

“The Greatest Showman”

Theme: The Gospel in Film

Sermon Scripture: Luke 5:12-13, 27-30; 7:34

Family Activity for the Week: Many stories of missionaries are shared in the Bible. Create your own family “missionary” story. Gather your family for a local “missionary” drive. Before you leave, select a few places you would like to stop and share God’s love in some way. Would you like to take treats to firefighters or police officers and thank them for their service? How about praying for local store owners as you shop? Could you offer to do some yard work for a neighbor? Maybe you could visit those in the nursing home or a lonely neighbor. You might also want to walk through your neighborhood praying for your school and places of worship. Pray and ask God to help your family be missionaries, sharing God’s love wherever you go.

Monday, August 1 – Read Luke 8:1-3, 1 Corinthians 15:3-11. In, “*The Greatest Showman*,” we 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.”

- In a related passage (cf. 1 Timothy 1:12-16), Paul said, “Our Lord’s favor poured all over me along with the faithfulness and love that are in Christ Jesus,” and emphasized that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” In what ways is God’s eagerness to welcome you into heaven’s “circus” a source of comfort and confidence to you? Are there times when it challenges you in your reaction to other “sinners”?
- 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, August 2 – Read Mark 3:22, Acts 17:26-28. 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.

- Paul quoted a line from an Athenian poet named Aratus in verse 28, “We are his offspring.” Today many believe that “science” means we are simply a cosmic accident, no one’s offspring (though many highly qualified scientists believe in God as much as Paul did). How does it shift your outlook on other people to see them as God’s “offspring” rather than as results of a random accident?
- Paul also told the Athenians, “God isn’t far away from any of us.” Some Greek philosophers believed that the gods were very far away from human beings and were indifferent to what happened to us. Do you find inner resonance 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 could call your life and ministry, “a celebration of humanity.” Help me move beyond cynicism and mistrust, and learn with you to celebrate this vast, diverse human family I belong to. Amen.*

Wednesday, August 3 – Read Mark 1:16-20. 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 typically gave the story an urgent feeling, using phrases like, “right away,” or, “at that very moment.”

- 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? There are many good ways to serve Jesus today, not just church employment. What has gotten lost so that too many people see church work as boring, dull or a dead-end?

- As we study Jesus' ministry, we find that he 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 I have a sense that it's a bigger risk to miss your call—so keep my ears and my heart open to you and your calling on my life. Amen.*

Thursday, August 4 – Read Mark 8:31-37. 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. Scholar Craig Evans wrote, "In that time there was no sentimentality attached to Jesus' death, and certainly not to the cross, a horrifying symbol in Roman antiquity." Peter found the idea of Jesus on a cross appalling. But Jesus didn't shrink from using the cross as a positive symbol of the cost of following him.

- "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?
- Peter's effort to deny Jesus' words about suffering and dying fit with the disciples' belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Scholar David Garland wrote, "most Jews... hoped for a Messiah [who] would be a kingly figure who would reign triumphantly as David had." For what reason(s) do you think Jesus found it important to talk to his disciples in advance about his death? Had you been one of them, how easy or hard would it have been for you to accept what he said?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, like Peter, I can have strong ideas about how you should do things, especially when they affect me. Help me to take up my cross by releasing my own ideas in favor of yours. Amen.*

Friday, August 5 - Read 1 Corinthians 1:21-25, Philippians 3:3-9. 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?

- Christian writer Donald Miller writes that a friend once said to him, "There is this part of me that wants to believe.... I feel as though I need to believe.... But it is all so completely stupid." Human wisdom wouldn't invent a God like the God of the Bible. Jesus often reversed the values of our broken world. In what ways has the, "foolishness of God," changed your world and you for the better? We often tell you not to check your brain at the door. It's okay to ask tough questions, and faith runs deeper than a few pious sayings. What are some of the toughest faith questions you've had to face?
- Paul said he came to see all his human credentials like a top-notch rabbinic education, being a famous 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. You also yearn for my heart. When my mind tries to get in the way of my heart, help me to love and serve you even if I can't answer all the questions. Amen.*

Saturday, August 6 – Read Acts 1:4-8. In Acts 1, the risen Jesus was eating with his disciples when they asked, "Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?" Their question showed their imagination still rested on the nation-bound dreams of a conquering earthly king in Jerusalem. Jesus had a vastly larger vision. The Greatest Showman quoted P.T. Barnum as saying, "Men suffer more from imagining too little than too much." 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.

- 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 settle for a small, constrained imagination about what you want to do through me. Make my dreams big, not about myself, but about you. Amen.*