



Let's Go to the Movies!
"DREAMING"
(The Greatest Showman)
Galatians 3:28-29; Luke 19:1-10
Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth

First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan

Growing in up in Sunday School, you may remember a children's song that goes with our scripture lesson this week. It starts like this:

Zacchaeus was a wee, little man,
And a wee, little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree,
For the Lord he wanted to see.
And as the Savior passed that way,
He looked up in that tree,
Spoken: And he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down,
For I'm going to your house today,
For I'm going to your house today."

This song from our childhood brings up such fun images for us of a short guy who's just trying to catch a bird's eye view of Jesus as he comes to town. In the song, it sounds like it's such a great honor for Jesus to visit Zacchaeus' home. Yet, I wonder if we miss just how counter-cultural this visit is for Jesus and Zacchaeus when we only view the story through the lens of our Sunday School memories.

If we dive a little deeper into this story this morning, it would be important to note that Zacchaeus was a Hebrew man living in Jericho at the time of Roman rule in the area. Jericho is on the way to Jerusalem from the Galilee, where Jesus had spent several years of his ministry. It's noted for being the oldest city; the longest-inhabited city on the earth.

In Hebrew, the name "Zacchaeus" means "clean" or "pure." Zacchaeus, however, is nowhere near a good representation of what his name means. While he may be known in Jericho for his wealth, his reputation is not a good one. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. His career, which earned him a great deal of money, also made him a traitor to his own people. His job was to collect taxes for the Roman government.

Before we all start making jokes about the IRS or our local treasurer's offices, the tax collectors like Zacchaeus in this time were often Hebrews who had turned on their own people to collect taxes for a government in which they had no representation and an empire of which they were guaranteed no rights as citizens. To earn income as a tax collector, you had to assess an amount over and above what the government wanted you to collect. Zacchaeus had become wealthy, indeed, but only by taxing people and collecting more than what the government required. It's how he kept his job and made a living at the same time. If he failed to collect an appropriate amount, he would be in trouble with the empire. On the other hand, if he collected too much, there was no problem except that his own people despised him. He could use whatever enforcement was necessary to collect the amount due. It was a great racket that paid off for his own family.

Yet as a tax collector and a traitor to his own people, Zacchaeus was the lowest scum of the earth. He was neither a Hebrew in the eyes of his own people nor a citizen of the Roman empire, even though he was a civil servant.

While Jesus is walking through Jericho, Zacchaeus climbs up into a sycamore tree to get a better look at Jesus, the guy who had just healed a blind beggar in Jericho in the preceding verses of Luke's gospel. When Jesus passes by the tree, he calls out to Zacchaeus to come down because Jesus plans to go to his house that day.

Everyone who is standing around recognizes what a crazy idea this is for Jesus to visit with this man. If Jesus really is a man of God, then he should have nothing to do with Zacchaeus. Instantly, the people begin to grumble, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."¹ Zacchaeus, the guy who earned his wealth through a great racketeering job he held with an invasive empire, is definitely not a man of faith in the eyes of his own people. He's simply identified as a "sinner." By associating with Zacchaeus, Jesus risks his own reputation among the people. No faithful Israelite would dare to enter the house of this filthy turncoat.

In the one of the early scenes in *The Greatest Showman*, we get a good look into PT Barnum's life as a young child. Before I go further, I should probably add a disclaimer that whenever I refer to Barnum in this sermon, I'm referring to how the movie portrayed him to be. It is a movie and may not be factually accurate to the historical PT Barnum, whose actions may have exploited some as he worked to earn a profit.

In the movie, however, the young Barnum is the son of a tailor who goes with his dad on a visit to the home of a rich man who has hired Barnum's father. While his father is taking measurements of the rich man, the rich man's daughter, Charity, is taking lessons in another room. Barnum causes her to laugh and her father becomes enraged at her lack of concentration. When the young Barnum confesses that he was the cause of her outburst, the rich man thanks him for his honesty and slaps him across the face.

It's clear from the beginning that PT Barnum will never measure up in this man's eyes. He's a filthy son of a tailor who is beneath his daughter's lot in life. Not too far into the movie, Barnum ends up married to the young Charity, much to the disdain of her parents. For them, he will never amount to anything and they guarantee that she'll eventually come running back home to them.

As I watched the movie, I wondered if it was Barnum's own sense of being the outcast in the eyes of his in-laws that made him all the more determined to dream of a world where all might be welcomed.

When Barnum puts this show together, he gathers outcasts and others from his day that have nowhere else to go. He seeks out those who are hidden by their parents because their conditions were an embarrassment to their families. At one point, as he works to convince General Tom Thumb, who was born with a form of dwarfism, to join him, Barnum says, "Everyone is special and nobody is like anyone else. That's the point of my show."

