

“Choose Kind”

January 14, 2018

Faith in Film series – *Wonder*

When I saw that the book *Wonder* would become a movie, I knew I wanted to use it in this series. The book was published in February 2012. It didn't take long for it to show up in schools. I came to know the book when Ana was in 5th grade right after we moved to Muskegon. In just two years, *Wonder* was a read-aloud for many teachers, including Ana's class.

I read it myself and wept at the end. That doesn't happen often for me with a book, but the story moved me deeply. It touches on overcoming obstacles. We can relate to it if we've ever felt “different” or out of place. But it also pushes us to examine ourselves.

I thought of my own experiences with a neighbor named Dylan who was born with physical differences, a classmate who struggled with mental health issues, and countless others. I wondered if I had done enough to be kind. I thought of many of you and your family members who might relate to this story even more closely than I do. Whether the differences are physical or something else, this story challenges us.

Stories and movies can touch our own humanity in profound ways. Josh Larsen put into words why we do this “faith in film” series, and I invite you to see this short video: **SHOW “Movies are Prayers”**

Did you hear that? Prayer isn't confined to the walls of places of worship. In film, we encounter confession, yearning, lament, and celebration - all a part of our human experience. “Movies are our way of telling God what we think about this world and our place in it.”

Wonder tells a story of Auggie Pullman, a boy born with a severe cranio-facial difference who enters a new school in 5th grade after being homeschooled prior to that. Auggie struggles to find his way among his classmates - some of whom are bullies, and some who genuinely want to be his friend.

What I didn't know was the premise of the story. Author R.J. Palacio wrote *Wonder* after a defining experience with her two sons. They were in front of an ice cream store in close proximity to a child with a severe facial difference. Her younger son started to cry because he was scared, and they left quickly because Palacio was nervous that her son's tears would hurt the child's feelings.

“I realized afterward that I had handled the situation terribly,” she said. “What I wished I had done was to turn that encounter into a teaching moment for my kids. I wished I had stopped to talk to the child, and shown my own kids there was nothing to

be afraid of. It made me wonder what it must be like for that child, facing a world every day that doesn't know how to face you back.” And so the story of Auggie Pullman came to be.

Actress Julia Roberts offered to play Auggie’s mom after reading the book to her children. *Wonder* inspired a movement called “Choose Kind.” The story touches the heart, but not just because of the “feel-good” element of a kid coming to accept himself and help others accept themselves along the way. Part of the power of the story is that we get multiple perspectives from the characters, too. The challenge for me was to recognize that there’s work to do, and even if *Wonder* gives us a good cry, it also makes us think about who we are and how we treat each other.

And the message resonates with Scripture. We started with Psalm 139 - a beloved reminder that God created us and knows us intimately. *Wonder* encourages us to consider who we are - not just on the surface, but who we really are. And when we look at ourselves as someone whom God created, knows, and loves, then maybe we can see one another that way, too.

Because this book is so popular in schools, I asked Grace and Hope, two of the 4th graders in the classroom where I serve at Ross Park, to share their thoughts about *Wonder*. They both talked about bullying and the consequences of our actions - how unkindness (and these are their words) “chips away” at Auggie and “chips away” at those who are unkind to him. A powerful image - that unkindness “chips away” at us and at those whom we hurt. It breaks us down and makes us feel less than who we really are.

Grace added: “You have the choice whether to be kind or not. And I’ll tell you right now that kindness turns out a lot better.” Hope talked about not giving up on people, and both of them said that the story shows how we don’t know what’s going on in someone else’s life or in their home. That’s not an excuse for bad behavior, but an observation and a way that we feel empathy for Auggie and the others.

Kindness is not a new concept; it’s a theme throughout Scripture. We hear it in the prophets: “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” We hear it in the letters written to the early church. Kindness is a part of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. And we hear it in Ephesians as Paul instructs early Christians on how to follow God and live with each other. The Greek word for kindness is *chrestotes*, and it means goodness, excellence, tenderness and uprightness. One note about kindness here – it’s a quality that makes others feel at ease with you.

That’s not the first thing that comes to my mind when I think of kindness. I think of doing something nice for someone, but isn’t it interesting that kindness has

something to do with another's comfort and ease? It's more of a quality connected to who we are and how we are - how we behave - rather than simply what we do.

It's notable to look at how Paul reflects on kindness. His words to the Ephesians remind us that it's not simply being kind and compassionate, but also putting away bitterness, hatred, anger, and the like. There's a part about forgiving one another, too. As if kindness and compassion aren't a challenge in themselves, the other pieces are a challenge, too.

We say "Treat others how you want to be treated," and certainly there's value in that. Kindness is important to people. In surveys about traits that we look for in potential spouses or traits that we want to see in people's character, kindness is near the top. And yet, we know that even though we want people to be kind to us, we're not always kind to others.

William Barclay takes this idea of kindness a step further: "Christian kindness means treating others in the way in which God has treated us." That's a challenge for us as we interact with the whole world - a world that God loves, a world where no place or person is outside of God's care and concern, a world where we're called by God to choose kind every day.

Palacio says Auggie "can't change the way he looks, so he could either choose to hide from people his whole life, or face them directly, head on, and hope for the best. That's all any of us can do with what we've got, right? Whatever we look like, whatever we have, we just need to accept it and move on. And hope the world is kind." I resonated with Auggie's mom who offered a prayer as he walked into the school: "Dear God, please let them be nice to him."

And yet, we know the world isn't kind, but we can be. This idea of choosing kind means that it's not a given. Kindness is learned, and we have to teach it. It starts early, but it's not something that's taught quickly. Whatever influence we have, we have to use it. We have to show real care and concern for others. We have to show compassion.

We have to believe that kindness really does matter. Palacio says that kids have the choice: "whether to be noticed for being kind or for being mean. They get to choose who they want to be in this world." We have the choice, too. The big question is: Do we show the kindness of God to the world? Do we stand against whatever doesn't show the loving-kindness of God? This week, there's been a lot of discussion about how words matter and how actions matter, especially when we have power as leaders. I hope we hear that both words and actions do matter – and so does kindness.

I received a special rock a long time ago. It was a hands-on item from a small UMC in Bergland, Michigan – way up at the west end of the U.P. I've kept it in my office

since then, and the message is faded, but not less powerful: “Kindness begins with me.” I’m sure now that kindness begins with God, but the saying is true – that you and I are called to show God’s loving-kindness just as we’ve received it.

May God help us choose kind. AMEN.

When given the choice between being right and being kind, choose kind.

(Dr. Wayne W. Dyer)

Kind words do not cost much. Yet they accomplish much.

(Blaise Pascal)

A sensitive answer turns back wrath, but an offensive word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1)

#choosekind #wonder #faithinfilm

Adapted from a prayer written by Ciona D. Rouse

My Prayer is simple,

May we choose kindness, Lord

May we choose kindness when faced with retaliation

Kindness when tempted by deception

Kindness when addressing poverty

Kindness when speaking to our neighbors

Kindness when lured by bad choices

Kindness when electing leaders

In all things we do, in all the words we say,

and in all the places we go,

May we choose kindness.

Amen