

This is the Greatest Show, and it's Right Here in Front of You

It was Sunday, January 6, 2019.

The Chicago Bears trail the Philadelphia Eagles by 15 – 16 with 10 seconds left in the game. Codey Parkey takes to the field. All he has to do is kick it through the goal a mere 43 yards away. It hits the uprights once, it hits the uprights twice, and bounces clear away. Stunned silence led to boos. The game, and the season were over.

Interviewed later, the kicker said, “You can’t make this up. I feel terrible. I let the team down.”

Can you imagine what it must feel like to be that kicker? All you have to do is the kick the ball straight through. Something a professional kicker has done hundreds, if not thousands of times.

Can you image what it must have felt like to be the rest of the team?

Our Scripture this morning speaks to this dynamic. The body of Christ is like parts of a physical body. Each one has its place, its role. We saw this in the movie *Greatest Showman*, where people in all shapes and sizes work together in the circus.

Our film selected for today touches on some familiar issues. Living your dream with confidence. Valuing diversity and bringing people from different backgrounds together. Focusing on the importance of family. This morning I’d like to use this as a jumping off point rather than a landing by asking the question? Why?

We can probably agree that we should value others, from different backgrounds and even beliefs. We can probably clearly see that we should also value ourselves and our own contributions. A burning question I have for all of us this morning then is this: why is it so hard? And what then can we do about it?

Warning: we might be talking politics today.

But before that, let’s talk about the circus a bit more. In the film, PT Barnum goes from penniless orphan to successful entrepreneur. He has a vision of what the world could be, and works hard at being a part of making that happen. He has a dream, and he invites all kinds of different people along the way to join him. In the same way, God has a dream. God has a dream for this world and how to make it better. And God is inviting each of us to join in that good work in ways big and small.

We are invited to join God in his redemptive work each and every day, wherever and with whomever we find ourselves.

Like Antonia Bundy.

She was pulling a slow shift as an 911 dispatcher in Indiana when the call came in. She focused intently to make out the quiet voice on the line. It was a child. “Hi, um, can you hear me? I had a really bad day.”

Antonia was trained to calmly talk to callers during emergency situations such as fires, robberies and shootings so that she can send them help.

“What happened at school that made you have a bad day?” she asked, to get exact information about the nature of his emergency.

“Fractions.”

He was calling for help with his homework.

“Is there a problem you want me to help you with?” As it turns out, math was Antonia’s favorite subject when she was in school. She calmly walked him through one of his problems. Crisis abated.

We can be part of God’s dream of making this world better no matter what we do, where we go, who we know. Whether we’re a foot, and hand or an eye. Whether we’re a bearded lady, a giant or a trapeze artist. There is a you shaped place in God’s Kingdom, a you shaped role in this, His Greatest Show.

When we follow Christ’s example and his teachings, we are by definition invited into a new life that not only accepts but values diversity. And not simply diversity of ethnicity, family background or outward appearance. But also diversity of thought and belief. We can agree to agree. We can agree to disagree. We can take time apart. We can force ourselves into fellowship even when we are not comfortable.

I don’t know what this weekend will bring for us United Methodists. I don’t know what this weekend will bring for us Christians. But I do know this, God’s Kingdom will continue. And I don’t know about you, but I’m going to join him in that.

Being a part of the body of Christ mean valuing each other, and valuing ourselves. It means knowing our strengths, and recognizing our limits. That second part isn’t as popular.

PT Barnum starts out as an little orphan with a big dream. He works on the railroad to get his start and then goes from museum curator to showman. His “circus” as they deridingly call it, takes off and he achieves his success. He gets the girl, the house, has a family who loves and supports him.

But it’s not enough. As the lone singer on the stage laments, it’s never enough. The orphan became the showman. And the showman yearned for respect of the social elite and strived to become an opera promoter. When that venture fails, PT realizes that what he lost was what was most precious to begin with. And he realizes that he lost that because he was chasing a dream that was his. Not a dream that was theirs. In his own words “I thought I was bigger than I was.”

Knowing who we are, knowing what part we play in God’s Greatest Show is about knowing what we are, but it is equally about knowing what we are not. Wherever I go in my travels I hear this continually. “Pastor Mary is so wonderful. She is so good at always remembering everyone’s name.”

Ummm. Uhhh. Yeah, I’m that guy who is always the one at coffee hour. “Hi Jeff!” “Hey....you.” And I’ve accepted that. This doesn’t mean I’m giving up putting names with faces. But it does mean I don’t try to be Pastor Mary. We already have a Mary. God doesn’t want another one. God wants a Jeff.

