

The Greatest Showman: A Parable about Parables
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Enter through the red and white striped tent to find the most lively, colorful, and exuberant performance that will amaze the eyes. With high-flying trapeze artists soaring high above the heads, to a bearded woman singing most divinely, to the shortest man dressed as a great general riding around on an elephant, and lastly, to the ringmaster, himself, in his bright red suit and top hat, incredibly dancing and taking charge of what an attendee may call a circus are the spectacles within the musical movie, *The Greatest Showman* (2017), directed by Michael Gracey. While this movie portrays the embracement of odd, yet intriguing individuals to society, *The Greatest Showman* simultaneously tells the origin story of this “celebration of humanity” (Gracey, 2017) set in New York during the mid-1800s by following the life of Phineas Taylor Barnum, otherwise known as circus showman, P.T. Barnum.

The life of P.T. Barnum as depicted in the movie could be termed as a stereotypical rags-to-riches story where fluffy song and dance sustain the audience. Yet, the life of this immense dreamer and his transformation in the movie could also be described through a biblical lens, more specifically through three parables found within the Gospels. By dissecting Barnum’s life into three main parts, (1) his early life and creation of the circus, (2) his lust for wealth, fame, and exhilarating applause, and (3) his ultimate return home to his family can all be represented by the biblical parables of the Mustard Seed, the Rich Man, and the Prodigal Son, respectively. This representation of Barnum’s life through these parables can be seen through the characters, screenplay, including song lyrics, lighting, sound, and, most clearly, central plot events.

P.T. Barnum, played by world-renowned actor, Hugh Jackman, is first introduced to the viewer as the young son to a tailor, dreaming of someday being this great star with a crowd

gloriously cheering for him. While on a job with his father, Barnum meets a young girl of the same age, Charity (Michelle Williams), whose upper class far exceeds Barnum's poorest class. Seeing beyond the fabrication of social classes, Barnum and Charity develop a budding and lasting romance. It is within the song "A Million Dreams", sung by the young and eventually present aged couple, where the dreamer side of Barnum is first revealed. The lyrics, "'Cause every night I lie in bed, the brightest colors fill my head. A million dreams are keeping me awake... a million dreams of the world we're gonna make" (Gracey, 2017) explicitly expose Barnum's desire to make what Charity's father deemed "an insignificant man with an insignificant life" (Gracey, 2017) into a life of grand adventure and excitement for him, Charity, and their two daughters.

With the loss of his job where he essentially was a cog in the machine, Barnum finally decides to delve into his wild imagination to chase those dreams he has had since he was a young boy. He buys a museum that displays the oddities or outlandish events of life, such as stuffed African animals of actual size, waxed historical figures, and re-enactments of famous historical events. While his initial attempt to "transport people to a place where they can see things they've never seen before" (Gracey, 2017) fails, Barnum tries again, this time, searching for live people who are *different* to fill his museum and attract a crowd. Barnum believes there is something fascinating about "the exotic and the macabre" (Gracey, 2017) especially that of individuals, whom society outcasts for looking physically different or disfigured. Barnum seeks out those individuals, like a woman with a full beard, a man covered head-to-toe with hair, and, still relevant to the twenty-first century, African Americans with a high-class trapeze act. He invites these societal castaways to "take [this] world and redefine it...and be more than [they] could ever be" (Gracey, 2017) without hiding their faces. He, essentially, creates a refuge, a family, for

these individuals where they not only proudly share their differences with society but for the first time in their lives, have a place of belonging and acceptance in Barnum and his family.

This portion, in fact the largest, of Barnum's life can be a representation of the biblical parable known as the Mustard Seed. This parable is one among many plant-related parables Jesus used to teach His disciples about God the Father and the Kingdom of Heaven. In the parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus compares the mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds on earth, to that of the Kingdom of Heaven. Although its size may be extremely small, when full-grown it is the largest of plants, "a large bush where the birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches" (Matthew 13:31-32, New American Bible). Through this parable, Jesus is teaching the disciples that Heaven, the eternal resting place for souls, will begin small, with just a few people. However, like the seed, it will grow to immense proportions as people throughout time learn to live God's way. Essentially, Jesus is describing the spreading of the Good News and start of Christianity after His death and resurrection.

