

“Antigone’s Dilemma”

A Sermon by Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

October 9, 2016

Antigone is an ancient Greek tragedy, which continues to provoke discussions about ethical duties to family and the state as well as about gender and power. Today, I want to revisit the Antigone story as a vehicle for us to consider our allegiances.

Antigone, was the daughter of Oedipus. Yes, *that* Oedipus that unknowingly married his mother. But that’s a different play. In the *Antigone* play, the action focuses on the aftermath of the death of Antigone’s two brothers in battle. With their two deaths, Antigone’s uncle, Creon becomes ruler. Determining that one of the brothers, Polynices, died as a traitor, Creon decides that Polynices shall not be buried. In the play, Creon declares:

*It has been promulgated to the city
No man shall bury, none shall wail for him;
Unsepulchered, shamed in the eyes of men,
His body shall be left to be devoured
By dogs and fowls of the air. Such is my will.
Never with me shall wicked men usurp
The honors of the righteous; but whoe’er
Is friendly to this city shall, by me,
Living or dead, be honored equally.ⁱ*

Simply put, Creon will not honor his enemy with a burial.

This places Antigone in a difficult situation. Does she defy Creon and bury her brother?

In the play, Antigone arrives at the start of the play having already decided yes, she will bury him. When she announces her intention to her sister, Ismene, Ismene passionately tries to dissuade Antigone saying,

*Do but consider how miserably
We too shall perish, if despite of law
We traverse the behest or power of kings.
We must remember that we are women born,
Unapt to cope with men; and being ruled
By mightier than ourselves, we have to hear
These things—and worse.ⁱⁱ*

“We’ll be killed,” Ismene says. How could *we* challenge the edict of men, of kings? We are women born. Although Ismene recognizes that it is her duty as a sister to bury her brother, Ismene adds that she would rather follow the edict of the ruler and ask forgiveness of the gods.

In response, Antigone dismisses the need of any help from Ismene and explains,

*Be what seems right to you;
Him will I bury. Death, so met, were honor;
And for that capital crime of piety,
Loving and loved, I will lie by his side.
Far longer is there need I satisfy
Those nether Powers, than powers on earth; for there
Forever must I lie. You, if you will,
Hold up to scorn what is approved of [by] Heaven!ⁱⁱⁱ*

Defending herself against Antigone's insult, Ismene responds,

*I am not one to cover things with scorn;
But I was born too feeble to contend
Against the state.^{iv}*

In this opening exchange between the sisters, so many conflicts quickly emerge. Should one follow the dictates of the state or one's conscience about what is right? Should a woman accept being ruled by men or rise to challenge their dictates? Should one give priority to the laws of this world or to those of Heaven and the next world?

Like many ancient texts, the story and the themes can feel both foreign and familiar. We do not live in a walled city at risk of armed assault from the neighboring town, nor do we have kings. And yet, we do face the death of family and questions of responsibility in how to honor them in death. Responding to the death of one you love can bring forth a wrenching sense of wanting to do the right thing to honor their memory. And as one wrestles with the right response, it is not uncommon that tensions arise with siblings or other family members who also have complex emotions of love and grief.

For Antigone, she's already lost her father, Oedipus, and her mother, Jocasta, to tragic deaths. Now both of her brothers have died in tragedy. Add to this an uncle, the King, who seeks to rob her of dignifying her brother, Polynices, with a burial. Seeking help, her sister, Ismene, reminds her that as women their lives are shaped by expectations of obedience and perceptions of weakness beside the men they serve.

And yet, with the threat of death should she defy the state, Antigone acts. She buries her brother. Twice. And for her act, she is condemned to death by Creon, the king.

What do we make of this story?

For some, Antigone is a feminist heroine who courageously follows her conscience against the dictates of the State and a patriarchal ruler. To others, she is a pious woman who

completes the rituals required by the gods at the cost of her life. And, to still others, she is the mirror of Creon, both of whom are fiercely intransigent in their point of view.

And for us?

I began thinking about the story of Antigone this summer when I read an edited volume on feminism, law, and religion that included an essay, “What is the Matter with Antigone?”. In the essay, the author, Emily Albrink Hartigan, explores the story of Antigone through the lens of modern legal systems. For Albrink Hartigan, Antigone’s action points to an excess that the law cannot contain. She writes, “All the writing in the world can never capture what law intends, much less what it cannot know.”^v

Anyone who has worked with children instinctively knows the truth of this statement. Not all action can be legislated. Not only would the lists of rules be unmanageably long, enforcement would be nigh impossible—even for a king!

As humans, there is something more to who we are than what can be written down. Life, the experience of life, cannot be legislated. We are more than members of the State. Our humanity transcends our participation in the State.