Whenever a group of thugs tries to harm the outcasts or pick on them, they find strength in this community that Barnum has built where all of them are accepted and valued. While there may have been a great deal of exploitation with the real PT Barnum, in the movie it appears as if Barnum is simply trying to create an experience where audiences are encouraged to smile and performers find their place to belong in a world that can be cruel to those who are outcasts. In Barnum's show, his cast finds community and family in the circus.

There were plenty of outcasts in Jesus' day, as well. Some were outcast because of physical disabilities or deformities. Others were shunned because of physical or mental illnesses. Widows and orphans were outcasts when they had no family to claim them. Still others were outcast because of where life's journey had taken them. This was certainly the case of Zacchaeus, who never fully belonged as a part of the Roman empire or among his own people because of his profession.

That day in Jericho, however, Jesus looked up in the tree and spotting Zacchaeus, he called out to the outcast. It was as if, in that moment, his life was changed by Jesus' visit to Jericho. When none of his kinsmen acknowledged his presence, Jesus decided that he'd come to visit his home. When everyone else thought he was unworthy, Jesus brought joy to his life. Luke tells us that "Zacchaeus was happy to welcome [Jesus]."²

That visit changed Zacchaeus' life. When he encountered Jesus' acceptance in spite of his own brokenness, Zacchaeus offered half of his possessions to the poor and decided to make things right again with anyone he had defrauded. And Jesus declared that salvation had come to his home. In fact, Jesus reminded Zacchaeus and everyone around that Zacchaeus was indeed a child of Abraham. For those around, the outcast was welcomed home.

In the trailer that you saw for *The Greatest Showman*, Lettie Lutz, the bearded lady, sings a powerful song entitled "This Is Me." As she sings, she realizes the healing that she receives as she realizes the sacredness in her own brokenness. Hear those words again:

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

It's clear from Lettie's song that part of Barnum's work was to provide a place for those whose lives were once hidden because of the shame that others felt. When they belonged nowhere else, Barnum's circus provided a place where their brokenness became empowering. It was the show that moved Lettie and the others to feel as if they finally had a place in this world. Barnum welcomed the outcasts and made room for them when he accepted them as they were. Their scars became their strength.

This was not without problems for Barnum. Whether it was the banks who didn't want to loan him money or street thugs who sought to do harm to him or the performers because they were outcasts, Barnum risked becoming an outcast himself the more that he associated with them in his show.

Jesus wasn't afraid of the outcasts. Like Barnum, he risked being the outcast by associating with them. Yet Jesus comes to visit Zacchaeus' home, and his world is turned upside down. Jesus risked his reputation to bring life to the outcasts of his day.

Many of you may know that I had the opportunity to participate in a cross-cultural experience for professionals by travelling to India for five weeks in 2006. I joined with people in education, medicine and law as we encountered those who worked in each of our professions. For five weeks, we shared presentations throughout southern India about our work experiences here in the United States to a variety of different groups of people. Every now and then I would notice someone watching from the outside or from the back of the room. For some reason, there weren't a part of the "invited crowd" who had come to hear us.

I'll never forget a young man by the name of Thomas, who sat at the back of our gathering one day for our presentation. Thomas wasn't able to understand much English. What he had learned, however, was that I was a pastor, or a priest in his mind. At the end of the presentation, as everyone seemed to be leaving, Thomas came up with another person who could introduce him to me. I could tell from his appearance and how others responded to him in the room that Thomas was not one of the originally invited guests. He was a part of a small group of people who were there to help out with the day.

As he came up to me with a smile on his face, he said in broken English, "American father. American father. A blessing, please." At the end of all the connections that I had made that evening, young Thomas came up seeking a blessing from this pastor from America. I reached out my hand and, making the sign of the cross on his forehead, I offered Thomas a blessing and

prayed for him. When I left, however, I wondered if this American father had been given the greater blessing to welcome a child of God who was not necessarily part of the invited crowd that day.

Perhaps the apostle Paul captured the sense of Jesus' extensive welcome when Paul wrote to the members of the church in Galatia. His words sound like a hope or a dream for who God may be calling them and us to be. He writes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."³

Jesus not only calls out to the outcast, but goes to his home. With Jesus, all are welcomed. With Jesus, all are invited. With Jesus, even the outcast is no longer an outcast. With Jesus, brokenness does not mean cast off, but glorious, beloved, child of God.

Perhaps the lyrics of a song entitled *Welcome* by Laurie Zelman and Mark Miller envision God's dream for us best. They write, "Let's dream together of the day when earth and heaven are one, a city built of love and light, the new Jerusalem, where our mourning turns to dancing, every creature lifts its voice, crying welcome, welcome to this place. You're invited to come and know God's grace. All are welcome the love of God to share, 'cause all of us are welcome here; all are welcome in this place."⁴

¹ Luke 19:7, NRSV.

² Luke 19:6, NRSV.

³ Galatians 3:28-29, NRSV.

⁴ Zelman, Laurie and Mark A. Miller, composer. *Welcome*. Nashville: Abingdon P, 2007.