

Reel Faith Sermon Series
Big Fish – John 6:1-13
August 5, 2019
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At General Assembly, our denomination's national gathering in Des Moines a few weeks ago, one of my favorite moments didn't take place in the exhibit hall or a workshop classroom or even in the arena where we worshipped. It took place in a bar. No, I wasn't drinking and yes, I remember everything that happened. About 100 people packed into the basement of the Des Moines Social Club for an event called Story Hour, in which people were invited up on stage to share a story about the evening's topic, which was "Failure." About six brave souls got up and told us about a time in their lives when they completely fell flat on their faces, failing miserably in a crucial moment or botching an important assignment. The speakers were courageous and vulnerable. There were a lot of laughs and more than a few tears. The Holy Spirit was present with us as the speakers bared their souls about a time in their lives when they were utterly human.

I think that night was so powerful to me because these people were sharing their stories. There's something about hearing a story that draws us in, makes us lean forward, captures our attention. There's a reason Jesus didn't start his parables with, "Now, if you'll pay attention to the graph I've created on this PowerPoint presentation." He says, "There once was a farmer..." "The kingdom of God is like..." I believe if Jesus were telling the stories today, he'd start with "Have you heard the one about the ten bridesmaids?"

As we continue our sermon series on movies called "Reel Faith," today we're looking at one of the most endearing, peculiar movies I've ever seen. The movie "Big Fish" is based on a book called "Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions" by Dan Wallace. The movie came out in 2003 and is directed by the visionary Tim Burton, who also gave us classics like "Edward Scissorhands," "Beetlejuice," and "Alice in Wonderland."

The story is about Edward Bloom, a traveling salesman who has a penchant for telling tall tales. Edward's son Will loved these stories as a child, but now that Will is all grown up he has distanced himself from his father, fed up with his dad's inability to tell the simple truth. When Edward is diagnosed with cancer, Will and his pregnant wife fly home, and Will uses this opportunity to ask his dad about the real story of his life, not the half-truths and legends that his dad has told him when he was younger

For example, Edward told his son that on the day Will was born, Edward was down at the creek trying to catch a giant uncatchable catfish. Edward said he used his wedding ring as bait and finally caught the fish, but as he was reeling it in, his wife went into labor, so he had to retrieve his wedding ring from the fish's mouth, set it free in the creek, and rush to the hospital. Edward tells that story at Will's wedding, but Will says angrily to his mom, "He was on a sales trip to Wichita." Is the fish story true? No. But is it a great story? You bet.

When Will arrives at his dad's bedside, the two men together for the first time in years. Will says he's going to be a father and Edward says, "You're in for quite a surprise. Having a baby changes your life. There's the diapers and the burping and the midnight feedings." Will says, "Dad, did you do any of that?" Edward responds, "No, but I hear it's terrible."

As Will sits with his dad, he tells him he wants to know the true version of things, not the fables Edward has been spinning. Edward says, "I tell stories." Will responds, "You tell lies, amusing lies." But Edward insists his stories really happened and begins to recount them again.

Through director Tim Burton's magical vision, we see Edward's stories played out: the story about seeing his own death in the glass eye of a witch, the story about befriending a giant named Karl, the story about meeting a circus ringmaster who was also a werewolf, the story about rescuing Siamese twins while on a mission during the war, and the story about getting his car stuck in a tree during a rainstorm. Will says, "Dad, I have no idea who you are because you've never told me a single fact."

Will is right. His dad's stories are absurd. Exaggerated. Irrational. Kind of like a story about a man who fed five thousand people with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Or the story about a man who built a boat so big he could fit two of every kind of animal on it. Or the story about a man who jumped in the ocean and lived for three days in the belly of a big fish. Or – the granddaddy of them all – the story about a man who was killed on a cross but three days later walked out of his tomb like he was strolling through the park. Absurd. Irrational. Stories of mythic proportions.

Are any of those stories true? Were any of Edward's stories true? I honestly don't know. Some people say all the stories in the Bible have to be true or else none of them are true. I don't believe that. Other people say the Bible is just a bunch of made-up stories to make people feel good. I don't believe that either. I think the truth may lie somewhere in between. It all depends on what you mean by "true."

Let's get at it by way of an analogy. When I walk out on my deck in the morning and see light appear in the sky, I say, "The sun is rising." Now, a meteorologist or astronomer would be quick to point out that statement is factually untrue. The sun doesn't rise or set; it stays still while the earth moves. But my experience tells me that the sun rises and sets. That is true for me, even if it's not true in other ways.