In the illustration and meaning of the Mustard Seed parable, there is much resemblance to Barnum and his life. Barnum, as seen from a young age, is a dreamer with limitless creativity and imagination for something the world has never seen. Barnum's story and his dreams, however crazy or extreme they may be, are much like the mustard seed. Society does not think that the son of a tailor (and later a poor orphan) would ever amount to anything in this life...that he and his big dreams would remain small and insignificant, like the size of the mustard seed. Despite the criticism and his initial failed attempt, Barnum, from his humble beginnings and small dream, ends up with a large, crowd-producing show. His insignificant life and outrageous dream no longer seem as small or ridiculous as they once had.

Yet, the comparison between Barnum and the Mustard Seed parable can continue further. With the success in the circus performances, the flocking birds and their dwelling within the tree, as described in the parable, can be a depiction of the outcasts Barnum willingly seeks out and provides refuge for. His circus, his dream, provides a home and a family for all those deemed unfit by society. By the creation of his show and fulfillment of his dream, Barnum establishes a place of acceptance and belonging for outsiders that can continue to grow overtime with the addition of more people, like that of Christianity and the Kingdom of Heaven.

In expanding on this comparison further, the biblical text reads, “where the birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches” (Matthew 13:32, New American Bible), which infers that ALL species of birds flocked to this one bush. The circus performers, all *different* in their acts and appearances, similarly find refuge in Barnum’s circus. In emphasizing this idea more explicitly, the colorful and flamboyant costumes and make-up for each of these performers, not only highlights the specific traits that society finds appalling but depicts the uniqueness and beauty of humankind. Additionally, the inspiring anthem of “This is Me” marvelously captures this message through words of encouragement, bravery, and confidence that alleviate the shame these individuals once felt about themselves. Through Barnum’s circus, there is an open and warm embracement for all people, much like the Kingdom of Heaven.

Evolving from the Mustard Seed parable, for a seed to grow into a plant, it needs sunlight. In relating this to Barnum and his transformation, the lighting used throughout the movie contributes this necessary factor for his growth. The lighting plays a recurring theme within the film. In the opening scene of the movie, the viewer sees only the dark shadow of Barnum, matching that of society’s opinion of him as being unrecognizable and indistinguishable. Once Barnum creates a kaleidoscope of light that dances off billowing sheets,

replicating some sort of unseen magic, from a simple candle and a patterned lamp shade, does the lighting on Barnum in the movie begin to increase in intensity. The beauty and intricate pattern produced serves as the initial spark of light for Barnum to make his dream a reality. The opening scene, in which Barnum was hidden in the darkness, is recreated again on the opening day of the circus. This time, however, Barnum, is bathed in a bright spotlight as he sings and dances on the circus floor along with the other performers with the crowd cheering out to their success. In both scenes, the physical light metaphorically represents the necessary light for a seed, or in this case, Barnum, to start growing into someone much larger and magnificent.

As Barnum rises to fame, his show becomes known throughout the country and even goes international, piquing the interest of the Queen of England. With this newfound fame and wealth, Barnum buys an enormous mansion for his family, claiming “this is the life I promised you [Charity]” (Gracey, 2017). It is here where Barnum for the first time, revels in the materialistic world instead of his usual idealistic dream world. He has become infatuated in how fame and popularity can increase his once spat-on class to one of elite status and grandeur, something now he does not want to lose. This ultimately causes Barnum to make a series of decisions that stunt and temporarily halt his personal growth.

Despite his house purchase, final approval from Charity’s stuck-up father, and new, elite social status after years of being a nobody, it is still not quite enough for Barnum. When he discovers Jenny Lind (Rebecca Ferguson), world-renowned opera singer, he ignores the circus he has built and the family he has gained. He makes it his new mission to tour with Jenny to increase his fame. The song, “Never Enough”, which is sung by Jenny while on tour, does not relate to her. Rather, the lyrics and meaning behind the song speak of Barnum and his unending lust for fame, wealth, and applause. The most prominent lyric equally matching that of Barnum’s

supreme desire is, “These hands could hold the world, but it’ll never be enough, never be enough for me”. While Jenny ends up “given [Barnum] the world” (Gracey, 2017), Barnum’s obsession for the frivolities of life cost him greatly. Even when Charity asks, “when will it be enough for you” (Gracey, 2017), Barnum still chooses to follow his temptations. He, ultimately, loses his family and circus – his best and most insurmountable achievement and joy.