God wants a Tim. I remember visiting Michelle while she was supporting the Cross family in the hospital. I asked her how she was holding up. “Well. Tim is really good at the practical stuff. Taking the boys out somewhere. Going and getting things. He’s, he’s not as comfortable with, you know, this stuff. The emotions. So I’m here.” God wants a Tim. God wants a Michelle.

How then do we achieve this precarious balance? How do we walk the tightrope of valuing each other, despite the differences, and value ourselves, without taking ourselves too seriously?

We focus on being part of something bigger. We remember that we are playing a part in God’s Greatest Show, not asking God to be part of ours.

When we focus on God's dream for the world, and how we can all be part of it, the petty differences go away. And here's the really challenging word for this morning: almost all of the differences are petty.

How can this be? In this world we face really important issues and problems. Human Sexuality. Climate change. The increase in totalitarianism. Population explosion. Disinterest or even distrust in the church. The meaning of denominational identity.

The issues are gigantic, our differences often are not. We have flipped this.

We have made our differences important, and have become fearful and apathetic on the issues. Here's a challenging thought. No need to show hands. How many here today felt uncomfortable or challenged when I said we were going to talk about valuing diversity? How many here today felt uncomfortable or challenged when I said we were going to talk about politics?

I have close friends on opposite ends of most issues facing us today. The more I talk to folks the more I realize that we usually come from very similar value systems. We follow remarkably similar journeys to arrive at conclusions, even if we arrive at seemingly opposite places. Sometimes it is what amounts to a little tweak at the end. Sometimes it is more like buttoning a shirt, where you start at a different place, and no matter how your button, you'll end up different.

Here is a challenge. Think of an issue that is extremely important to you. Gun control. Abortion. Gay ordination. Something like that. Now think of someone who has a view that is opposite of your opinion. Ask this powerful question: why do they think that?

Ok, ok. I am talking about the Wall.

I have close friends who are adamantly for the Wall, because they genuinely and sincerely want to keep the people of this country safe.

I have close friends who are adamantly against the Wall, because they genuinely and sincerely want to keep the people of this country safe.

I have close friends who are vehemently Pro-Life on the abortion issue, because they love Jesus and his people and want to follow his teachings and example.

I have close friends who are vehemently Pro-Choice on the abortion issue, because they love Jesus and his people and want to follow his teachings and example.

I remember having a "spirited conversation" with someone shortly after the last Presidential election. They had voted for (Trump or Clinton) and I of course had voted for (Clinton or Trump). I remember this question coming up. Can you articulate why people voted for (fill in the blank)? Can you answer that question? Because if the only answer we have is that about 50% people are stupid, or elitist, or racist, or privileged or whatever it might be, then we might just want to ask that question again. And listen.

We need to engage and be fearless on the issues. And at the same time be open and loving on people.

I have a friend who has very strong views on young-earth creationism. As do I. We used to get together at a coffee shop to share what we'd learned. The ground rule was this. We should talk to one another in such a way that someone could walk up to the table and know we were friends. We should listen to one another in such a way that anyone could walk up and ask, "So what is his position?" and we'd be able to articulate it.

Our children's children's children will look back on this time we are living and will judge us. The primary question I would hope they ask is the one Jesus said was most important. Did they love one another?

That being said, there will be a right and a wrong on a lot of the huge issues facing us today. There were well meaning Christians who were certain that slavery in the south was Biblically justified.

But in the here and now, the question remains: Did we love each other? Did we assume the best of each other? Did we allow our shared passion for a shared God cover our differences and remind us. We're all part of the same show. Is it any wonder that 1 Corinthians 12 connects directly to chapter 13, the passage so often used in weddings. Our scripture this morning ends with "and yet I will show you the most excellent way." That most excellent way is literally spelled out in God's love. For us. For each other. 1 Corinthians 13 becomes a template for living out 1 Corinthians 12.

When will they learn? Love is patient.

What could I even say? Love is kind.

I wish I knew that! Do not envy.

Look what I know! Do not boast.

Always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere.

We are all part of the same show. We are all playing on the same team.

The crowd was literally booing the disgraced kicker off the field. Throwing trash.

That's when 6-foot-6, 317 pounds of offensive lineman Bobby Massie grabbed him and lifted him up pulling Parkey into a hug. One by one came words of encouragement. no one was leaving him out on an island of anguish.

The team was going to still be the team. The Bears were going to be the Bears.

"keep your head up,"

One of the linemen came by and told him, "Dude, you accounted for half our points ... We could have done more as an offense."

From another,

"That's a teammate,"

And another,

"That's your brother."

I don't know what this week will bring for us. Or this decade. But I do know this. We all have a part to play in this crazy circus that is God's Greatest Show.

And we're all on the same team.