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Parables in Pop Culture, T/RS 228

22 May 2020

The Forgiveness Behind I Can Only Imagine

I Can Only Imagine tells the unknown true story behind the band MercyMe's quadruple platinum award winning song that would become and continue to be the most played song on Christian radio and number one best-selling Christian song of all time. Previously, the band had produced four Christian alternative rock albums, influenced by the grunge style of rock music at the time in the 1990s, but the band realized their original songs from these albums failed to connect to audiences while their covers of popular worship songs were much more popular. Because of this, MercyMe decided to write and produce an original album of worship songs.¹ Needing one more song to complete the album, lead singer and songwriter of MercyMe, Bart Millard (J. Michael Finley), was inspired to write "I Can Only Imagine" basing it on his personal feelings surrounding his father's death and the life story behind Bart's need to forgive his father (Dennis Quaid) for being abusive towards Bart and his mother all his life. The song is about what Bart thinks his father is experiencing in heaven. Several themes arise and lessons that can be learned from the spirit of forgiveness that Bart embodies so he can let go of his painful past. I have found meaning in this movie as a parable through my life experiences, especially recently, in the moments when I realize I have to turn anger into a spirit of forgiveness and moving forward, letting go of people and situations that I do not have the power to change. As Bart came to realize, if you have been forgiven by God, then He also gives us the power to forgive. Even furthermore, to forgive is what all people are called to do, no matter how hard or

¹ *I Can Only Imagine* movie website, <http://www.icanonlyimagine.com/mercyme>.

impossible it seems to be, a great example being Bart's story. The Erwin Brothers did it again, with *I Can Only Imagine* being about as "parabolistic" as a movie gets, in that Bart Millard gained an understanding of how to detach from negative earthly experiences that were holding him back from God's grace and to reattach to the disorienting but ever-rewarding belief in hope and its power to change lives, rooted in forgiveness.

The movie opens with a scene that occurs toward the end of the movie within the story's sequence. Bart is a young man of husky build with a warm, innocent face, and light brown curly hair wearing average casual clothing and is in a meeting talking with MercyMe manager Scott Brickell (Trace Adkins) and Amy Grant (Nicole DuPort), when Amy expresses how the first time she heard this song she wondered, "who could write this, and what did they have to go through to be able to give this gift to me?" While she went through a trying time of pain and loss, this song "blew her soul wide open and became her anthem," and she wants to know what experience Bart must have lived through to produce such an inspiring song. When Amy asks how he did it, Bart says it only took him about ten minutes to write the lyrics and about the same for the music, to which Amy responds, "Bart, you didn't write this song in ten minutes. It took a lifetime."

From here, *I Can Only Imagine* is segmented easily into four sections that determine the progression of a parable that is simple to follow and that portrays both growth and grace. Most of the film occurs in a flashback until it catches up to the meeting with Scott and Amy. This first section is about the origin of Bart's painful past that begins in Greenville, Texas where he was born and raised. From the beginning it is very apparent that Bart loves listening to music. He listens to it while riding his bike home from doing yardwork for his Memaw (Cloris Leachman), and it is his comfort when things get rough at home between his parents. On his way home he

stops at a thrift store where he collects several items before also stopping inside to purchase some cassette tapes. When Bart gets home, we find out that the things he collected are to build creations from his imagination, like the “fighter helmet” he was eager to show to his mother (Tanya Clarke). Bart’s father, Arthur, soon storms into the kitchen immediately angered by Bart’s creations, and tells Bart that “dreams don’t pay the bills,” and that all dreaming does is “keep you from knowing what’s real.” Arthur is a middle- aged man with salt and pepper hair and facial hair of only stubble, also wearing just average male casual clothing as the Millard’s appear to live and work in a rural farm setting. One of the techniques the Erwin Brothers implemented within the camera movements is the way that the camera shakes and loses stability during the scenes when Arthur enters the house. It implies a sense of nervousness that Bart and his mother are probably feeling and the fear that his rage will heat up until it explodes and is violently taken out on the two of them. While Bart tries to fall asleep that night, his father is heard in the kitchen yelling at Bart’s mother and hitting her. To block out the noise, Bart listens to music again, and pretends to be asleep when his father bursts into his room with a belt, planning to continue to take out his rage on his family, but then turns to leave when he assumes Bart is asleep. The directors shift the camera focus between Bart’s face bracing for impact and Arthur’s hand holding the belt.

