

The Pirate Movie – Band of Misfits

I Samuel 22: 1-5

Acts 4: 1-12

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I. Introduction

In May of 1724, a little bookshop in London near St. Paul's Cathedral put out for sale a small leather volume with a rather provocative title, *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*. The author was a man by the name of Captain Charles Johnson, who we know nothing about and is largely thought to be a pseudonym possibly for the author, Daniel Defoe. But it was published at kind of the height of the Golden Age of English piracy, and captures or gives us a lot of the stereotypes of what we image as pirates now, and it sold like hotcakes.

We're ending our sermon series today on Oscar-nominated films, and we're ending it on a slightly lighter note than last week, which was admittedly a little heavy, I talked about *Amour*. Today, we are looking at one of the nominees for Best Animated Film, the children's film *The Pirates! Band of Misfits*. The movie follows the adventure of the hero who is simply called Pirate Captain, as he runs afoul of Queen Victoria in his quest to earn the award for Pirate of the Year. It's a fun children's movie, and we'll get a chance to see it in a few weeks out in the parking lot. But I thought it might be a nice opportunity to explore our cultural fascination with pirates.

We see pirates all over the place in pirate logos, in skull and crossbones, and all of those things. Pirates own a place in our corporate psyche that I would suggest is disproportionate to their role in history. But whether it's Captain Johnson's 1724 book

or Robert Louis Stevenson or Errol Flynn playing Captain Blood or Disney theme park rides or movies made out of Disney theme park rides or children's party themes or all kinds of paraphernalia, we have this really interesting fascination with pirates, who you can argue on a very significant level are pretty dismal characters in many ways.

II. King David was a Pirate

Now, a Methodist preacher talking about piracy needs to be careful, because almost all of the representations in the media about piracy are obviously a very highly sanitized picture of a life that was quite brutal, generally very short lived, and we don't want to romanticize that, nor do we want to hold up lawbreaking as a model of behavior.

But pirates are about more than simply criminality. Throughout the literature and the media around pirates, there is this interesting ongoing tension between the criminal pieces of it and the pieces of it that are more about a spirited rebellion, from very early history and Theuydides writes about pirates, and several of the Roman historian write about the Roman antagonism towards piracy. There's a sense that piracy represents a threat beyond the simple robbery element. It speaks to a wider menace that undermines the root of the empire. Historian Marcus Rediker writes, "the pirate was the very negation of Roman imperial social order." Pirates represented a threat not simply by virtue of their criminality but because they stood in opposition to the uniform power that the empire sought to extend.

What's interesting, of course, is that in many ways, empires themselves often engage in piracy. I'm actually in the middle of a wonderful series of books that was

written by a British historian and author by the name of Patrick O'Brian who writes these wonderful naval adventure stories of the British Navy in the 18th and 19th century. They trace the career of a guy named Jack Aubrey who starts off in the first book as a naval commander and ends up in the 21st book as an admiral. But somewhere along the middle there, he falls afoul of his naval superiors and he essentially becomes a privateer. He is given by the king what's called a Letter of the Marque which was his permission from the throne to, in the quaint language of that day, "harry the commerce of the enemy." Well, he was a pirate. I mean, he was paid to take over ships that the Spanish and the French were using to trade and to capture their booty and dispose of it. He was in every element a pirate, although he always understood himself to be a patriot and an officer in the navy, the difference there being he had a letter of permission from the king to be a pirate. So, he wasn't a pirate. He was a patriot. So, there's this interesting tension that the empire is happy to use piracy in its own behalf, but stamps out with violent reactivity pirates who are outside of the structures of the empire.

Piracy always represents a threat to systems of control. Piracy in the 18th century represented a threat to a system of governments -- the English, the British, the French, the Spanish, the Dutch were all trying to establish trade monopolies around the world as the world had expanded dramatically.

In the seventh book of the *Harry Potter* series which we're reading with Julia right now, Harry gets condemned by the official Ministry of Magic and labeled as a dangerous criminal because he stands in opposition to the system of evil that is seeking to pervade the wizarding world. And there's this very wonderful parallel

between *The Pirates! Band of the Misfits* and *Harry Potter* in that the same woman who plays the evil Professor Dolores Umbridge in *Harry Potter* also plays Queen Victoria in *The Pirates!* movie, so there is this wonderful kind of parallel that you see.