Before you worry that I’m about to take a turn to preach about the merits of anarchy, I assure that I believe law and the institutions of the State *do* have an important role. I personally enjoy driving on well-repaired roads and trusting that the Fire Department will show up if we’re in need. We enjoy living in a civilization governed by the rule of law. We are privileged to live in a *democratic* state in which citizens can vote and have a voice. (Well, most citizens...the impact a criminal record has on one’s voting rights is a topic for another sermon.) Yet, neither the democratic process of voting, nor the laws of the state encompass all of who we are. We are more than our vote. So are those who vote differently than we do.

In her article, Albrink Hartigan suggests that a key tension between Creon and Antigone is how they view Polynices—as dehumanized enemy or as beloved brother. She writes,

“After [Antigone’s] back-and-forth with Creon as she is brought before him to account for the second burial, she says she was made for fellowship in love, not hate. She cannot abide her brother’s banishment from humanity. And this radically inclusive sense of personhood, transcending the dehumanization of the “enemy” that political statehood might seem to require, is premised on her belief in the piety of the unwritten law, the realm of the final Other, the Wholly Other, the unknowable Other, who decrees for all ages that all human bodies are human.”^{vi}

All human bodies are human . . . even Polynices . . . and even Michael Brown’s body that laid in the street for four hours after being shot by the Ferguson police on a hot August day.^{vii} Registering surprise at the length of time Brown’s body laid in the street, Chief Gerald

Nelson of the New York Police Department said, “We make sure we give the body the dignity it deserves.”

Seen through the lens of that day, Antigone’s anguish feels more present. I hear her voice in the bystanders surrounding Michael Brown calling for Brown to be covered, to be moved. The Black Lives Matter movement grew from that day—from that day when an unarmed black man was shot, when a black body lay, undignified, in the street.

What leads us to dehumanize the other? To fail to give honor and dignity to the dead? Why do we move our enemies from beyond the line of disagreement and danger into a place of inhumanity?

By burying her brother, Antigone followed the fellowship of love. In a 1948 post-war version of *Antigone* by Bertolt Brecht, the heated exchange between Creon and Antigone sounds like this:

Kreon: Get out. You were always our enemy and even in hell you shall be so;
like the mangled one, you shall be hated even in hell, you nothing.

Antigone: Who knows what the customs are down there?

Kreon: The enemy, even when dead, does not become a friend.

Antigone: Of course he does. I don’t live to hate, but to love.^{viii}

“I follow the religion of love,” the Sufi poet writes.^{ix} “Love your neighbor as yourself,” the Jewish teacher instructs. “We promote and affirm...the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” the first Unitarian Universalist principle declares. Again and again, spiritual traditions call us to seek to live in the fellowship of love.

Of course, living to love can be a demanding and costly commitment. It cost Antigone her life. And yet, living to love also grounds our lives in a vision of a common humanity that exceeds the social and political divisions that seek to make us forget that all human bodies are human. Even black bodies. Even women’s bodies. Even refugee bodies and displaced bodies. Even your enemies bodies.

The fact that the play *Antigone* is more than twenty-five centuries old tells us that the pressure to divide into factions runs deep within our cultural patterns. This holiday weekend which commemorates the voyages of Columbus, also marks a centuries long process of dehumanizing Indigenous persons so that European settlers might claim their land. Across these same centuries, patterns of dehumanizing black bodies developed which remain present even today. And, from Antigone until today, being a woman born too often justifies the dehumanization of women’s bodies.

Against all of this, we must stand like Antigone stood, seeking to live for love, not hate. Seeking to recognize an inherent dignity and worth that transcends the state, the political divisions, the enmity. I don't pretend that this is easy. Nor can it be simply legislated with a clear list of actions. Living to love is a spiritual discipline that asks of us to consider what values lie beyond what is written. Living to love calls for our allegiance to Heaven, to a sense of what ultimately matters.

Living to love does not mean we cease living within a state, within the rule of law, or within the messy processes of democracy. Nor does living to love mean we do not recognize differences, disagreements, or even danger. But living to love does mean that as we engage with the state and with others, even our enemies, we do not forget that there is something more that transcends the fray. We do not forget our capacity to love, to be loved, to hold fast to a common humanity.

So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Sophocles, *Antigone*, (New York: Dover Thrift Edition, 1993; reprinted London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1906), 9.

ⁱⁱ Sophocles, 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Sophocles, 3-4.

^v Emily Albrink Hartigan, "What is the Matter with Antigone?" in *Feminism, Law, and Religion*, edited by Marie A. Failinger, Elizabeth R. Schiltz, and Susan J. Stabile, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 90.

^{vi} Albrink Hartigan, 88.

^{vii} Julie Bosmand and Joseph Goldstein, "Timeline for a Body: 4 Hours in the Middle of a Ferguson Street", *New York Times*, August 23, 2014.

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/24/us/michael-brown-a-bodys-timeline-4-hours-on-a-ferguson-street.html?_r=0

^{viii} Bertolt Brecht, *Antigone*, translated by Judith Malina, (New York, NY: Applause Theatre Books, 1984), 34-35.

^{ix} Ibn 'Arabi, Poem 11 of the *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*.

<http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/treasureofcompassion.html>