The next morning, Bart’s mother awakens him and tells him to pack for Camp Glorieta where he will spend the week. While they drive, Bart asks his mom if they can “drive and listen, just you and me.” Something I did not notice until the second time I watched the film was his mother’s face when he made his request. The camera is focused on her face in the rear- view mirror and she looks lovingly but with concern at Bart as he stares out the car window. Asking

Bart, “you know that I love you, right?” adds to the foreshadowing that when Bart would come home from camp, he discovers that his mom left he and his dad for good.

While at the Christian camp, Bart meets a girl whom he has passed by daily on his bike rides home named Shannon, who also goes to the same church as Bart. When Shannon accidentally bumps into another camper and drops her tray at dinner, she also drops her journal that opens to a page with the words, “I love Bart Millard.” Bart, immediately jumping to her aid, sees the opened page but pretends that he did not when she asks, visibly embarrassed. By the end of camp, Bart and Shannon have become friends, and she gives Bart an Amy Grant tape to listen to that she says is one of her favorites.

When Bart returns home, a large moving truck is at their house, and he runs inside looking for his mother. Arthur responds to his calls coldly, denying that his abuse had anything to do with his mother leaving them. An asynchronous sound technique is used noticeably every time Arthur slams a door in the house. The door makes a deep and penetrating sound like a dramatic and echoing explosion, though such a sound is obviously not authentically present in the house for real.

As Bart grows up, his primary aim is to get as good at football as his father was. During his high school years, he also has a loving relationship with Shannon who is now his girlfriend. Shannon has grown into a beautiful girl of average height, build, and clothing with long brown hair and brown eyes. She also remains a static character throughout the film, which absolutely lends itself to embodying her character as the only unwavering support in Bart’s life no matter what. However, through the years as Bart practices harder and harder, he hopes that his bond with his father will become stronger, but instead his father criticizes him and points out that Bart will never be as good as he was at his age, because “it took the whole team to get him down on a

tackle.” Bart takes a terrible fall at one practice and breaks both ankles, resulting in an injury that prevents him from ever being able to play football again. When Arthur breaks the news to Bart, Arthur agrees that it is disappointing, but implies that it is Bart himself who has been the real disappointment. Unable to continue football for the same elective requirement at school, Bart joins the only open class which happens to be music. After being assigned the role of technical director for a performance of the Glee Club, the music teacher hears Bart singing to himself, and unbeknownst to him, casts him as the lead in the school production of *Oklahoma*. From the moment Bart steps out on stage for the opening number, the camera zooms out of a close up to a long shot and scans the entire back of the theatre behind the audience members’ heads showing the view of the stage from the very back of the audience, before circling around to the faces of the people sitting up front and then back to a focus on Bart. Bart has attempted every excuse to avoid the role, but in the end blows the audience away with his vocal talent and theatrical performance. Arthur meanwhile discovers Bart’s picture in an ad at a local diner as an advertisement for the show but then collapses on the ground in a blackout. After only a brief stay in the hospital, we find out that Arthur’s blackout was due to low blood sugar caused by a cancerous mass the doctors found that leads later to pancreatic cancer, for which he refuses any kind of treatment.

Back at home post hospital visit, Arthur asks Bart about the musical he is in and shows him his picture in the paper, referring to the whole thing as a joke. Bart points out that his father has never even heard him sing, to which Arthur responds that it is not his fault that is true. Bart then invites him to come to church with him that day where he was asked to sing, but Arthur refuses claiming he does not belong there. The camera on and off focuses on certain items around the house that are shattered, we assume having been broken by Arthur, including family

pictures, mirrors, and trophies. Arthur concludes the conversation saying that Bart will never be able to make a living as a singer, and he smashes his plate from the table over Bart's head, causing Bart to yell at his father calling him crazy, and slamming the door as he leaves on his way to church. After noticing his head bleeding on the way into church, Shannon expresses concern and wants to help, but Bart pushes her away, ultimately leading to their decision to break up because he is going away after graduation, and he "never really loved her anyway."

