'The Greatest Show on Earth' to End 146-Year Run in May

The Wired Word for the Week of January 22, 2017

In the News

Last week, the iconic traveling Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus announced that its final performances will take place in May in Providence and New York after 146 years in operation. The circus plans 30 shows in its last season, including stops in Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington.

Kenneth Feld, chairman and CEO of Feld Entertainment which produces the circus, said it was a difficult decision to end the show that had brought joy and inspiration to him and his family since his father purchased Ringling Bros. nearly 50 years ago.

Feld's daughter, Juliette Feld, the company's chief operating officer, said several factors contributed to the decision to close down the circus: escalating operating costs, steadily declining attendance, changing interests and opinions of the public, and protracted legal battles with animal rights groups who alleged that circus employees abused performing animals.

Even though the case against the circus was dismissed and the plaintiffs were ordered to pay Feld Entertainment $25 million to cover its legal fees, the company decided to retire its popular performing elephants to a preserve in central Florida last May. Ironically, the loss of elephants as an attraction further depressed ticket sales.

"One of the major reasons people came to Ringling Bros. was ... to see elephants," Juliette Feld acknowledged.

In the early days of "The Greatest Show on Earth," the flashing lights, constant action and calliope sound in three rings under the big top captured the imagination of small-town America, which was mesmerized by the spectacle of exotic animals, oddities, dare-devil performances and slapstick humor.

"When we toured the Ringling Bros. Circus Museum in Sarasota, Florida, I was amazed at the model of what the circus looked like at its peak," TWW contributor Jim Berger reflected. "It was an entire train, with 20 or 30 cars. When it set up in a city, it was like a small town within the city. It was massive! But as time went on, they gave up the trains for semi-trailers. The tents were replaced by arenas. They adapted and strove to remain current while keeping the traditional."

But as time went on, new inventions such as cinema, video games and the Internet increasingly competed for fans' attention.

"The competitor in many ways is time," said Kenneth Feld. The business model of traveling with a large troupe from city to city that once worked was no longer sustainable. "We can't see how it works in today's world."

Some of the changes Ringling Bros. made recently included hiring its first African-American and female ringmasters, hiring motorbike daredevils and ice skaters, and introducing an interactive application.
"We tried all these different things to see what would work," CEO Feld said, "and we weren't successful in finding the solution."

When the show closes, the Felds plan to place the remaining circus animals, including lions, tigers, camels, donkeys, alpacas, kangaroos and llamas, in suitable homes. Feld Entertainment hopes to transfer a few of their 500 circus workers to other profitable shows they produce, such as Disney on Ice, Marvel Live and Monster Jam, but the majority will lose their jobs, and in some cases, their housing as well. The Felds say they are committed to assisting their employees during the transition period.

"When our family lived in Pennsylvania, our house was just across the road from the main east-west rail line coming into Philadelphia. Over the nine years we lived there, we saw the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus train four times," wrote author Daniel Buttry. "It was quite a show with the gaudily painted wagons on flat cars, the various tents, sideshow booths, etc. We could even see the elephants in the animal cars."

"The last day my wife Sharon was there," Buttry continued, "we were saying goodbye as she headed out for Michigan while I stayed behind with the kids so they could finish out the school year. As we said our farewells in the driveway, the circus train came by, one of the most serendipitous goodbyes ever! A last curtain call for this great circus!"

More on this story can be found at these links:

Ringling Bros. Circus to Close After 146 Years. ABC News
Ringling Bros. Circus Closing Show After 146 Years. PRI
As Circus Shuts Down, Historians Point Out Local Connection. WNNY-TV

The Big Questions
Here are some of the questions we will discuss in class:

1. What is it about circus life that attracts some people? Have you ever wanted to run away and join the circus? Have you ever done anything that was your emotional equivalent of running away to join the circus? What did you do? What motivated you? How did that act impact your life?

2. How does news of the closure of the circus affect you emotionally? What, if anything, are we losing with the end of this institution? What, if anything, might we stand to gain with its closure?

3. TWW contributor Frank Ramirez mused, "I was sorry to hear the Ringling Bros. circus was closing down, but I haven't been to a circus since my kids were little and I have no interest in going, just in it being there. I wonder if this is the way much of our society feels about the church!" What do you think about this?

4. What still evokes childlike wonder in your own heart, such as the wonder a circus has been known to evoke, or the wonder you may have felt the first time you heard the story of Christ's birth or resurrection? Does familiarity with the Bible breed contempt (or at least boredom) for you, or are you among those the hymnwriter says want to hear "the old, old story" again, "for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest"? How can the church convey the wonder of the gospel to people who think they have heard it all before, and who are underwhelmed by what they have heard?
5. In matters of faith, when should we hold on to old, traditional things and when should we discard them? On what basis do we distinguish between things that are still useful and those that have lost their efficacy? What is the difference between basic essentials of our faith and out-of-date ideas and methodology?

**Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**
We will look at selected verses from these Scripture texts. You may wish to read these in advance for background:

- Luke 1:5-25
- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
- Mark 2:18-22
- 1 Corinthians 13:8--14:1
- Isaiah 43:15-19

*In class, we will talk about these passages and look for some insight into the big questions, as well as talk about other questions you may have about this topic. Please join us.*