

## At the Movies: 4. The Greatest Showman

Luke 5:12-13, 27-30; Luke 7:

July 28, 2019

Pastor Steve Richards

Of all the movies that we've seen this month, *The Greatest Showman* is the one I've been looking forward to the most. I love a great musical with great choreography, and that's this movie. It also offers a lens through which we see the gospel story come to life.

Are there any self-doubters among us this morning? Anyone who never felt right or didn't think you had what it takes to be a good parent, partner, friend, or Christian? Have you ever felt like you didn't belong and felt completely out of place? I still remember my summers in a small town where we would have pickup baseball games. In an age of organized sports, I don't know if these kind of games still happen. But what I remember most was being the last one selected for a team. I was the only one whose parents could not afford to buy their son a baseball glove – and to this day, I've not cared much for baseball. We've all felt unworthy at some point in life. We may be smiling on the outside, but on the inside – just not good enough. Or we've been around other people who told us in one way or another that we don't measure up. You don't belong here.

Did you ever see the circus? Maybe there was a time when you wanted to run away and join the circus. Recognizing your life was not what you hoped it would be but if you could join the circus, you thought they would accept you – misfit though you were, they would welcome you and find a place for you.

This movie is based on the life of P.T. Barnum. Born in 1810, he was a showman, politician, businessman, author of books and religious tracts, and best remembered for founding the Barnum & Bailey Circus. It was the Greatest Show on Earth. When he was 31, he had this idea that he could get people to come to a museum where there were curiosities and oddities. I haven't walked through the Midway at the State Fair in recent years, but I remember a time – and maybe it's still there - where among the carnival rides and carnival acts was a tent where you could pay a price to see a halfman/halflizard, a boy who looked like a wolf, a person with two heads, and others. That's how the circus got its start. Barnum purchased a museum and began looking for persons who at that time were called "Freaks of Nature." Today, we don't refer to people that way. These were people who had rare medical conditions not understood at the time. Most were outcasts, often humiliated or harassed, but they found a home in Barnum's museum. They found family and a place to belong. The movie wants us to see these characters as metaphors for all of us who feel we don't matter and we don't belong. P.T. Barnum invites them to come out of the shadows and join the circus. [*movie clip: recruiting performers*]

It wasn't just the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that certain people were made to feel inferior and told they didn't belong. This also happened in biblical times. We read in the Old Testament book of Leviticus: **No one who has an imperfection will be allowed to make an offering: this includes anyone who is blind, crippled, disfigured, or deformed; anyone who has a broken foot or hand; anyone who is a hunchback or too small.** (Leviticus 21:18-20) None of these were allowed to serve in the Temple. Why? Because they believed such people were unfit to serve God. Instead, they were worthy of pity. They were left to beg in order to survive. They were considered unclean. But these were the very people Barnum recruited. Did you notice the posters? They said, WANTED. What's it feel like to be wanted – especially when the whole world says you are not wanted? When Barnum meets the bearded woman who is hidden behind a sheet so others won't have to look at her, he pulls back the sheet and says, "extraordinary,

unique...beautiful." For the first time in her life, she heard words that made her feel wanted. That's what Jesus did. For Jesus it didn't matter what Leviticus said. Jesus went searching for people others called unclean and not wanted. In fact, that's who the gospels tell us Jesus spent his time reaching. He reached out and cared for the people everyone else had pushed aside.

Luke tells it this way: **Jesus was in one of the towns where there was also a man covered with a skin disease. When he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged, "Lord, if you want, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do want to. Be clean." Instantly, the skin disease left him.** (Luke 5:12-13) Then Jesus came across a tax collecting booth. The tax collectors were hired by Rome and hated for it. The Romans used taxation to keep the people poor and oppressed. But Jesus approached the tax collector's booth, took one look at the tax collector, and said, "Come and follow." And what did the religious say: **"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"** (Luke 5:30) Why? Because Jesus looked beyond appearances and saw a person created by God, loved by God – a person of sacred worth and filled with potential. Jesus saw how their uniqueness could be used by God. He brought them together in a celebration of humanity. And that's what we see in the movie, when Barnum has assembled his cast of characters. Take a look: *[movie clip: performers appear for the first time]*.