It is during this part of Barnum’s life that his unappeasable desire for fame, wealth, and status renders much similarity to the Rich Man parable found within the Bible. In this parable, Jesus is speaking to His disciples when a man runs up to Him, asking “what must I do to inherit eternal life” (Mark 10:17, New American Bible). In response to the man, Jesus answers with the Ten Commandments as the way to eternal life. However, when the man remarks he has followed them all since his youth, Jesus adds one more aspect to His original answer. He says to the man, “Go, sell what you have, and give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mark 10:21). At this last requirement, the man’s “face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions” (Mark 10:22, New American Bible). Jesus ends the parable with, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25, New American Bible). Through this parable, Jesus is teaching the disciples that Heaven cannot be reached if one solely focuses on materialistic objects, assumed titles, and frivolities of this earthly world. One must turn to God and give everything up for the ultimate treasure, eternal life. Jesus understands and addresses the challenge it is to do this through the image of the camel passing through the eye of a needle, but, regardless of its difficulty, it is the only way for absolute and lasting joy.

From this parable, Barnum clearly represents the rich man, who is unwillingly to let go of his possessions for something even more valuable and fulfilling – a life with his family and

circus. While in the case of Barnum, his possessions are incomparable to that of his family and circus life, he still tightly holds on to them, believing they are worth so much more and yield greater happiness than that of the people in his life. As a result, Barnum, like the rich man, walks away disappointed with “just him and his show” (Gracey, 2017).

Developing off this idea of riches, for Barnum, the sound of roaring applause and cheer from the crowd is the glorious sound that he so desperately seeks. While the reader does not know of the possessions the rich man owns in the parable, it can be fair to assume that the ring, cling, and chime of his coins, jewelry, and other precious metals probably melodiously fill his ears, preventing him too from even greater treasures and sounds. Throughout this movie, sound and its usage are meticulously placed and emphasized for the corresponding action and tone of scenes. In particular, the absence of sound for certain scenes does not only add drama to the visual depiction but also perfectly complements Barnum’s quest for fame, wealth, and applause. For it is in the scenes when Barnum, from his point of view, accomplishes astonishing performances for the first time that the omission of sound is employed. For example, on the opening nights of both the circus and Jenny Lind tour, does the crowd explode with cheers and applause that are initially inaudible to Barnum. From his perspective, he sees the crowds enthusiastically cheer and applaud for him but hears nothing. His loss of hearing in these grand moments of immense adoration and praise are the fame, wealth, and prosperity speaking to him. These trivial goals of the human life impede his hearing so much that their loud clashing disenables him to hearing the beautiful voices of his family and circus performers around him.

Again, the lighting within the movie corresponds to this part of Barnum’s life. As the movie progresses and Barnum’s infatuation with fame and applause grows, he becomes blinded by the metaphorical light emitted from these false treasures. In response, the lighting within the

movie slowly diminishes. The once bright spotlights that facilitated Barnum's growth now become dimmed and hushed. However, this decrease in lighting only starts after the climax of light is seen through an intense, raging fire. When Barnum returns home from the tour, his beloved circus, his original dream, is engulfed with flames, essentially destroying everything he has built. The fire, with its intense heat and light, can physically embody Barnum's internal turmoil and loss of his family. The ashes that are left of his circus now signify the broken relationships in his life, especially his relationship with Charity. With the extinguishment of the fire, the lighting on Barnum is significantly reduced, reflecting his consequences of following his temptations.

As Barnum is now alone with no family or circus, he is forced to reflect upon his decisions that led him to where he is currently. In doing so, he recognizes how the choices he made, especially for higher prestige and acceptance by society, mean absolutely nothing if he does not have his family, including the circus, with him. In a moving scene within the movie, Barnum, who is drinking alone after losing everything, is encountered by the circus performers. Although Barnum abandoned them for what he deemed a more genuine act in Jenny Lind, the performers quickly re-embrace him. Lettie, the bearded woman, tells Barnum, "maybe you are a fraud or interested in just making a buck. But you [Barnum] gave us a real family. That circus is our home. We want our home back. You don't get it. Our own mothers were ashamed of us. Hid us our whole lives. Then you came and pulled us out of the shadows" (Gracey, 2017). In that moment, Barnum rediscovers why he began his dream. It is for his family; the insuperable love for them that "no ovation could ever fill" (Gracey, 2017) his heart. Barnum goes on to sing the song, "From Now On" with the circus performers. The lyrics within this song as well as his

action of running home to his family within the scene reaffirm his recognition of his mistakes and explicitly mark his new vow to do all things for his family, never for fame or glory.

