

The Greatest Showman:

## A Glimpse of True Community in P. T. Barnum's Circus

Los Altos United Methodist Church

1 Peter 2:4–10

1.



Welcome back to the second Sunday morning matinee. As pastor Kathi shared before the movie teaser, today's movie is *The Greatest Showman*. I want to express my special thanks to the New Covenant Choir before we begin. Last fall, when our choir performed one of the songs from the movie at one of our Sunday services, it inspired me deeply and motivated me to watch the whole movie. In this movie, there are good songs and other entertainment to enjoy and a meaningful message for us to think of as well. I am so glad and excited that we have this opportunity to look into and discover God's presence and a grace moment that still speaks to us today.

2.



For those who haven't watched this film before, I want to share a brief overview. P. T. Barnum, a visionary man, dreamed up new and innovative ideas in the late nineteenth century for "unique individuals." He opened a new show with human curiosities and such elements as



"oddities" and "extraordinary" and "never-seen-before live acts" on the stage. The critic James Bennett suggested that Barnum rename the show "P. T. Barnum's Circus." P. T. Barnum was a man who embraced human abnormality as part of the diversity and celebration of humanity.

Among the people in his circus were a dwarf, a bearded woman, a man covered in hair, an obese man, and an 8-foot-tall man. These people were marginalized, outcast, and rejected in their real lives by society and even by their families. They were called "freaks" and were forced to be ashamed of their physical differences. But Barnum wanted to celebrate their identities, and he made them stars on the circus stage. He says in the movie, "No one ever made a difference by being like

everyone else.” Our choir sang one of the theme songs of the movie, “This Is Me,” a minute ago. The members of the circus troupe were once afraid, rejected, and outcast, but they now they have the courage to speak out and express from their hearts who they are. I invite you to think about the question, *What was it that changed them and transformed their lives in such a dramatic way?*

3.



To me, the entire movie is about a new image of home and a glimpse of true and authentic community. The circus in this movie is not merely about the circus performers’ show; it is also a metaphor for a new kinship community and a home where every character, including P. T. Barnum and the circus performers, experienced a place of belonging, acceptance of who they were, and a full celebration of their unique identities, regardless of how they had been seen by others. The circus was literally their home. Fredrick Buechner, a theologian and author, writes about home in his book *The Longing for Home*:

Home is a place where you feel you belong and that in some sense belongs to you, a place where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren't going all that well at any given moment . . . perhaps a place inside yourself, that you spend the rest of your life searching for even if you are not aware that you are searching.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier in his life, P. T. Barnum was obsessed with the pursuit of social success and fame due to his poor childhood and shameful childhood memories, and he desperately wanted to be rich and be identified as a member of socially successful, upper-class groups. But he couldn’t find a home where he had a sense of happiness and belonging. At the end of the movie, the circus troupe helped him to have courage and to discover the true sense of belonging in his relationships with his family. Barnum sang this song with his circus troupe together:

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Buechner, *Weekly Sermon Illustration: The Longing for Home*, Frederick Buechner, <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2018/6/11/weekly-sermon-illustration-the-longing-for-home>, accessed July 8, 2019.

And we will come back home  
 And we will come back home  
 Home, again!

The circus troupe also found their home in the circus community. Lettie, one of the members of the troupe, said to Barnum, “Even our mothers are ashamed of us. You, Barnum gave us a real family. . . . And the circus . . . that was our home.”

In our spiritual language, the church is our spiritual metaphor for home, and our ultimate home is God, a larger self where our restless heart can find rest, acceptance, and a place for belonging and celebration of our identities.

4.



The circus was not merely a home and a sacred place where the circus troupe and P. T. Barnum could glimpse true and authentic community; it was also a moment when they experienced life-transforming change in their lives. When they shouted out the song “This Is Me” together, they expressed their authentic voices with their whole hearts. This is exactly the same moment that Jesus dreamed of; he wanted to build a new kingdom of God in the form of a true and authentic community of God among us. This is a new and innovative kinship of community shaped by love.

