

Reel Faith Sermon Series
The Soloist – John 15:12-17
July 28, 2019
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Do you all remember the new business concept I shared with you a few years ago? I think I'm ready to pull the trigger on it and I'm looking for investors. The idea is for a gas station, but it's not like any gas station you've ever seen. When you pull up to the pump, instead of getting out of your car, a person comes from inside the gas station, asks you how much gas you want, and – get this! – they pump your gas for you. I think I'll call them "attendants." Not only will they pump your gas, but they'll also wash your windshield and even check your oil if you want, all while you wait inside the comfort of your vehicle. Isn't that a novel concept?

Of course it's not. Once upon a time, all gas stations operated that way. I can still remember pulling into gas stations in my hometown and choosing between the two islands: full-service and self-service. When's the last time you saw a full-service gas station? Nowadays, *everything* is self-service, from gas stations to banks to grocery stores. The term "self-service" implies we don't need no stinkin' attendants; we can do it ourselves! But that attitude of self-service becomes problematic when it runs up against Jesus' call to serve others. Do we sometimes serve others to make ourselves feel better?

We're continuing our summer sermon series called "Reel Faith," in which we're looking at some popular movies and the spiritual messages they contain. We may not think we can find God in "The Shawshank Redemption" or "Field of Dreams," but I believe God speaks to us in a variety of ways in which we are most likely to hear God, including through the big screen.

Today's movie is "The Soloist," a 2009 film starring Robert Downey Jr. and Jamie Foxx. It's the true story of Steve Lopez, an L.A. Times columnist who discovers Nathaniel, homeless man, playing a two-stringed violin in an L.A. park. Lopez extends his hand in greeting, but Nathaniel shrinks back, afraid to be touched. Lopez asks Nathaniel a few questions, and in Nathaniel's rambling, semi-coherent answer, he mentions the word "Julliard," the famous New York music school. After some digging, Lopez learns that Nathaniel used to be a cello student at Julliard but dropped out because of his mental illness.

Lopez writes a column about Nathaniel, but in the midst of getting to know him, a stronger bond forms. These two men couldn't be more different Lopez is a suburbanite whose biggest problem is raccoons digging up his well-manicured lawn. Nathaniel is homeless, mentally ill, and almost unreachable in his constant state of manic confusion. Nathaniel chooses to live on the streets instead of going to a homeless shelter.

Because of Lopez' newspaper story, someone donates a cello for Nathaniel, but in an effort to get him off the streets, Lopez will only let him play it at the shelter. Lopez badgers the shelter director to get Nathaniel medical help and a diagnosis, but the director responds, "Nathaniel doesn't need one more person telling him he needs medication." This creates a crisis for Lopez, which he narrates in a voice-over: "I tell Nathaniel the streets are no place for him, but he said he needs to be here. It's his choice. Should I try to force him inside?" In other words, should Lopez let Nathaniel do what he wants, or make him do what Lopez thinks is best?

Lopez' inner conflict grows when he sets up an opportunity for Nathaniel to hear the L.A. Symphony rehearse. At first Nathaniel agrees, but then at the last minute he refuses because he doesn't want to leave his shopping cart at the homeless shelter for fear someone will steal it. Lopez is frustrated that Nathaniel won't do what Lopez thinks he should do, and he explodes:

“Fine. There are a million other things I could be doing right now. Things people pay me to do. I have a job. I’m a professional person.” Is this about Nathaniel or about Lopez making himself feel better? Lopez looks around at the homeless people surrounding him, apologizes, and helps Lopez push his shopping cart several blocks to the concert hall.

Can you relate to Lopez’ dilemma? Author David Goetz can. In his book Death by Suburb, Goetz tells about how he volunteered for a ministry program that helped inmates transition back into the world after their incarceration. He was paired with a prisoner named Pete, who was approaching his parole. Goetz met repeatedly with Pete, working with him to help smooth the difficult transition from prison to a local halfway house. Goetz said he had big dreams for Pete that included Pete marrying his girlfriend, buying a house, and settling down in the suburbs.

So, imagine Goetz’s anger when he found out that Pete had been arrested again after only a few months out of jail. Goetz said he was furious, because Pete had jeopardized all of Goetz’s plans for him. Goetz was using Pete in his pursuit of significance. He wanted to help a poor person become a suburbanite just like him. Do we suffer from the same motivations? Do we serve others so they can become like us? That’s not full service, that’s self service, and that’s much different than Jesus calling us to lay down our lives for our friends.