Do you see the joy? Can you hear it come alive? That's the kingdom of God. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is the place where people are set free to feel loved, to be accepted and empowered. It's the place where lives have meaning and joy. That's the circus. They were "dreaming with their eyes wide open" because the unbelievable has happened. Suddenly, my life matters. I've found grace and forgiveness and love.

In the movie, a recurring theme is the cruelty that some people inflict on others, especially those who appear different. We see a pair of trapeze artists who respond to Barnum's invitation. They are African American, brother and sister – one has light skin and the other dark skin – and they tell Barnum, you can't put us on stage or people won't come. And when the circus is invited to meet Queen Victoria, they ask, "Is everyone invited?" or only those with certain color skin? We live in a world where there is racism and bigotry – a fear of those who are different. At several points in the movie, thugs show up to run the circus out of town. They attack the characters. They hold up protest signs, and eventually set fire to the building. But the movie also shows the high society people who you'd think would know better, but they also struggle with racism and bigotry. In this scene, we see a moment when Philip, Barnum's associate who has fallen in love with the trapeze artist. He takes her to the theatre – something she has always wanted to do but as an African American, it's a place she had never been allowed to go. Watch what happens. *[movie clip: Philip and Anne are rejected by Philip's parents]*

It's tragic how inhumane people can be – how we can hurt each other. We learn that. We are not born that way, but as we get older we learn to separate ourselves from those who are different. Do you remember middle school or junior high? We learned who mattered and who didn't. And we carry that learning into adulthood. We see adults often acting the same way – and even churches do that. I've described how one of first church jobs was an organist and choir director in a church in Dallas. It was located in a changing neighborhood that was once all white but then one African American family moved in and then another and white families put their homes up for sale and moved out of the city and as the church became more black and less white, the church decided to close rather than let the leadership of the church go to African Americans. Or when I left the two churches I was serving in Duluth, the churches were asked what sort of person they wanted for their next pastor and they said – anyone but a woman. What was that about? Even now, our denomination is struggling over sexual orientation and

who is accepted. Our signs are one effort to say we are going to welcome everyone, because that's what Jesus did. He reached out to those whom the world was ready to push aside and marginalize. My hope and prayer is that we are the kind of church that recognizes the kingdom of God is open to everyone and that everyone is created in the image of God, and we will welcome whomever walks through our doors, and we will love them because it doesn't matter the color of your skin or your social economic status or who you love. Everyone is welcome here.

For Barnum, the stigma of growing up poor was a demon inside his head that kept reminding him that he was not good enough. So in 1850 he sponsored a tour for Jenny Lind a Swedish opera singer who gained fame and fortune in Europe. He brought her to America, thinking this would give him a legitimacy among the higher class who looked down on him and his circus acts. In this scene, we see the reception after Jenny Lind's performance. Barnum has finally achieved the affirmation he had been seeking his whole life, but at that moment the circus performers arrive at the reception and in his success, he becomes the very thing that he had been fighting. [*movie clip: after being rejected by Barnum, the performers sing "This is me"*]

That's a gospel song. The circus performers find their voice. And we are the circus performers, aren't we? This is me. This is you. We all are broken. We all have things about us that are not right. We all have insecurities and doubts, times when we've been picked on or pushed aside or told we didn't belong. You might be smiling on the outside but on the inside you know what it is to be broken. And Jesus says, you were made in the image of God and if you will let him, his love will take hold and never let go of you.

I've been a grandpa for 10 days. Friday morning, I had another opportunity to hold my grandson. I so want him to know how loved he is, not just by me but by God so that when he falls down or fails or gets teased or bullied or sees himself as less than – that God's love will override all that. We exist to be that reminder to every child, every youth, every adult. You matter, because God says you matter. Do you know who we are? We are the circus. We are the people who have found a home and a family here in the circus. So, come and join the circus. We are the greatest show on earth, and Jesus is the true greatest showman.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 28, 2019**

**Weekly Prayer:** Most holy God, Lover of all people, your grace is truly amazing. You accept us and love us even when we are not able to love ourselves. You see in us a potential that we may not see. You are ready to work through us to love others, especially those who have been rejected by the world. Shine a light on anything that may keep us from following you, soften our hearts, and transform us for loving service. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Monday, July 29**

#### **Scripture: Luke 8:1-3; 1 Corinthians 15:3-11**

Soon afterward, Jesus traveled through the cities and villages, preaching and proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom. The Twelve were with him, along with some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses. Among them were Mary Magdalene (from whom seven demons had been thrown out), Joanna (the wife of Herod's servant Chuza), Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.