Are the stories in the Bible true in a way that we can prove them? That was never an issue for the early readers of the Bible. They didn't care about the verifiable truth of scripture, because for them, it was true in more profound ways. For example, archaeology has shown no evidence of a group the size of the Israelites leaving Egypt, traveling 40 years in the desert, and settling in Canaan. No candy wrappers, no discarded maps, no sandal prints. Archaeology and the Bible don't line up. But that didn't make a lick of difference to the early readers.

Getting the past right was not the driving issue of the biblical writers. The primary purpose of the Bible was to tell the story of God and God's people as a way of explaining their current situation, not unlike how other cultures used supernatural stories to explain natural phenomena. They didn't care that the facts didn't line up. They didn't care that in the Bible God spoke directly to people, the sun stopped moving, Jesus drove out demons, and animals talked. Who cares if that stuff doesn't happen today? The purpose of the Bible is not to explain science or accurately recount historical events. And as soon as we use it to do those things, we're severely distorting the Bible's purpose. Trying to contort the Bible to be factually true isn't submitting to God, it's making God submit to us.

I believe "Big Fish" and the Bible have something in common: every story in them is true and some of them really happened, and the more we can grasp that truth, the more the Bible comes alive for us. We can quibble over how long a day was during Creation or how Moses did all those plagues or how God rolled away the stone from the tomb. Or we can just listen to the stories and the truths they contain for us and let them take root in our hearts.

Toward the end of the movie, Edward the father has a stroke, so the son Will goes to his bedside. The family doctor is there and asks Will if he wants to know the true story of his birth. The doctor says, "Your mother came in about three in the afternoon. Her neighbor drove her, on

account of your father was on business in Wichita. You were born a week early, but there were no complications. It was a perfect delivery. Now, your father was sorry to miss it, but it wasn't the custom for men to be in the room for deliveries then, so I can't see as it would have been much different if he had been there. And that's the real story of how you were born. Not very exciting, is it? And I suppose if I had to choose between the true version and an elaborate one involving a fish and a wedding ring, I might choose the fancy version. But that's just me."

Later that night, Edward wakes up and sees Will sitting beside him. Barely able to speak, Edward asks Will to tell him the story of how he dies. Will says, "I don't know, Dad. You never told me that story." Edward insists more fervently, "Tell me the story." And something in Will softens. So, the son, who used to be so jaded by his dad's fantastic stories, tells one of his own. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he tells the story about how he helps his dad escape from the hospital and goes down to the riverbank, where all the characters from his dad's stories have assembled. He tells about how he takes his father into the river and sets him down in the water, where the dad turns into a big fish and swims away. Will says, "And that's how it happens." Edward whispers, "Exactly," and then closes his eyes and dies in the hospital bed.

But that's not the end of the story. Later, at his father's funeral, Will is stunned to see some of the characters his dad told him about in his stories are actual people who've come to pay their respects: the giant named Karl, the ringmaster from the circus, the Siamese twins (actually two separate identical twins). Will always thought these stories were just made up, fairy tales from his dad's quirky brain. But the people were real. Maybe there was some truth to these stories after all.

Are the stories in the Bible true? I don't know. But I've seen a small amount of food feed a hungry crowd at a soup kitchen. I've seen a rainbow in the sky after a hellacious storm and people band together to repair the damage the storm left behind. I've seen new life spring up from a loved one's death as warring relatives reconcile. I've seen people who ran away from God come slinking back, only to be welcomed with open arms by God's church like the prodigal son returning home. Did all the stories in the Bible happen? Maybe. Are they true? You bet. Some people say you have to believe they all are historically true, but I don't believe that. And some say they are all made up, told to fool us into belief. I don't believe that either. I believe the Bible is book of mythic proportions, telling the story of a God who can't be contained within its pages.

You see, our world tells us one story. We're born, a collision of molecules, a random sampling of DNA. We grow up, get jobs, have families. Then we die. End of story. Not very exciting, is it? But the Bible tells us a different story, about a God who chose us, formed us, breathed us into creation, nurtured us in childhood, cleansed us in the waters of baptism, called us to do good works, showed us how to love others, and promised us that death is not the end of us. Now, if I had to choose between the world's version and God's version, I think I'd choose God's version, even if I can't prove that it's true. But that's just me. How about you?