

Reel Faith sermon series
The Greatest Showman – Psalm 139:7-18
August 11, 2019
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

I've never shared this with you all, but I was once a king. I even wore a crown. I was about eight years old, a boy king like King Tut. My Little League team, which was co-ed, had to choose a king and queen to represent them at the end-of-the-year celebration. Our team only had one girl, Michelle, so it was pretty clear who was going to be queen. To be completely fair, our coach put a bunch of pieces of paper in a hat and had us each draw one out. One of the pieces had the word "king" on it.

But here's what you need to know: I didn't want to be king. Oh, believe me, I wanted the attention and the crown and the McDonald's coupons that came with being a king. But I didn't want to stand next to Michelle. As with many girls, Michelle had grown much faster than all the boys, so she stood about half a foot taller than everyone else. She had this wild, curly hair that stuck out from under her cap like some kind of animal was trying to escape, and her teeth were badly in need of dental work. I'm not going to tell you the names we boys called her because, even today, I'm ashamed. So, guess who's slip of paper said "King"? I groaned as all the other boys laughed at me, teasing me for being Michelle's "date." I said to the coach, "Do I have to stand next to her?" well within earshot of Michelle. I wonder how she felt hearing me say that.

We continue our movie sermon series called "Reel Faith" this morning but looking at a recent movie all about people who stand out, people who don't fit in, and how the world treats them. "The Greatest Showman" is a musical that was released in 2017 and stars Hugh Jackman as P.T. Barnum, the founder of the famous circus that bore his name. The movie is a highly stylized account of Barnum's life, starting with his poor upbringing and his dreams of something bigger. When he loses his job with a shipping company, he deceitfully secures a loan to open a wax museum. When the museum struggles, Barnum realizes he needs live acts to draw people in.

So, he goes about recruiting what his poster calls "oddities," misfits that stand out because they are different in some way. When he tries to recruit Charles Stratton, who will become known as the tiny Tom Thumb, Barnum says, "I'm putting together a show and I need a star." Stratton says, "You want people to laugh at me." Barnum says, "They're already laughing at you, so you might as well make money off it." Barnum goes on to recruit other oddities, such as a bearded lady, a tattooed man, a man covered with hair, the world's tallest man, the world's fattest man, and two African-American trapeze artists. Barnum is banking on the fact that people will pay money to see these oddities who are so different from everyone else.

Barnum's show is successful but comes with a price for him personally. His goal is to become accepted as a legitimate businessman, a respected member in New York's elite crowd, but the popularity of the show only lumps him in with his oddities. The show is panned by a newspaper critic who calls it a "circus," and Barnum and his family are ridiculed by the very people Barnum with who Barnum wants to attend parties and drink champagne. It turns out that if you hang with misfits, or stand next to one on the Little League field, you become a misfit yourself.

In an effort to become accepted, Barnum discovers a European opera singer and sponsors her tour of America, turning his back on his family and his circus in order to find favor with the movers and shakers of society. The first show is wildly successful and for the first time, Barnum gets a taste of what it's like to be part of the "in" crowd, not lumped in with the freaks. When the

circus performers show up at the after-party, Barnum closes the door on them for fear their presence will taint his acceptance. He doesn't want to stand next to the misfits.

Let me pause the narrative just a moment to observe the poignancy of this movie. Although set in the early 1900s, the themes raised by "The Greatest Showman" are relevant to today's society. The movie deals with issues like racial discrimination, gender inequality, class warfare, prejudice based on physical ability and differences, the choice between family values and power, and the undying pursuit of the American Dream at the cost of the dignity of others. At one point, a crowd of protesters carrying torches confront the circus performers, telling them to go back to where they came from because they didn't belong. It's sad how little we've changed.

When Barnum shuts his performers out of the after-party, they sing a song called "This Is Me." Listen to the lyrics: "I am not a stranger to the dark/Hide away, they say/'Cause we don't want your broken parts/I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars/Run away, they say/No one'll love you as you are/But I won't let them break me down to dust/I know that there's a place for us/For we are glorious/When the sharpest words wanna cut me down/I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out/I am brave, I am bruised/I am who I'm meant to be, this is me/Look out 'cause here I come/And I'm marching on to the beat I drum/I'm not scared to be seen/I make no apologies, this is me."