This last part of Barnum's life and his complete transformation of starting with a dream to chasing admiration and acclaim and finally ending with his return home to his family, exemplifies the biblical parable of the Prodigal Son. In this parable, Jesus speaks of a man, who has two sons. One son asks for his piece of inheritance right now, while the other son diligently works on the farm, not asking for his share quite yet. With his prized and substantial inheritance, the son leaves his family and goes off only to squander all of his given fortunes. For money, he is stuck tending to the pigs and eating their chum for food. In recognizing his foolishness and admitting to his faults in worshipping the false treasures of this life, the son decides to return home, ask for his father's forgiveness, and work hard on the farm. Upon his return, his father "ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him...[saying] my son was lost and has now been found" (Luke 15:20,24, New American Bible), which causes for a large celebration. The other son is jealous of his father's quick forgiveness and party for his brother, who was fast to waste his father's fortunes (Luke 15:11-31, New American Bible). Through this parable, Jesus's message for His disciples is at times one may lose sight or faith in God by the earthly riches in this world. Yet, no matter how lost or hopeless one may become, God will always warmly welcome and forgive when he or she returns home to Him.

In much of a similar way, Barnum, who represents the brother who squanders his inheritance, receives this unconditional embracement and forgiveness first from his circus family then from his biological family, especially Charity. Returning to the song, "From Now On", Barnum, like the son, acknowledges his mistakes in seeking joy from wealth and fame that which could never measure up to the joy he receives from his family. He sings, "I drank

champagne with kings and queens. The politicians praised my name...I chased their cheers. A crazy speed for always needing more. But when I stop and see you [his family] here, I remember who all this was for” (Gracey, 2017). Like the son in the parable, Barnum returns home because his family and original dream is all that truly matters to him.

While Barnum experiences a grand return home, he, too, faces opposition much like the brother did in the parable. Although the disapproval does not come from his family like it does for the son, Barnum, even throughout movies, faces the townspeople’s criticism and displeasure of his circus, especially that of his performers’ appearances. They protest and call for an end “of this freakshow” (Gracey, 2017). With his return home and resurgence of the circus after the fire, he, again and will continue, to encounter this conflict. Yet, it does not deter Barnum or the performers from putting on their show and displaying that they have a given place within society.

Finally, with Barnum’s resolution in place and reemergence of what he values in his life, the lighting that was diminished is now restored. Only when Barnum vows, “these eyes won’t be blinded by the lights [the prestige, fame, and wealth] anymore” (Gracey, 2017) does the bright lights, especially use of spotlights in the final scene, return shining bright on Barnum who remembers the reason why he did all of this in the first place. This restoration of light enables Barnum, like the mustard seed, to begin growing again. In fact, the movie concludes with Barnum, giving up time in the spotlight to watch his daughters’ dance recital. As the scene fades, he encapsulates his growth by singing to himself, “its everything you want. Its everything you ever need. Its here right in front of you” (Gracey, 2017) referring solely to his family.

While *The Greatest Showman* depicts the life of ringmaster, P.T. Barnum and his ultimate realization that all he needs is his family, both biologic and circus, through three biblical parables, in a way, this movie, itself, can be a modern parable for today. In the twenty-first

century, there is still much discrimination on people in regard to their physical appearance, whether it be their skin color, gender, sexuality, fashion and hair styles, or, just simply, any deviation from the standard norms. Even more, the divide of classes, especially the affluent looking down on the poorer classes, is still prevalent to today's culture. *The Greatest Showman* perfectly illustrates this current struggle seen in our society "by putting folks of all kinds, all colors, shapes, sizes on stage presenting them as equals" and having the solution of having "a celebration of humanity" (Gracey, 2017) versus constant judgment and disapproval.

Additionally, *The Greatest Showman* addresses the infatuation or lust for the materialistic objects of this world. Individuals, especially in the American culture, have grand excitement over the best technological toys or fashion trends or whatever the next best thing is of any area. They run and chase after them, like Barnum did, and fail to recognize that the best things may just be sitting right in front of them or even living under the same roof. *The Greatest Showman* reminds our busy society that the greatest riches in this world are not things, assumed titles, or social media likes, but rather they are the people one chooses to surround him or herself with. In Charity's words, "You don't need everyone to love you, just a few good people" (Gracey, 2017).

Lastly, *The Greatest Showman* as a parable teaches its viewers to have limitless imagination and dreams, no matter how extreme they may be or how much opposition comes with them. Barnum, who started as a lowly tailor's son, followed his dream, and it became one of the most famous forms of entertainment in the world. As Barnum put it himself, "A man's station is only limited to his imagination and man suffers more from imagining too little than too much" (Gracey, 2017). So, dream big, focus and spend time loving those who bring you the greatest joy to your life, and treat ALL people with equal kindness, respect, and dignity.

References

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