I passed on to you as most important what I also received: Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures. He

appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once—most of them are still alive to this day, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me, as if I were born at the wrong time. I'm the least important of the apostles. I don't deserve to be called an apostle, because I harassed God's church. I am what I am by God's grace, and God's grace hasn't been for nothing. In fact, I have worked harder than all the others—that is, it wasn't me but the grace of God that is with me. So then, whether you heard the message from me or them, this is what we preach and this is what you have believed.

**Observation:** In *The Greatest Showman*, you see P. T. Barnum's effect on his circus players when Lettie Lutz, the "bearded lady," sings: *"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."* Jesus' "circus" of followers, including the women Luke named, upset "proper" men in his day. The apostle Paul, who had hunted Christians, said, "I don't deserve to be called an apostle." But he didn't hide in shame. He said, "I am what I am by God's grace, and God's grace hasn't been for nothing."

**Application:** Later in the film, Lettie told Barnum, "The world was ashamed of us, but you put us in the spotlight. You gave us a real family." Luke and Paul both learned that Jesus didn't care about whether the world was ashamed of certain people—he wanted them all in his family, in his kingdom. Can you think of people you'd be ashamed to have sitting next to you in church? If so, what would it take to align your feelings more closely with those of Jesus?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I've done plenty of things that disappointed you and hurt others. Thank you for showing me mercy, and calling me into your service. Amen.

## Tuesday, July 30

### **Scripture: Mark 3:22; Acts 17:26-28**

The legal experts came down from Jerusalem. Over and over they charged, "He's possessed by Beelzebul. He throws out demons with the authority of the ruler of demons."

From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn't far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, 'We are his offspring.'

**Observation:** In *The Greatest Showman*, theater critic James Gordon Bennett harshly blasted Barnum's "fake" show. In a pensive moment near the film's end, though, he told Barnum, "Putting folks of all kinds on stage with you...all colors, shapes, sizes...presenting them as equals...why, another critic might have even called it 'a celebration of humanity.'" "I would've liked that," Barnum replied. Religious critics said what Jesus did was evil, not good. But Jesus acted on what his follower Paul told philosophers in Athens. Jesus and his followers believed that all people, not just a select few, are children of a personal, life-giving, loving God.

**Application:** Paul told the Athenians that "God isn't far away from any of us." One whole group of Greek philosophers believed that the gods were very far away from human beings indeed, and were quite indifferent to what happened to us. Do you agree with Paul's assertion about God's nearness, or do you struggle to believe that is true? What experiences either support or challenge your ability to believe God cares about you?

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, we certainly could call your life and ministry “a celebration of humanity.” Help me move beyond any mistrust and celebrate with you this vast, diverse human family in which I belong. Amen.

### **Wednesday, July 31**

#### **Scripture: Mark 1:16-20**

As Jesus passed alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” Right away, they left their nets and followed him. After going a little farther, he saw James and John, Zebedee’s sons, in their boat repairing the fishing nets. At that very moment he called them. They followed him, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired workers.

**Observation:** Invited to join Barnum’s early museum, Phillip Carlyle said, “Do you understand that just associating with you could cost me my inheritance?” Barnum said, “Oh, it could cost you more than that. You’d be risking everything. But, on the other hand, you just might find yourself a free man.” Jesus could have had a conversation much like that as he called his first followers. Mark gave today’s reading an urgent feeling, using phrases like “right away” or “at that very moment.”