Lopez’s struggle with this heightens. He sets up an apartment for Nathaniel so he can take cello lessons, not knowing that Nathaniel used to live alone in an apartment, which made his mental illness worse. Lopez again appeals to the shelter director for help, telling the director to force Nathaniel to see a psychiatrist. Lopez asks, “What if that’s all he needs to be well? What if that changed his life?” The director says, “Nathaniel has only one thing going for him. A friend. Don’t betray him and destroy his world.” Lopez responds, “I don’t want to be his only thing.” When Lopez tries to get Nathaniel to sign papers admitting Nathaniel is schizophrenic, Nathaniel attacks Lopez and threatens to kill him.

When we serve as Jesus calls us to serve, it can be messy, and it may not end the way we want. That’s why Goetz says we often find ourselves serving in safe or comfortable programs, where we won’t get dirty or risk forming a relationship with someone in deep need. There are people who need friends, who need money, who need a listening ear or a chunk of our time because they are in such deep poverty or despair. But why get involved in that if there’s no upside for us, if things won’t turn out how we want?

You all may remember Tanya Torp from Step by Step Ministries, who spoke with us earlier this year about the work her organization does with young single moms. I was having coffee with Tanya a few months ago because I wanted to learn more about the challenges faced by people living on the north side of Lexington. We don’t see the challenges here on Bellefonte Drive, and I want to find ways for our church to connect with people in real, deep ways that not only meets needs but builds relationships.

I asked Tanya about her neighborhood and what people needed. I was thinking about food or clothing or tutoring or transportation. I will never forget her answer. “What we need is someone to come and sit on our porch and listen to our stories. We’ve had churches come in here and help us for a few days and then leave without ever getting to know us. You want to help us? Sit on our porches and talk to us.”

That’s what Lopez fails to do with Nathaniel. At first, he sees him as a story, a project, someone with amazing talent that Lopez can help mold into his image of what he thinks Nathaniel should be. He sets up a recital for Nathaniel in front of a crowd, but Nathaniel freaks out and runs away. When Lopez realizes Nathaniel can’t be who Lopez wants, Lopez says, “I

can't see any outcome to support. I'm done trying. I resign." It's only when Lopez spends time at the homeless shelter, sleeps on the street with Nathaniel, listens to him as a person, that Lopez understands what Nathaniel really needs. As one person tells Lopez, "You're never going to cure. Nathaniel. Just be his friend and show up."

At the end of the movie, the two men meet again after Nathaniel's attack on Lopez. For the first time in the movie, Lopez calls Nathaniel "Mr. Ayers" as a sign of respect. Nathaniel is no longer a charity case, someone to help in order for Lopez to feel better about himself. Lopez tells Nathaniel, "Sometimes friends make each other mad. I'm honored to be your friend." And Nathaniel shakes his hand.

So, who gets helped in this movie? Does Lopez help Nathaniel? Does Nathaniel help Lopez? Probably a little bit of both, but neither in ways that are ultimately satisfying. In the end, Nathaniel is still homeless and Lopez is still frustrated. But that's as it should be. Serving others is not about the outcome, because sometimes there may never be an outcome. It's about the journey, the relationships that are developed, the deepening of our own compassion and empathy when we risk our well-being to enter into someone else's pain and suffering. We may not alleviate it, but we certainly can help them bear it when the load gets too heavy.

What we have to fight against is our tendency to make those we serve "normal" like us. We think we have it all figured out and if we can just help that other person get to where we are, then they'll have it figured out, too. But we can never fully figure it out and that way of thinking treats the people we serve as projects, as missions, not as human beings. When Jesus calls us to lay down our lives for our friends, I don't think he means for us to die for them. I think he means for us to take our lives – our priorities, our expectations – and lay them aside so that we can focus on seeing the other person for who they are. That's what friends do.

Lopez sees that Nathaniel is at his most "normal" when he's playing music, and in that moment, Lopez realizes that he has something to learn from this homeless man, not the other way around. Lopez describes it this way: "I watched him, he's experiencing something higher. I've never experienced it, I don't even know what you call it." And Lopez's friend says, "Grace. It's called grace."

This church does a lot of great things to serve other people. It's a core value of who we are. But we must constantly be checking ourselves to make sure that we're not serving others in order to serve ourselves, to make ourselves feel better. It's not about us. Jesus says, "I've come not to be served, but to serve." May we follow that example, sitting on porches, listening to stories, seeing the image of God in everyone, even those who mumble to themselves and play two-stringed violins. Because you just never know when you are entertaining an angel without even knowing it. You just never know where you'll find grace.