God), which strips us naked." The preacher must remember the ones he is speaking to, who beneath all of the clothes they wear, are poor animals who labor under the burden of their own lives, let alone of this world's tragic life. The author further reminds us that it is the worldly-wise ones who are utterly doomed, the central paradox of King Lear. In the Brothers Karamazov, Alyosha suddenly sees the world abandoned by God, then finds the world so aflame with God that he rushes out of the chapel where his dead friend lies and kisses the earth, the craggy face wherein God, in spite of and in the midst of everything, is. The author alludes to Father Mapple preaching in Moby Dick as well, charging all preachers not to shrink from facing and proclaiming the dark side of truth: "Woe to him who seeks to please rather than appall. Woe to him whose good name is more to him than goodness." Melville would appall us by speaking the tragic truth of a tempestuous world where even the whiteness of a great white whale is ambiguous: standing for beauty, gladness, and holiness, and also for the whiteness of sharks." Not so much a color, he writes, as the visible absence of color...a colorless all-color of atheism from which we shrink." But the author also finds the gospel comedic. We all face the darkness of death and life in a world where God can only be seen from afar; though laughter, like the announcement that Abraham and Sarah will have a child at the age of 100, we come to see that although the tragedy of our lives is inevitable, the comedy is frequently unforeseeable. Of all the people God could have chosen to be his holy people, he chose the Jews, who before his words ended were dancing around a golden calf. Apart from the comedy of Jesus himself, there is the comedy of the word he speaks: parables. Because his understanding transcends the medicine of words, he uses the language of images and metaphors. Consider the story of the prodigal's son, a caricature of all that is joyless, petty, and self-serving. The joke is that his father loves him more than all of his other sons who are blind to comedy, trapped by their own seriousness. This is all, the author suggests, the sad fun of Jewish ghetto humor. The comedy of God saving the most unlikely people when they least expect or deserve it is what King Lear glimpses at the end of his tragic life, when the world has done its worst, he says to the daughter he loves, "Come, let's away to prison. We two, alone, so we'll live, and pray, and sing and tell old tales, and laugh." Finally, the Gospel is Fairy Tales. Hmmmm. Every age has produced fairy tales, stories about transformation where all creatures are revealed in the end as what they truly are: the ugly duckling becomes a great white swan; the frog is revealed to be a prince in hiding; the beautiful but wicked queen is unmasked at last in all her ugliness. What gives these tales their power is the world they evoke: where the battle goes, ultimately, to the good, who live happily ever after; where in the long-run, good and evil alike becomes known by its or her true name. The

author cites Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. It is true that in the destruction of the demonic ring, a great evil is destroyed, but the universal triumph of good is still only a Hobbit's dream, and the Golden Age of elves and dwarfs is fated to be followed by the tragic age of men. The author suspects that our obsession with the occult, the demonic, exorcisms, and black magic—the great white whales, is actually our longing for the beatific. We are all like the knight in the Seventh Seal who tells the young witch about to be burned that he wants to meet the devil, her master, because "I want to ask him about god; he, if anyone, must know." The whole point of the Gospel as fairy tale is that he is the king in spite of everything. In the world of the fairy tale, the wicket sisters are dressed as if for a Palm beach wedding, and in the world of the Gospel, it is the killjoys, phonies, and holier-than-thous who wear fancy clothes, the same ravenous wolves in sheep's' clothing. I'm not planning on becoming a preacher, but the literary merit of this existential argument is profound and stands alone. ***** = Five Star Rating

Jen says

I love how Buechner can mashup biblical and literary characters with a 20th-century setting. Humor and compassion come through clearly.

Lisa says

I read this book every few years. It reminds me to take Wonder seriously. It is small, and rooted in the mid twentieth century which I find charming. But the idea that before there is good news there is tragedy and that it is the comedy that isn't expected--the baby born to an elderly person, the first being last, the prodigal son--it is comedy, good news. And re-embracing the fairy tale instead of making the gospel rational. Looking for the peace that passes understanding instead of just the peace that makes this life do-able.

jim says

changed my life. reads like poetry and cuts straight to the soul.
