

The Tragic Comedy of Lance Armstrong

Cycling is a tarnished sport. Unfortunately, for “sportophiles,” the halcyon days of cycling have never existed, for any sports or slice of life for that matter. I believe our loyalties and passions can blind our view of reality, and thus, we can misread a cluster of signs, disclosing that something is mistaken. The cumulative signs for the icon Lance Armstrong signify tragedy.

Tragedy is what happens when the hero of a story shockingly falls, because of some tragic flaw, bringing ruin. Armstrong’s tragedy amounts to an echelon of costs, i.e., divorce, lies, use of drugs, ruptured friendships, Tour De France titles, Nike Contract and Livestrong Foundation. On the one hand, his tragedy is unique. On the other hand, tragedy is indiscriminately inevitable. Tragedy lives in us too, as the bad news, the universal experience of Romans 1-3. We all labor to make a name for ourselves, and in this pursuit, we often hurt others and ourselves. Lance is not soloing off the front on this one, since all humans share in this gospel truth. Watching Lance fall, we are forced to confront our own human condition.

Lance has been “caught in the act” and he is vulnerable like the adulterous woman in John’s Gospel. Jesus teaches us that the responsible action is to see things as they really are, showing and feeling compassion. Tragedy evokes images of the gospel message in that it directs us to a world mortally wounded and in need of healing. Instead of condemning, for we are never in a position to hurl stones as fellow sinners, Christians should genuinely imitate Jesus by pointing Lance to the way of forgiveness and reconciliation. The gospel as bad news is a prelude to the gospel as comedy, namely, the good news that God extravagantly loves and forgives Lance Armstrong.

At Advent, we remember comedy as God’s outrageous announcement concerning the gospel; humans are no longer subject to bondage because Jesus sets us free. God in Christ triumphs over our misery and misfortune. Impossible! Hilarious! Sad tears are turned to glad tears. The spectacle of sports, however, frames Lance’s tragic choices as trapped, because in this drama, performances and success are merit-based, limited to the predictable, achievable and calculable. And since Lance failed and is barred from sports—his place of redemption—he cannot save himself. As a warrior kind of athlete, set on seeking personal honor and glory, Lance appears doomed, but herein lies the unforeseeable relief. His tragedy betrays his human limits (and ours); athletic prowess will never traverse the line between us and perfection. Absurd! And now, like Charlie Chaplin, he has unexpectedly slipped on the proverbial banana peel, meeting his backside (*without his bike*), with the comedic freedom to laugh at himself for taking life too seriously, and see God gratuitously reaching down to right his fall. With grace and humility, Lance can rest in God’s draft, protecting him from his win-at-all-costs attitude and liberating him to experience the joy of sport and life.

John White is the Harold and Dottie Riley Assistant Professor of Practical Theology and Director of the Sports Chaplaincy/Ministry Program at Baylor University. White served for 17 years with Athletes in Action before completing his Ph.D. from The University of Edinburgh (U.K.) in Theological Ethics. Contact: John_B_White@Baylor.edu

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