

“Hoping for Hope”

March 3, 2019

Faith in Film series – Transfiguration Sunday – *I Can Only Imagine* - Sunday after GC

When I looked back at the planning notes for this series – and this message in particular - I had written this as a synopsis: *God is in the business of reconciliation - bringing people together and leading us back to the truth of God’s love for us. We bank on hope - that God can and will work through the toughest situations we face and even provide us glimpses of God’s grace in our struggles.*

That sounded good when I was planning for this series - and for the film - *I Can Only Imagine*. It sounded great for this true story of Bart Millard and his dad, Arthur, and the power of God’s forgiveness in our lives. It helped when I was thinking about the song by MercyMe that has become the most popular Christian single of all time - 200 million copies sold, triple platinum, a cross over to other genres, and a song that has touched hearts. It made sense when I was talking about the transformation that God works in our hearts - sometimes so visible and surprising - and sometimes more subtle - but always a powerful witness to God whose grace truly is amazing.

But I’ll confess that it’s been difficult to muster thoughts of hope, so this title is truly where I am - hoping for hope. It’s been a difficult week in our larger United Methodist Church. You may have seen it on the news. A special session of General Conference gathered to discuss issues around human sexuality - specifically full inclusion (marriage and ordination) for LGBT persons. The decision that came at the end of the conference was to retain current language in our Book of Discipline and add more stringent punishment for anyone who would choose to act against it.

Though there are still questions around implementation of these decisions, for many, there is grief. For me, it’s grief because I think about faithful people in every congregation and their families - in my own family - who have experienced discrimination because of their sexual orientation and sometimes felt unwelcome in the church. I’m concerned about our larger mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

To reach people with the love of Christ means that we welcome all people with love first. I’m concerned that LGBT persons will feel excluded, unwelcome, and not able to serve Christ with the gifts they have because of this decision. My grief pales in comparison to those who are experiencing feelings of pain and rejection and families who are struggling. And I pray for a certainty of God’s love for anyone who may ever doubt it. To everyone here, gay or straight, you are God’s beloved.

Jeff's message last Sunday reminded me that the Kingdom of God continues in spite of the decisions made in a St. Louis arena. That doesn't mean that there isn't deep pain - because there is - and the effects are real. It doesn't mean that we simply "move on" and ignore the pain because we can't. People are hurting, and we must acknowledge the pain many are feeling and the harm done. We can offer our own lament to God.

We also must acknowledge that we don't all agree on these issues. We have different interpretations of Scripture that inform our opinions even as we seek to be faithful to God. We have different understandings of human sexuality and what Scripture says related to it. Those conversations are important, and I want to invite you to talk to me and to each other. Let's be gentle and gracious with each other.

And yet, the Kingdom of God comes, and we're called to participate. Pastors and leaders have been in conversation - not always agreeing, but seeking to understand each other and be in ministry together. I was grateful for a time to talk to a colleague who holds a different view than me. It was important and heartfelt conversation.

And here, the Kingdom of God comes, and we're called to action. Kids need shoes, and they got them. People went to read at Ross Park, and worship of God was planned and prepared. Folks gathered to pray for each other and our church in our sanctuary. Our Ad Council still met to talk about mission and vision. I've had many conversations this week about how we move forward and how we respond. I want you to hear my call and commitment to welcome all people into the Body of Christ. The ministry of our local church matters. And as a friend of mine reminded me - our words matter, but our actions matter more.

So I'm hoping for hope, and I'm hearing Paul say, "For Christ's love compels us..." This letter is Paul's effort to save his reputation among Christians in Corinth and convince the people that that his ministry is legitimate - that he's the real deal among other voices. His motives are pure - to share his story and urge others to be in relationship with God and live as God's people. He's asking the Corinthians to trust him, but even more, to trust in God's movement in the world through Jesus Christ.

Remember this is Paul whose story is a transformation example. He was the one who had hunted Christians and was knocked down on the road. And so it's no wonder that we're told in Acts 9 - **SHOW SLIDE**

²¹All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?"²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

God takes the first step to love us, and accepting God's love in Christ brings us into right relationship with God. Trusting that relationship and living in that relationship means that we express our faith in love. Jesus' death was for everyone, so everyone can respond to God and receive the gift of new life – everyone!

And so Paul's looking at things from a resurrection perspective, and that's changed his view of everything! The standards we have for each other don't work in God's kingdom. People have value because Christ has died for them – whoever they are, however they are, whether they've responded to God or not. God treasures them - period. People don't need to prove they are worthy to us. God loves them, and Jesus died for them.

Paul reminds us that We-who-are-loved love others. It's not an option; it's not up for debate or discussion. We are ambassadors for Jesus Christ – the way in which Jesus is made real to others. How do we make it real in worship, fellowship, study, prayer, everyday encounters?

Those who seek to follow Jesus Christ are called to be reconcilers. I've thought of people who need to hear a word of reconciliation - a word of love and hope about the love of Jesus. God calls us to be reconcilers. We need to make a move, and we need to know that we can't do that work on our own. We need God's help through the Holy Spirit.

That's an inspiring part of the film - that God can bring hope in our pain. That pain must be acknowledged, though. Many of us face broken relationships, and there are some now who may feel like their relationship to the church is fractured or even broken.

God's grace came alive in Arthur when he accepted it for himself. God's grace came through Bart's willingness to open his heart to God - even the pain. The words *Can Only Imagine* share the honest questions that we have about heaven - and what it will be like. That's a powerful witness to our faith, and music is an anchor for us. **SHOW SLIDE:** Music is what feelings sound like.

Henri Nouwen, says this: "A Christian community is a healing community, not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision." I pray for that we can offer our honest prayers. I pray for healing and community for us and for all who are desperately seeking it today.

And so we come to the table on this Sunday before Lent begins this Wednesday when we will receive a cross of ashes to remind us of our need for reconciliation and transformation. This is a holy time. It's more than just receiving a simple meal. We come to the table just as we are – all of us beloved by God.

It's a reminder of the power of God to reconcile us to himself and make us new by the power of his grace poured out. We come with pain – I know I do. We bring it here in honest prayer to God and with each other.

Friends, I'm still hoping for hope. And in the midst of this week and thinking about this film, I kept asking myself, "What's the Good News?" The hope I have doesn't come from me or a General Conference decision. The Good News I know is that God is a Reconciling God who offers us grace for healing and gives us the ministry of reconciliation.

"For Christ's love compels us..." Right now, Christ's love compels me to bring life where there is death. Christ's love compels me to offer connection and community where there is estrangement. God is leading us. We love and serve Jesus Christ who came that we could be reconciled to God. May we reflect the love of God that lives in us, the generosity of God that offers us new life, and the grace of God that has been there all the time.

We come to the table of grace. The song says it well: "This is God's table; it's not yours or mine." We come just as we are: hurting, joyful, hopeful, or despairing – all of us desiring a sense of God's grace and a reminder that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus.

Let us pray...

SILENT PRAYER OF CONFESSION