**Application:** What do you think made Jesus and his invitation so compelling that, when he called, these four men would promptly leave the security and familiarity of their family fishing business to follow him? Jesus called people to change their employment (as in today’s reading), their habits, their attitudes or beliefs, their relationships, or even their understanding of life’s ultimate purpose. Is there any place in your life where you believe God is calling you to change something, maybe “right away”? If so, how much is your response like the response of the men in this story?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, sometimes I’d rather not hear your call. But give me a sense that it’s a bigger risk to miss your call, so that I will keep my ears and my heart open to you and your calling on my life. Amen.

### **Thursday, August 1**

#### **Scripture: Mark 8:31-37**

Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: “The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead.” He said this plainly. But Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him. Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, then sternly corrected Peter: “Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.”

After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives?”

**Observation:** Resisting Barnum’s invitation, Philip Carlyle said, “Let’s just say that I find it much more comfortable...admiring your show from afar.” And Barnum murmured, “Comfort, the enemy of progress.” Jesus’ closest followers became uncomfortable when he talked about suffering

and crosses. Peter found the idea of Jesus on a cross appalling. But Jesus didn't shrink from using the cross as a positive, yet hugely challenging, symbol of the cost of following him.

**Application:** "Jesus said to them, 'All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.'" Did Jesus' words apply only to his first-century followers who faced Roman persecution, or do they apply to us in the 21st century, too? If so, what does "taking up your cross" look like in your daily life? In what ways have you found greater depth of life by saying "no" to yourself at key times?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, at times, like Peter, I have strong ideas about how you should do things, especially as they affect me. Could it be that one part of "the cross" you ask me take up is releasing my own ideas in favor of yours? Give me wisdom and courage. Amen.

## Friday, August 2

### **Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:21-25; Philippians 3:3-9**

In God's wisdom, he determined that the world wouldn't come to know him through its wisdom. Instead, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom. This is because the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

We are the circumcision. We are the ones who serve by God's Spirit and who boast in Christ Jesus. We don't put our confidence in rituals performed on the body, though I have good reason to have this kind of confidence. If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more: I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee. With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless. These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith.

**Observation:** Late in *The Greatest Showman*, vandals burned down the building that housed Barnum's circus. In the wreckage, Phillip Carlyle said, "You know, Barnum...when I first met you...I had an inheritance, acclaim, an invitation to every party in town. And now, thanks to you, all that's gone. All that's left is friendship, love, and work that I adore. You brought joy into my life." Lettie, the bearded lady, added, "Into all our lives." Doesn't that sound like what the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians about how making Jesus his Lord had changed his life?

**Application:** Paul said he came to see all his human credentials—his top-notch rabbinic education, his renown as a religious leader, his respectability and status—as "sewer trash" compared to the value of knowing Jesus. Of what achievements, degrees or awards, if any, are you particularly proud? Would you rank knowing Jesus above them or not? Why or why not?

**Prayer:** Lord God, my mind was a gift from you, and you want me to use it. But you also yearn for my heart. Please free me at those times when my mind tries to get in the way of my heart, when I ache to love and serve you even if I can't answer all the questions. Amen.

**Saturday, August 3**

**Scripture: Acts 1:4-8**

While they were eating together, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. He said, "This is what you heard from me: John baptized with water, but in only a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." As a result, those who had gathered together asked Jesus, "Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" Jesus replied, "It isn't for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

**Observation:** In Acts 1, the risen Jesus was eating with his disciples. They asked, "Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" Their imagination still rested on the nation-bound dreams of a conquering earthly king in Jerusalem. Jesus had a much larger vision. *The Greatest Showman* quotes P.T. Barnum as saying, "Men suffer more from imagining too little than too much," and what Jesus was picturing must have made his followers gasp. He said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." There were 120 of them at most. Imagine them wondering, "Did we hear him right? To the end of the earth?" That was, and remains, Jesus' vision. Today millions of people follow him, some more fervently than others—but we're still called to do our part in carrying his kingdom of love to the end of the earth.

**Application:** When the disciples asked, "Is this the time?" The Message said Jesus answered, "You don't get to know the time. Timing is the Father's business. What you'll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world." Have you ever had to set aside your own wishes and plans, and accept what God gives you instead? How hard or difficult is it at those times for you to trust that God is doing what is best? How big is your imagination for what God can do in and through you?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, you're a big God. Help me never to set limits on what you want to do through me. Make my dreams big, not about myself, but about you. Amen.