But systems of power are always seeking to control the voices that are in opposition, and piracy always represents the voices of those who don't have the opportunity to speak otherwise. And we see this in this wonderful story from Samuel in the history of David. This is a place in David's history before he is king. He has been serving King Saul and he falls afoul of King Saul and is forced to flee. And he essentially becomes a sort of stateless bandit king, gathering about him all of the people who are oppressed and feel voiceless under the tyranny of King Saul, very much in a model and style of Robin Hood.

III. A vision of equality

In his book, *Mutiny! Why We Love Pirates, and How They Can Save Us*, which I'll reference at a number of points in the sermon, Kester Brewin writes, "I want to argue that pirates emerge whenever economies become 'blocked.' To put it another way, wherever we see piracy we are looking at a system in trouble, a trading structure that is unjust." And in era of enormous growth in wealth, in the heyday of piracy in the 18th century, sailors were cheap fodder in the economic system of the day. Any young man in Britain of an age in which he could become a sailor was liable to simply be picked off of the street by the press gangs that were part of the British naval system and forcibly made into a sailor. So, if I'm 16 or 18 years old and I've gone down to the local store to get some bread, to the baker, a press gang could see me on the street,

grab me and take me to the nearest shipyard and dump me on a ship where I was now essentially a sailor in the British Navy. I didn't even have the chance to tell my family where I went. I could be going down the street one day and then on a ship sailing off to war the next with nobody the wiser.

Life in the navy meant that sailors were often subject to very harsh and often random discipline from their superiors, and they were paid next to nothing. And the ships in the navy were compensated largely because they captured other ships, and then, the people on the capturing ship were able to sell or redeem the ship they had captured for a certain amount of money. The captain in that position usually got about half of the value of the ship captured, and officers get the bulk of the rest, and then, the sailors split amongst themselves a fairly small proportion of what remain. So, they're fighting and risking their lives on behalf of a system that poured huge amounts of money into the hands of those who were rich and powerful with very little benefit to themselves. And in the midst of that system, which is all legal and aboveboard, piracy offered a different model.

In Article 10 of the Pirate Captain Bartholomew Roberts Code, we read these words, "The captain and the quartermaster shall each receive two shares of a prize, the master gunner and boatswain, one and one half shares, all other officers one and one quarter, and the private gentlemen of fortune," -- the rest of the sailors -- "one share a piece."

So, again, just at the economic level, the bottom rung of the food chain and the top rung were one share and two shares in a pirate system as opposed to the naval

system which had the captain earning orders of magnitude more than the average sailor. It was expected in the pirate codes of the day that the captain of the pirate ship would mess or eat and socialize with all of the crew, not just the officers, as was the custom in the navy. And decisions on board were taken by vote in which every member of the crew had an equal vote.

Again, I don't want to romanticize this life, but what I want to suggest is the models of living together, the models of economics in a pirate structure, stood in very sharp contrast to the well-oiled machinery of the economic world around them. And piracy was a wrench in that well-oiled machinery, which is why the nation states responded so passionately to destroy the pirates of that day.

Piracy always appears when oppressive economic systems are at work, and we see that obviously right up to this day.

One of the interesting recent news pieces that you may have read was a legal battle over pirated drugs used to treat AIDS patients in Africa and how pharmaceutical companies have been fighting, as you would expect them to, to protect their patents and high profits on these drugs and their intellectual property. On the other side, of course, are vast numbers of people who desperately need the drugs, but can't afford them at their market rate, and so a pirate system arises that produces these drugs illegally. So, on the one side, you have the pharmaceutical companies seeking to maintain their monopoly on those drugs; on the other, you have healthcare providers arguing that the pharmaceutical company system has artificially extended the patent rights almost indefinitely on many of these drugs by making small little tweaks in the

drug composition, and that the passion for profits has resulted in the needless death of thousands of Africans suffering from AIDS.

