

Sunday, August 12, 2018

“Films & Faith” #1 “It’s harder than you think.”

(Film: “I Can Only Imagine.”)

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Scriptures: Exodus 20:1-6, 12; Matthew 5:23-24

On top of a stack of books on my desk at home is a little book by Paul Boynton that is folded open to a quote I ran across some weeks ago. Boynton is a life coach and a leadership consultant to corporations. His little book “Begin with Yes” is a quick read – but for some time I’ve been stopped by a little question:

“What do you know,” he writes “that you’re not letting yourself see?”

Sit with that question for a bit. Allow it to be an invitation to the sort of joy-filled, life-renewing promise Jesus offers in these words from the Sermon on the Mount. By the way, I am planning an eight-week sermon series on the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount – you’ll be hearing a lot from Matthew’s Gospel this fall. For now, however, I invite you to sit with these words which we know so well but often do not allow ourselves to see. Or perhaps even fully comprehend:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder;’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.”

Such easy words to say, and words that are perhaps familiar to us. Living these words is another matter. It’s more difficult than we can imagine. What do we know that we not letting ourselves see?

In part that is a theme that emerges from the movie, "I Can Only Imagine." The movie tells the story of the story of the same title. Bart Millard, who is a singer/songwriter with the band "Mercy Me," wrote this blockbuster song in ten minutes. But as singer Amy Grant tells Bart, "you didn't write this song in ten minutes. You wrote it over a lifetime."

Not all of you will be familiar with the song or with this movie. The song became a hit both in Christian music and in country music. The movie explores the back story of Millard's faith, telling a story grounded in painful experiences of abuse, reconciliation, and forgiveness. grounded in painful acts of reconciliation and forgiveness.

It's not so easy producing an explicitly Christian movie. Secular critics and audiences often misunderstand the point that is being made. Other times the movies are criticized by Christians for not being religious enough. Most frequently, I believe, movies try too hard to be a sermon and not a movie.

That happens to preachers, too but we're not talking about preachers today.

What happens is that sometimes a Christian movie works so hard at telling a message of faith that it doesn't show us a story. And like my college writing professor drilled into our heads the point is to show, not tell. Show us how a person is moved. Show us the story unfolding. Place us in the center of the drama without force feeding the message.

"I Can only Imagine" is not a perfect film, but it does succeed in showing the power of reconciliation. It shows Bart's experiences growing up in a household filled with anger and abuse. There are strong scenes of abuse in this movie which are difficult to watch, yet they are essential. The nastiness and ruthless beatings Bart experiences from his father sets the table for the meal of grace by reminding us of the power of grace to imagine new possibilities.

One summer Bart goes to church summer camp where he meets Shannon, the girl who becomes the love of his life. They sneak out late one night and watch fireworks – which seems strange because none of the summer camps I've ever been to included fireworks. But maybe I should have gone to a Baptist camp.

Anyway, Shannon tells Bart to keep a journal. She helps Bart to begin seeing the things he already knows. She encourages him to dream, to believe, to imagine.

Imagine.

Imagine is a powerful word. Imagine ignites both relationships and revolutions. To act with imagination is to take a daring look beyond the broken shards of the world in order to look for signs of healing and hope. To serve with imagination, you'll remember, is one of the vows that Presbyterians ask their elders, deacons, and pastors to take at ordination. We imagine how God might be leading the world toward justice, healing, and hope. Imagination is a provocative act of faith that dares to try and see the things we already know: that God is at work in the world imagining new possibilities and repairing broken lives.

Imagine.

It's tougher than sounds. For example, we may tacitly accept Jesus' words about being reconciled to those who have hurt us, but not understand the practicalities involved. How do we do that tough work? Desmond Tutu, the Anglican archbishop from South Africa says true reconciliation is "challenge to us when we have suffered mental anguish and physical harm. The God who waits for the human change of heart is cold comfort to the victims of human brutality." (Tutu, *Made For Goodness and Why This Makes All the Difference.*)

That is hard to imagine.

Imagining that sort of grace seems quite difficult. It is a harder than it looks or sounds. We remember Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words that "the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice," yet when prayers go unanswered, when evil persists, when God seems silent, when abuse continues, it is very hard to imagine how reconciliation will occur. That is exactly what Bart experiences. His father, who beat him mercilessly as a child, has become a Christian and wants more than anything else to be reconciled to his son.

Imagine.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are things we know, but do we see how they can change us? Do we imagine how the impulse toward reconciliation could allow God's love to free us? As I watched this movie – and wrestled with the problem

that the directors had a 30-year-old man playing a high school student – I also wrestled with the very possibility it suggests. **Would I dare to sit down at table with someone who has so deeply injured me?**

Could I imagine that?

For starters, we can say that seeking reconciliation is not always advisable, and that it takes work. Let's be honest. To forgive someone does not mean you forget how they have injured you. Nor does forgiveness mean that we accept empty apologies or even allow the person who has injured us back into our lives. That is not forgiveness. Forgiveness is not the same thing as foolishness.

The forgiveness God asks of us is an invitation to imagine. Forgiveness models the work Christ calls us to do. Forgiveness reminds us that as God has lifted our burdens, and as Jesus has forgiven us, so we undertake the long and often twisting path toward forgiving others. Forgiveness does not ignore the reality of what has taken place. Instead, it begins to imagine the possibility of what God might do.

In one scene of the movie, Bart's father prepares him a special breakfast. It spoke to me of the way God sets the table for us to seek reconciliation. The good news of the Gospel is that Christ is our host – and that Jesus invites us to take a seat at the table of reconciliation. Can you imagine that? Amen.