The transition from Bart's life in high school to the commencement of his career as a singer presents a parabolistic theme that begins to show the consequences of the way Bart has treated people in his life, especially Shannon, and the negative impact that "running away" has had on his career. This is also the beginning of segment two, which covers the time Bart spends on tour with MercyMe starting in Oklahoma where he tries to find an escape from the pain of his childhood. A few months after graduating from high school, Bart immediately leaves Greenville to pursue a life in music. He ends up in Oklahoma City where he meets a band that would eventually become the group MercyMe. They are traveling around, essentially homeless, playing to youth camps and Christian organizations, as they catch the attention of producer Scott Brickell who works with the band and tells Bart the harsh reality that he needs to be more real, to which Bart take slight offense but resolves to improve. Bart tries to reconnect with Shannon during this time, but she refuses any kind of relationship, as Bart has inconsiderately barged into her life again without any consideration to how much pain he had previously left her with. Scott gets MercyMe a Nashville showcase with many record executives and introduces him to Christian singing star Amy Grant. The showcase goes well for MercyMe, and Bart cannot wait to hear the news, so he goes out to talk with the executives who all tell him he is either not good enough or not ready. Bart takes the news hard and quits, feeling anger about the many ways this situation

reminds him of what his father used to say to him about never achieving his dreams. At this moment within Bart's mind another series of flashbacks occur to all the times when Arthur told Bart to give up on his dreams, that he would never make any money, and that he was not special and therefore would never amount to anything. This technique is effective in this moment because it solidifies Bart's work ethic and that he is different than his father, because instead of being discouraged, he is only more determined to prove that he has a voice and a message worth sharing. Scott asks Bart what he is running from, because when he sings it is just not believable, but the moment he lets himself be authentic, that feeling is gone too as quickly as it comes. Bart then reveals to Scott about his father being the thing he is running from, because he used to beat him as a child. Scott convinces him not to quit, but Bart decides he does need to go home and right some wrongs before getting back with the band, who promises they will wait for him. Scott concludes, saying, "I may not always believe in your music, but I believe in you."

Segment three brings Bart back to Greenville to address the pain that prevents him from using his voice to his full potential. As Bart is on his way home, the camera takes an extreme long shot to follow his motorcycle up the long dirt roads to the Millard house. Using this long shot demonstrates how far Bart has come, but how far back he still needs to go before moving forward. Bart comes home to discover his father has been reading the Bible and is working on becoming a better man. Bart is not sure if he believes his father's new personality especially after the years of scarring abuse and is frustrated by his father's new mindset that the two of them can just start over as if nothing ever happened. Arthur responds saying that he realized that if God really has the power to forgive people, then why not him? Bart responds, saying, "God *can* forgive you, but I can't." Eventually he learns of his father's grave condition and that he is working on becoming a good Christian, which bonds the two towards the end of Arthur's life as

Bart resolves to help his father figure out his un-answered questions. Arthur also informs Bart that he will be receiving money periodically from his life insurance policy, and he wants Bart to use it towards furthering his singing career, with the hopes that he will “never look back.”

Another few months later, Arthur dies. Bart heads back out to join MercyMe on their way to Nashville, thus beginning the fourth segment of the movie that focuses on the healing process for Bart. While on the tour bus, he is struck by inspiration and looks in his journal to find the words "I Can Only Imagine" written on every page. The Erwin Brothers choose to include a flashback here to the night back at Camp Glorieta when Bart was first told about the power of forgiveness, and finds a page in the journal where he wrote, “Tonight, I choose to forgive ____.” So, he says, "okay, Jesus" and starts writing the lyrics to what will be the song "I Can Only Imagine,” after writing “my dad” in the blank space. He sends the song to Scott who is overwhelmingly impressed, and he plays it for Amy Grant who loves it and wants to debut it on her new tour and album. Bart says he wants as many people as possible to hear the song, and Amy is who will make that happen. His dad was a “monster” but became his best friend and the man he wanted to become. Bart did not think God could do that, and so he wants people to know that there is hope as great as this.

During this time, Bart also calls Shannon to let her know about the new song, and that he is journaling again. At the concert where she is about to sing it for the first time, Amy is too moved by the sentiment of the song and cannot sing it, so she invites Bart up on stage. He proceeds to sing the song with Shannon in the crowd, and the crowd’s response is amazing. Again as the technique was used for the scene when Bart performed in *Oklahoma*, the camera begins with a strong close-up focus on Bart, but then travels around the entirety of the space capturing the view from all angles of the venue in a long shot of the stage before coming back

around to focus on him. The camera then circles around Bart as he sings, emphasizing the magnitude of the moment and the importance of the lessons he discovered through the process of forgiving his father in this one culminating moment. The aspect ratio remains the same wide screen throughout, and would perhaps have added a more dramatic effect should the Erwin Brothers have decided to lengthen the height as Bart's music fills the theatre, but the consistent wide screen does however provide the possibility for more light patterns which is more central to this scene anyway. After he sings it, he imagines the theater empty with only Arthur in the audience clapping for him. At this point in the film, the warm and full lighting of the space fades into a "heavenly" bluish white lighting, and his father's face glows with happiness and pride. The lighting choice also creates an angelic focus on Arthur which illuminates not only his physical body, but also emphasizes the reason that Bart has for writing and singing this song in the first place, which was to show that God really can and does radically and beautifully transform even the most "far-gone" people like his dad. As the rest of the crowd goes wild, Bart notices Shannon in the audience and runs up the aisles after the song to hug her and express his love for her.