IV. Piracy also manifests itself when power structures try to clamp down on ideas.

Intellectual property and intellectual property structures have always been the subject of pirate incursion. In 1707 a London printer who became known as Henry Hills the Pirate began selling poems and sermons and leaflets for a fraction of what the official publishers charged. And on each pamphlet, he printed the words, "For the benefit of the poor." In doing so, Henry Hills was violating what was called the Licensing Act in which the British government granted a certain small number of publishers the exclusive right to print things, thereby enriching those publishers enormously but also allowing the government to control what information got out to the public. And in the face of that kind of oppressive intellectual atmosphere, people like Henry Hills were pirates. They were bucking the system and throwing a wrench in the well-oiled machinery of domination.

These monopolies, of course, also benefited not only that government, but the church which does not always, you may notice, have liked new ideas. "Publishing monopolies," wrote John Locke, the philosopher, "were designed" -- these are his words -- "to let mother church remain undisturbed in her opinions."

Henry Hills's printing presses were ultimately discovered and destroyed by the government, but his work also echoes on to modern age.

A number of us a few years ago, when we did our first volunteer mission trip to Nicaragua, in the midst of that trip, visited a jungle site which had been the home of the Sandinista pirate radio station that was the only outside source of news to the Nicaraguans during Somoza's dictatorship. And likewise in our lesson from Acts, the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin are quite eager to make sure that Peter and John's voice gets suppressed in order that their religious control might be maintained. Now, Peter and John were kind of hard to keep quiet because they had experienced the reality of the Risen Christ and the power of the Risen Christ was moving through them in their ministry in such dramatic ways it was hard to keep quiet. And so, the Sanhedrin calls Peter and John in front of them and says, "You can't preach this anymore," to which they respond, "We can't do anything else than what God has called us to do."

V. Becoming Pirates

One of the gifts of pirates is that they force us to look at the world a little differently than we normally do. When we see piracy, we should be alerted to the fact that we're looking at a system that somewhere is broken. The piracy is not the solution but it can be a very helpful diagnostic tool that something is wrong. It's probably a particularly helpful diagnostic tool for us who are usually on the benefiting side of our economic system. We in our community here, by and large, have figured out how to make the system work for us, we benefit from it. And so, when we see piracy, our immediate reaction, when it's not a romantic pirate with an eye patch, is fear, because the system from which we benefit is being challenged. As Christians, of course, our call is to use that as a diagnostic tool to look at where injustice is happening and how we can engage the injustice in a way that changes the system.

We also should acknowledge that sometimes we don't have the ability to change the system, and maybe we ourselves are called to do a little piracy. I would suggest that our church's decision to allow same-sex marriages to happen here is a little bit of piracy. We can't change our church's position on this right now. We'll continue to work on that. But until we can change the system, a little bit of piracy may be an appropriate response. We may not be able to change the system, but maybe we can throw a wrench into it.

VI. Conclusion

So, this is why we love pirates. I think pirates appeal to us because they show us that systems, no matter how large and overwhelming, can always be opposed, and that causes us to celebrate with theme park rides and movies and paraphernalia, the meaning of which we largely don't even understand. But reflecting on our love of all things pirate, Kester Brewin writes, "These are small mostly unconscious acts of protest, hummed snippets from songs of defiance long forgotten." I like that one, "hummed snippets from songs of defiance long forgotten." "But though small, they are not insignificant for they speak in whispers of the spirit of justice and equality of the desired exercise common rights that has lain dormant, perhaps, and then muffled by the mountains of consumer goods we have harvested for ourselves as we have reaped the apparent rewards of economic growth through the capitalist miracle."

Captain Johnson's 1724 book on piracy described a pirate colony off the coast of Madagascar that was founded by a man named Captain Misson and inspired by a rebel Italian priest whose name was Caraccioli who preached a social gospel of

universal human equality and caused Captain Misson to set up this pirate enclave in which pirates and often the slaves that they had freed all came to live together in common and elect their leaders and share their goods with one another. It was called Libertatia. And while no archeologist has ever found a site that might have been that place and it may have never existed other than in the imagination of Captain Johnson, that vision of a land where people could live together in peace and share resources with one another and live together in equality regardless of their social rank and the color of their skin, echoed among the society of London in that day in a way that was very transformative and continues to echo to this day and sounds in many respects very much like the kingdom of God. Which is why perhaps, as Mark Twain noted, “Now and then, we had a hope that if we lived and were good, God would permit us to be pirates.”

Amen.