

“What God Sees”

January 29, 2017

Faith in Film series – Hidden Figures

I saw a trailer *Hidden Figures* last summer. I knew I wanted to see the film, and I knew that it would be important to me. And it was, but not for the reasons I anticipated. I was ready for a good story and good acting, and I wasn't disappointed. I was prepared to celebrate a victory for women in a time not that long ago, and I certainly did as I watched.

Hidden Figures carries a powerful message of perseverance, resilience, and solidarity in the face of hardship. Some of our young women saw this film as a part of confirmation. As they consider what it means to confirm their faith in Jesus, the women portrayed offered a lesson in following God's call on their lives, claiming their identity, seeking justice for themselves, and encouraging each other.

Can you even imagine the strength and faith it requires to keep going even when everything looks like it's against you, even when you're tired, even when you're powerless amid structures and systems? There was a scene in the church and a call out to praise God for changing times, but their faith and strength was incredible.

I loved this film, but I'll confess that the message to me was to own my own prejudices and racism – maybe not even known to me, but certainly real. They're not even conscious, but the film reminded me of something I already knew - that racism still exists. We see it every day - sometimes very visibly - but many times not so much.

The issues around separate bathrooms based on race comes to a head in the film, and finally one of the supervisors tears down the bathroom sign after a moment when Katherine Johnson expresses her feelings and confronts the blatant racism she experiences.

There was another poignant scene after bathrooms are unsegregated where Vivian, a Caucasian woman who oversees the department where a group of African-American women work, says to Dorothy Vaughn, “Despite what you think, I don't have anything against y'all.” It's a powerful moment where I realized again that we live with a dissonance where we perpetuate racism while decrying it.

I felt ashamed for the ways that I've probably said something similar or thought it anyway. I don't believe I harbor racism in my heart, and yet I was jarred and convicted because Dorothy responded to Vivian with this truth: “I know *you* probably believe that.” We believe that we're not a part of it, but we are simply by the way we're a part of systems of structures.

Janelle Monae, who plays engineer Mary Jackson says, “There’s a lot that happened even in the 1960s, half a century ago. Some of those things are still happening. Women are still underpaid because of their gender. There’s still sexism, there’s still racism. So I hope we’re continuing to have the necessary conversations with each other to make the changes - and not just talk about it, but show it through our actions, show it through how we’re hiring, show it through inclusion. I think that’s going to be important as the world is changing.” Monae adds that the change will happen through education. “I hope 50 years from now we’re doing more listening and less talking.”

There’s a call to talk less, to listen more, and to truly invite people to share their experiences of discrimination - and to hear them. We may not be able to understand it, but we can affirm that the experience is real and work to advocate for all people to have equal rights. The film started an important conversation for Ana and me about how we stand up and support one another in the midst of discrimination. I know we say it, but does it really happen?

I know what we lift up in the church. We talk about being one body in Christ where “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female.” I know about Peter’s sermon after Pentecost when he lifts up that Jesus came for Jew and Gentile. I know about Paul’s conversion experience from persecuting Christians to being a faithful follower of Jesus.

I’ve experienced sexism in the church. I can talk about that. I know it’s real. But I have no idea know what it feels like to experience judgment and prejudice based on the color of my skin. I don’t know what it means to face hateful language because I don’t speak English or because of my sexual orientation. I don’t understand what it’s like to be targeted because of the head covering I choose to wear. I can’t imagine being a refugee - leaving a country where I grew up because it’s unsafe for me and my children. I haven’t experienced the depth of struggle that those who live in poverty do.

But I’ll confess that I’ve made judgments against people because of their outward appearance or their life situation. That’s not a major revelation; that’s just honesty. I hold biases that don’t allow me to see people as God sees them. I need to listen more and talk less. I don’t have the solutions, except to open myself to God’s call to see as God sees. So, the story of David’s anointing made sense.

It’s a wake-up call that God doesn’t see people or situations like we do in our humanness. Even though we may not share the experience, we must be willing to see people as fellow human beings. Try as we might, we struggle to look at others’ hearts instead of making judgments about what we see on the outside. Try as we might, we

struggle to understand that God's view of us is based on who we are – beloved children of God – each of us known, claimed, and loved by God.

David is an underdog who becomes a great, and it has everything to do with God's working in his life. This is David's debut in Scripture. Go back and read early chapters of I Samuel to learn about Samuel, the prophet, and Saul, Israel's first king. The gist of the story is that Israel struggled to be faithful to God. Their focus became foggy. They had been a theocracy—meaning they were ruled by God as King.

But Israel looked at its neighbors who had kings and thought it would be a better way to live. So, God told Samuel to comply and appoint Saul as king. The king was God's representative to the people. Now Israel was a monarchy. And Saul was a good king who followed God's direction—for a while. But, eventually, when he didn't follow God, God told Samuel to anoint a new king. That's where David comes in.

So the scene is set. God tells Samuel to move on now that Saul will be replaced. Even though God speaks with authority (“I have provided a king; I will show you what to do”), Samuel is quick to question God because he fears for his life. He's up against not just one person, but a community in turmoil. He goes to Bethlehem – a small village – to find Jesse and his sons.

Samuel is sure he knows what God will do and whom God wants as king. He's looking at Jesse's sons, but he's not really seeing. His vision is clouded by his reliance on appearance. We live with that same clouded vision. Our world doesn't prize an honest look at people. Image is everything. But God isn't impressed with appearances, whether it's wealth, family or social connections or power or anything else.

One of the main lessons we want our children to know is that we don't judge people by what they look like, but by who they really are. God knows our hearts and wants us to grow in looking at one another's character. Anyone who's had a surgery to improve their vision says how much clearer everything is. It's a whole new way of seeing! And God sees in a clearer way than we do. God's view of us is much deeper than we can imagine—straight to the heart. Straight to our true character.

Samuel's focus is on physical strength and appearance – nothing else. He sees the eldest son and is ready to pour on the oil. So, take heart: God's plans are even unclear to God's prophet! David isn't what Samuel expected. He isn't the obvious choice. I imagine a lineup of all of Jesse's sons waiting for David to come from the field. He's the youngest of the bunch, and Israel's hope and future rest in his hands. He's the unexpected choice through which God's grace will move.

What a word to hear today! God's view and God's working go against our expectations. And like Samuel, we have to be attentive to God's voice and respond to God's voice. We don't hear a word from David. All we know is that Samuel anoints him

with oil in front of his family. And the Spirit fills him to do the work God appointed him to do.

We're not sure how old David is, probably in his late teens - certainly not the next king that people expected. We bank on appearances without seeing more. And we don't allow for God's view – that God is molding us and shaping us into servants. This is how one writer says it: *“Looks aren't everything. Don't be impressed with looks and stature. God judges persons differently than humans do. Men and women look at the face; God looks into the heart.”*

In the film, NASA was looking for a wider view in the space race, and their leaders had to get past what they thought they needed and who they thought could provide it. These women used their gifts to help others. They helped others see that we can lift one another up without anyone being let down.

Nelson Mandela said, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

Friends, we're made to love. And we worship and serve Jesus our Savior whose new command to his followers was “love one another.” But he didn't stop there. He said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” We're made to love.

It's easy to say that we have to try harder to see as God sees, but it's true - to see ourselves and all those with whom we share this world as beloved children of God our Creator. May we accept each other as God accepts us.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.