

# Frederick Buechner: Telling the Truth – the gospel as tragedy, comedy and fairy tale

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*A short, evocatively written essay on what it means to live and preach the gospel*

## 1. Telling the truth

Henry Ward Beecher preparing to lecture on preaching at Yale, knowing he had been having an affair with the wife of a parishioner. All have sinned, Rom 3.23; all are human, all labour under the burden of their humanity. Preachers must address themselves to the fullness and the emptiness of who we are, the emptiness where grace and peace belong but mostly are not, because terrible as well as wonderful things have happened to us all.

The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather what he sees is at least eight parts thicken, phony, slob. That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. That is the comedy. And yet, so what? So what if even in his sin the slob is loved and forgiven when the very mark and substance of his sin and of his slobbery is that he keeps turning down the love and forgiveness because he either doesn't believe them or doesn't want them or just doesn't give a damn? In answer, the news of the Gospel is that extraordinary things happen to him just as in fairy tales extraordinary things happen. Henry Ward Beecher cheats on his wife, his God, himself, but manages to keep on bringing the Gospel to life for people anyway, maybe even for himself. Lear goes berserk on a heath but comes out of it for a few brief hours every inch a king. Zaccheus climbs up a sycamore tree a crook and climbs down a saint. Paul sets out a hatchet man for the Pharisees and comes back a fool for Christ. It is impossible for anybody to leave behind the darkness of the world he carries on his back like a snail, but for God all things are possible. That is the fairy tale. All together they are the truth.

But to preach the Gospel is not just to tell the truth but to tell the truth in love, and to tell the truth in love means to tell it with concern not only for the truth that is being told but with concern also for the people it is being told to. So it is crucial to keep them in mind too, the hearers of the tragic, the comic, the fairy-tale truth. Who are they? What is going on inside them? What is happening behind their faces where they have cut themselves to make them strain to hear the truth if it is told? The preacher must always try to feel what it is like to live inside the skins of the people he is preaching to, to hear the truth as 'they hear it. That is not as hard as it sounds because, of course, he is himself a hearer of truth as well as a teller of truth, and he listens out of the same emptiness as they do for a truth to fill him and make him true. So at the deepest level all hearers of the truth are the same hearer. 7-8

Pilate asks, what is truth? 'The Gospel that is truth is good news, but before it is good news, let us say that it is just news. Let us say that it is the evening news, the television news, but with the sound turned off... A particular truth can be stated in words... But truth itself is another matter. Truth itself cannot be stated. Truth simply is, and is what is, the good with the bad, the joy with the despair, the presence and absence of God. Before it is a word, the the Gospel that is truth is silence, and in answer to Pilate's question Jesus keeps silence. '

The OT prophets spoke particular truths – what would happen -. But they also spoke truth, gospel truth, truth itself and that was when they were most truly prophetic. They spoke in poetry; 'at their most truly prophetic they speak things that my guess is that even they themselves did not entirely understand because they are things that are of truth itself rather than of particular truths, truth itself which cannot finally be understood but only experienced'. 21

What will the preacher tell? Let him tell them the truth. Before the Gospel is a word, it is silence. It is the silence of their own lives and of his life. it is life with the sound turned off so that for a moment or two you can experience it not in terms of the words you make it bearable by but for the unutterable mystery that it is.' 23.

## 2. The Gospel as Tragedy

The tragic part of preaching is about stripping us naked. We clothe ourselves in our accomplishments, reputations, churchmanships, knowledge, pretensions. Our listeners clothe themselves in their own securities, pretensions, reputations, expectations. Clothes are not just hypocrisy; they are essential to survival because we cannot endure too much nakedness any more than we can endure too much silence. So after the silence that is truth comes the news that is

bad before it is good, the word that is tragedy before it is comedy because it strips us bare in order ultimately to clothe us.

Jesus invites us, who are heavy laden, to come to him. The preacher has to remember that he speaks to people who are poor, bare, who labour under the burden of their own lives before they labour under the burden of the world's tragic life. The pressure is to speak the answer – he has to give one, because everyone else is giving them. But when Jesus came to dead Lazarus, he just wept.

The preacher is not called to be an actor, a magician, but just himself. He is called to tell the truth as he has experienced it; called to be human. 'If he does not make real to them the human experience of what it is to cry into the storm and receive no answer, to be sick at heart and find no healing, then he becomes the only one there who seems not to have had that experience because most surely under their bonnets and shawls and jackets, under their afros and ponytails, all the others there have had it whether they talk of it or not. As much as anything else, it is their experience of the absence of God that has brought them there in search of his presence, and if the preacher does not speak of that and to that, then he becomes like the captain of a ship who is the only one aboard who either does not know that the waves are 20 feet high and the decks awash or will not face up to it so that anything else he tries to say by way of hope and comfort and empowering becomes suspect on the basis of that tone crucial ignorance or disingenuousness or cowardice or reluctance to speak in love any truths but the ones that people love to hear. 40-41

It is out of the whirlwind that Job first hears God, out of the absence of God that God makes himself present. IN the beginning the earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep – so also now, because there is never a time when darkness and dimness are not upon the face of the deep and upon our own faces.

### 3. The Gospel as Comedy

Sarah and Abraham, laughing at the idea of a baby. Jesus says come to me all you who are laden (that is the tragedy), and I will give you rest (and that is the comedy). Jesus' whole life was a kind of comedy – a 'folly' (1 Cor 1.23). It started with a dark night and a multitude of angels, carried on with loaves and fish, went on with resurrection. He speaks in comedy too, the parable, not in the incendiary rhetoric of the prophet or the systematic abstractions of the theologian but in the language of images and metaphor, which is the only language you can use if you want not just to elucidate the hidden thing but to make it come alive. Rather different from the OT prophets – he doesn't speak great historical truths, address questions of politics and social justice; he talks about God being like a shepherd overjoyed because he'd found his lost sheep.

'Is it possible, I wonder, to say that it is only when you hear the Gospel as a wild and marvellous joke that you really hear it at all? Heard as anything else, the Gospel is the church's thing, the preacher's thing, the lecturer's thing. Heard as a joke – high and unbidden and ringing with laughter – it can only be God's thing.' 68. Prodigal son – the elder brother just doesn't get it. 'People are prepared for anything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light.,'; that in their field is a treasure.

'The preacher tells the truth by speaking of the visible absence of God because if he doesn't see and own up to the absence of God in the world, then he is the only one there who doesn't see it, and who then is going to take him seriously when he tries to make real what he claims also to see as the invisible presence of God in the world. Sin and grace, absence and presence, tragedy and comedy, they divide the world between them and where they meet head on, the Gospel happens.' 71

### 4. The Gospel as Fairy Tale

Stories do not just tell us about the world of the fairy tale in and of itself, they tell us something about where it is located and how to reach it, and most of them agree that it is not as far away as we might think, or all that hard to get to. in Fairy Tales things aren't as bad as they seem, and in their world the marvellous and impossible thing truly happens. Good and evil meet and do battle there as here, but in the tale the good live happily ever after. Perhaps the obsession of our time with the monstrous, demonic, occult, is at its heart the shadow side o four longing for the beautific.

The fairy tale world is one of darkness, and so is the Gospel world. The point is that the king is the king. That is the Gospel, this meeting of darkness and light and the final victory of light. This is the fairy tale of the Gospel – with the claim not just that it happened once upon a time but that it has kept on happening ever since and is happening still.