

The Circle of Life

Acts 6:1-6
April 17, 2016
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Begin with: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zLx_JtcQVI

We've heard the song, "Circle of Life," from the opening scene of *The Lion King*, a song reprised many times throughout the series. You have to love that scene. It's majestic and romantic and cute and religious all rolled into one, all played to fantastic music.

The "Circle of Life," is really a philosophy of life, about how there is a balance in nature, and how that balance is best observed by letting nature take its course. Very nice. Rings true—on the surface, if you set aside what we all know, namely that nature is cruel.

According to the song, life is "an endless round," from the day we arrive on the planet, blinking in the sun, down a path unwinding, through despair and hope, faith and love. Sure. We get that.

But there is a glaring absence in this song. This song is about life as an endless round, from its beginning to . . . well, death is not actually mentioned in this song. But it is in another passage:

Mufasa and Simba Talk Circle of Life

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bW7PITaawfQ>

Did you catch that? Mufasa says, "Everything you see exists together in a delicate balance. As king, you need to understand that balance and respect all creatures, from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope."

"But," asks his little prince, Simba, "don't we eat the antelope?"

"Yes," says Mufasa. "Yes, Simba, but let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass, and the antelope eat the grass. And so we are all connected to the great Circle of Life."

Now, given the romance of the movie, the attractiveness of Simba and Mufasa, the glory of the music, we can almost buy Mufasa's blithe explanation for death, and his justification for why lions get to do the killing. But you know, at about this point, the circle of life sounds kind of messy to me. And if I am an antelope, I'm not sure I like the equation that says, "your destiny is to eat grass until you are eaten" . . . by a lion.

It actually gets a little worse. If you listen closely to the song in the movie, you can hear chanting. Translated into English, the chant explains Mufasa's self-serving justification of the Circle of Life. It goes like this:

“Here comes a lion, Father.”

“Oh yes, it's a lion,” goes the chant. And, then, “We are going to conquer.”

The chanting reveals that as far as lions are concerned, the circle of life is not so much about balance as it is about hierarchy. The lions fight, the lions conquer, the lions decide who lives and dies. “We're going to conquer.” All of life does the lion's bidding—that's the circle of life.

And when the lions rule badly, as Scar ruled badly, everyone suffers—the land turns black with death, the hyenas get fat on baby antelope, and everyone not part of the ruling clique starves—something we've seen all too often in human history, too.

But at the heart of this lion system is hierarchy. The lions are in charge. “Everything you see,” says Mufasa, “is yours.” No matter what else happens, the giraffes and the birds and the elephants bow down and grovel, as they did in the first scene we watched. The lions conquer.

In twenty-first century Canada we cannot escape hierarchies either. There is a racial hierarchy. Just ask the black parent about how they have to teach their kids to scrape and bow before the law. Just ask the residents of Attawapiskat how it is that they don't have safe water or enough housing or good schools and many of their youth try to, and do, commit suicide every year.

There are financial hierarchies. The people who ran AIG or Lehman Brothers in the USA get off scot-free—at worst the corporation pays fines for the way they instigated the crash of 2009. But people who held the mortgages that went under water paid with their homes. In the near-depression that followed, many more paid with their jobs, and their self-respect. It isn't so much a trickle-down economy so much as a trickle-down disaster. Meanwhile the rich sent their money overseas so they wouldn't have to pay taxes and participate in the deficit spending that tried to right the economy.

There are political hierarchies where big donors get the ear of politicians. There are gang hierarchies, where the most violent get the turf and drug trade. There are gender hierarchies, where women still face glass ceilings. There are neighbourhood and class hierarchies, where the nicest neighbourhoods get to fight cutting down their trees, while poorer neighbourhoods fight violence and poverty.

Hierarchies. Living with them, adapting to them, manipulating them, escaping them, climbing them is part and parcel of all our lives. Mine too. Hierarchies are the stuff

of our circle of life. Hierarchies are, perhaps, not inherently evil. But they are all—even in the Lion King movies, as Scar’s coup d’etat shows—all hierarchies are subject to a rule we understand in our bones. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Which is why the earliest Christians, who lived under the thumb of Caesar, tried to subvert and overturn hierarchy, to be a light set on a hill for a different moral ideal. We turn the other cheek. We visit the prisoner as well as the politicians. We are the community, says Jesus where the last shall be first, where the least are the greatest. We are a community, says Paul, where there is no more slave or woman or gentile who is lower than the free citizen, or man, or Jew. He adds, in another place, “submit to one another, in love.” Not very hierarchical.

The best example I can think of from the Bible, that gets at our approach to hierarchy, is found in Acts 6, where we learn that the poor Greek-speaking Christians were left out of the daily distribution of groceries and financial aid. They complained, and the powerful Jewish Christians listened, and said, “that’s wrong.” So the leaders gave control of all the church’s finances to the very Greek-speaking Christians they had financially shorted.

Paul calls this subversive love for pushing back against hierarchies the foolishness of the cross. I know a story from a novel by Alan Paton that gets at this—not the circle of life, but divine foolishness of Christians.

In his novel, *Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful*, there is a black minister, Mr. Buti, who had a church full of angry young people who wanted to fight the racism they experienced in South Africa. Mr. Buti feared violence, and so he tried to figure out how to suggest to his young people a better way.

As it turned out, Mr. Buti knew that the chief justice of the South African Supreme Court was a white Christian who sympathized with the blacks, but felt powerless to do anything in his role as upholder of apartheid law. Anyway, Mr. Buti told the chief justice about the anger of his young members, and asked the chief justice to come to his church to help him address that anger. The chief justice came.

During the service Mr. Buti read the story of how Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. Then he asked Martha Fortuin to come to the front of the church. Martha Fortuin was a very old black woman who thirty years earlier had gone to work in the home of the chief justice, when he was still a young lawyer. Martha Fortuin had been his maid and a nurse and nanny to all the judge’s children. When Mr. Buti called her, Martha Fortuin limped slowly, on account of her arthritis, to the front of the church, where Mr. Buti showed her a chair.

Then the pastor called out the name of the chief justice of the South African Supreme court. He too walked to the front of the church. Then he took off his coat, and

wrapped a towel around his waist. The white chief justice then took old Martha Fortuin's shoes off, took her crooked feet into his hands, and gently washed them. When he was done he dried her feet, and then, in a departure from the script, the chief justice kissed her feet.

The whole church fell to weeping, including many of the young people. And when white people asked the judge why had he made such a fool of himself for all those black people, the judge said it was because they were all his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Look. Hierarchies are here to stay. They grease society's wheels. They help us set priorities. They define the status quo. But in every hierarchy, it is the lions who conquer, and the antelope who are eaten. Hierarchies may be part and parcel of our lives, but they ground a lot of people down.

Church, on the other hand, is our opportunity to subvert Mufasa's circle of life. Here at church we can witness to a different set of values, one where the poor are given a boost—through organizations like Camp Scugog, that we are supporting with our second collection, or through refugee sponsorship. Here in church, majorities can seek the wisdom and welfare of minorities. Here in church, as in Acts 6, leaders are called, historically, “deacons,” which means, table servers. We're all waiters and waitresses, looking after each others' wellbeing. We get to wash each others' feet in church council, or by how we volunteer, or by the non-church causes we support, or by how we teach our children to look at others who are different than they are, or by how we prioritize the mission of the businesses we own or run. None of this will make us rich or earn more than modest praise from society.

But, I have to tell you, this foolishness of the cross is the wisdom of God, and ultimately, there is no circle of life like it, because it is, for us, the life of Christ and the future of the world as we dream it.