The directors of *I Can Only Imagine*, Andy and John Erwin (the Erwin Brothers), are known for their mission of "spreading the Gospel further than it's ever been using film as the medium." Their hope is that "by creating bigger, better blockbuster films, we can expand the reach of the Gospel with an undeniable presence in the faith and mainstream markets through stories that have the power to change the world."² They have been the directors of other well-known Christian based films such as *October Baby* in 2011 and *I Still Believe* just recently released in the spring of 2020. The purpose of their films in itself is "parabolic" in nature

² Erwin Brothers website home page, <http://erwinbrothers.com/>.

because of the Christian truths they seek to portray through the films, most of which are based on true stories. *I Can Only Imagine* fits perfectly into this Christian genre.

A common trend with Erwin Brothers films also seems to be that only the main characters are fully developed within the story. Though the usage of supporting actors is not necessarily minimal, the directors, I think effectively, choose to keep the story focused on the characters whose perspective the story is mostly in, such as with *Imagine*, where only Bart and Arthur's characters are fully developed by the end of the movie. Though the movie fits well into the Christian drama genre, the characters do not really fit into a certain "type" except perhaps "ordinary-type character with an extraordinary story." Another worth-noting style of the Erwin Brothers films that is also true for *Imagine* is that there is no use of special effects. This also goes with the fact that the diegesis of the film is all-inclusive, and so there is not much, if anything that happens within the telling of the story that we do not see or at least hear about. I believe that this is because the purpose of the Erwin Brothers films is to depict the extraordinariness of the ordinary life lived for Christ. The movies have a real-life feel to them, and so special jaw-dropping effects are not what the goal is for achieving the message of this film or any that the Erwin Brothers direct.

I have always loved both the song "I Can Only Imagine" and many albums by MercyMe, however, it was not until watching the movie for a second time more recently that I realized the impact the message of forgiveness really had on me. After making the Search retreat at the University of Scranton, my eyes were opened to the spirit of agape, or the highest form of love that a person can have for another. This is exactly the love that Bart develops for his father, which is an example of how Jesus instills the nature of His love into us here on earth, because

only He is able to create love that is truly unconditional and exists no matter what anyone has done to deserve it.

Since the beginning of my freshman year at Scranton, I had feelings for a friend I met, and was not expecting my friendship with him to grow in the way that it did which (I thought) was towards the romantic relationship I was hoping for. This semester, several months filled with uncertainty about what his actions towards me really meant, a trip to Washington DC, some intimate conversations, and a meeting with some of his siblings later, I finally decided there was no better or worse time to tell a graduating senior how I felt about him. I had also taken the opportunity to express my frustrations about all the ways in which he was unfair in our friendship, gave mixed signals, and generally failed to consider my feelings or keep his in check. His response was not at all what I had been praying for, working towards, and agonizing over for about two years. It is in the healing from this situation however that I have realized similar to Bart, that my faith means nothing if it fades when circumstances are not so good or when hope is something I have to strive for. Amy Grant spoke about Bart's song as giving her a true feeling of hope, and that is what I am reminded of during this season of my life. Hope is having joy not based on outcomes, and I realized that what is holding me back from this hope is the inability to let myself forgive. I need to forgive him for all the ways I think he should have acted differently and for not understanding or caring about the consequences of his unintentionality, which is similar I am sure to the way that Bart made Shannon feel. I need to forgive myself for all the time and insane effort I put into our "friendship," and for a while I even needed to forgive God for letting things reach this point, only to end with a shortened semester on campus and little to no closure in the matter.

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “the world promises you comfort, but you were not made for comfort, you were made for greatness.” By this I believe the pope means to remind us that the call to love is our first vocation in life, and it will not be easy or always enjoyable, but it is what we were made for. Bart knows this, which is why he chooses to love his father first before returning to pursuing music as a career. The difficult memories of people or events in our lives that we would rather forget sometimes will arise, but that is when you just have to say, “okay, Jesus,” trusting that God is Who He says He is, and that our reward will be great in heaven.