It's a powerful song, but the truth is that most people who don't fit in are scared to stand up for themselves. That was certainly true in Jesus' time. You wouldn't hear a leper or a crippled person singing, "This Is Me." They were relegated to the fringes of society, considered unclean and untouchable, forced to live as freaks and oddities, doors constantly closed on them. No one wanted to stand next to them for fear of being considered outcast just like them.

I heard a powerful definition of sin the other day. This commentator retold the story of the Good Samaritan, in which a beaten and bruised man is lying in the road. Two religious leaders pass right by without even stopping to help, and it is a Samaritan, considered an enemy by the Jews, who helps the man. The commentator said this: "I don't consider it a sin if you are trying your best to do right and you fail. I consider it a sin when you have the power to do right and choose not to. For me, sin is the failure to bother to love. The two religious leaders couldn't be bothered to help the injured man. That's their sin."

Sin is the failure to bother to love. No one bothered to love the freaks who ended up in Barnum's show because no one saw them as people worth loving. Even Barnum saw them as a means to the end of making money, and the moment he was accepted by the aristocratic elite, he shunned those who were different. If you stand next to a misfit, you become a misfit yourself.

Of course, this begs the question: Who are misfits today? Who doesn't fit in, who are being cast out because they are different? We have seen people carrying torches in protest of others who look different than them. We have heard the cries of "go home!" aimed at people who others think don't belong. We have witnessed people turning their backs on other human beings who simply want to be accepted for who they are, who God created them to be. There are misfits all around us.

My friend Melissa has started a worshipping community called Salvage Garden, which is aimed at children and adults who are different, who deal with disabilities, who live with autism, who don't fit in. She said she started this community because she took her son, who has autism and is non-verbal, to visit a church. During Sunday School, her son was making noises and swaying as the kids did their crafts. One of the children asked, "What's wrong with that kid?" Melissa's daughter answered for her brother, "Nothing wrong with him. God made him that

way.” What we see as a misfit God sees as a child. There are other misfits in our world who are being treated with the same way, cut down by sharp words, told to hide away. Who’s going to stand next to them?

In the movie, Barnum eventually tastes defeat as the opera singer ends her tour and his circus building is burned to the ground by protestors. Barnum is ruined, his family has abandoned him, and he’s out of money. He’s back to square one, facing the same poverty he fought so hard to escape. So, who stands next to him? The circus performers, the very people he failed to bother to love. They tell him, “Our own families hid us. But you gave us a family. This is our home.”

For the first time, Barnum is seeing the performers not as oddities, a means to make money, but as friends. And when you bother to love someone different, someone shunned by society, you stop seeing them as a threat, someone to be feared, someone unusual and odd. You start seeing them as a person, part of God’s colorful creation. In the movie, the newspaper critic who panned Barnum’s show eventually says to him, “Taking people of all shapes, size colors, putting them on stage together and presenting them as equals, someone might call that a celebration of humanity.”

We have two choices. We can celebrate the diversity of humanity God has created, recognizing that God has formed each of our inward parts, that each of us is fearfully and wonderfully made. Or we can live in fear of those different than us, seeing them as threats, wishing they would go home and just leave us normal people alone. We can be a church of inclusion and love, a church that stands next to the misfits, or we can be a church that chants for them to “go home,” a church that seeks to keep God’s gospel pure and unblemished. Here’s my question. If Jesus were here, which church do you think he would attend?

The people who most need to be accepted in this world aren’t people who are already in the church. They are waiting out there for someone to choose them, to stand next to them, to say that matter. They are waiting for someone to bother to love them, even if they look, sound, think, and feel differently than us. When Christ encountered the oddities – the lepers, the wounded, the lame, women, foreigners – he didn’t shy away. He reached out, touched them, made them whole. Christ loved across barriers, not within them. He stood with those that others shunned, called names, made feel less than human. He stood with those not valued by society, those people said we should fear, those who had no homes. He stood with the misfits, the oddities, the freaks. Where do you stand?