The circus troupe used to be people who were rejected, ashamed, abandoned, and worthless, but then they found their home and found their true identities not in others’ evaluations and opinions but in their inner hearts. God spoke to them and validated that they were not nobody but somebody, and they were precious and glorious. In their song, they had the courage to claim who they were regardless of how they were seen by others. Let me remind you of some of the words:

I’ve learned to be ashamed of all my scars  
 Run away, they say  
 No one’ll love you as you are

...

I am brave, I am bruised  
 I am who I’m meant to be, this is me

Some of you haven't watched this movie, but you still may be able to feel how they sang from their hearts in a way that moves our hearts. This song has the power to touch our hearts. How is that? What should we call the circus troupe's transformative change and liberation from their bondage? What made it work, do you think? It's the power of vulnerability. Brené Brown, a research professor and expert in vulnerability, reclaims the beauty and true power of vulnerability to liberate us from our internal fear and insecurity once we acknowledge them as part of ourselves. Vulnerability is neither weakness nor psychological unstableness; it is our whole heart and courage and willingness to admit who we are, even that we are imperfect and that we are struggling, wrestling with many challenges and hard things in our lives. But, we can still claim that we are worthy of love and can live up to our own, not others', expectations.

The circus troupe continues to shout out and say, "Hide away, they say / 'Cause we don't want your broken parts / I've learned to be ashamed of *all my scars*." The word 'scars' causes us to think about our own broken parts, wounds, weakness, and vulnerability. The circus troupe's physical differences are a metaphor of our own inner brokenness, self-doubt, and inadequate feelings that we are afraid of. My friends and spiritual siblings, think of your own scars and do not avoid them but claim them as part of yourself and accept them. And open yourself to go deeper to see yourself and celebrate who you are.

5.



In our Christian faith, transformation or conversion is not something we can bring about ourselves because it is not a question of willpower. Henri Nouwen, a twentieth-century Catholic priest and spiritual writer, gives us spiritual advice in his book *The*

*Inner Voice of Love*. He advises, "You must stop seeing yourself through their eyes and trying to make them proud of you . . . let go of all these self-made props and trust that God is enough for you. You must stop being a pleaser and reclaim your identity as a free self. . . . You have to trust the inner voice that shows the way. You *know* the inner voice."<sup>2</sup>

The movie *The Greatest Showman* provokes us to redefine our stereotypes about faith and inspires us to reclaim the purpose of our church's mission. Faith is not an

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<sup>2</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: The Journey through Anguish to Freedom* (New York: Image Book Doubleday, 1998) 5–6.

act in which we find a hiding place and are dependent on God. Rather, it is a spiritual form of vulnerability and the courage to stand before God who embraces our imperfectness. Faith empowers us to be bold, to say that we are not small, afraid, and ashamed of who we are, because we are part of God's glory. By faith and by the grace of God, we admit our limitations and imperfections and claim that we are not nobody; we are somebody, and we are precious children of God.

6.

Today's Scripture reading perfectly reflects Christ's teachings on our identity through the disciple Peter's voice for the Christian community in Asia Minor, which is now known as Turkey. Around 60 A.D., before the death of Nero's Roman Empire, most Christians were nobodies. They were seriously persecuted, isolated, and oppressed by the Roman Empire and by the majority Jewish community. The Apostle Peter sent the church in Asia Minor a letter in which he encouraged them to have a new spiritual identity. He said, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession."

7.

Henri Nouwen, in a lecture entitled "Who Are We? Exploring Our Christian Identity," asks us about our true identity: "Who is this person that lives this little life?" In other words, "Who am I?" He challenges us to respond to two common misunderstandings: "I am what I have" and "I am what other people say about me." If you think you are identified by your education, social status, good appearance, and health, what if you lose these or cannot achieve them? Then, you will feel like a nobody. If you feel good or bad about yourself when you hear what others say about you, your sense of yourself is really dependent on the opinions of others. If so, then you are always insecure and threatened by others' opinions. But, you are not defined what others say about you.<sup>3</sup> Christian faith affirms that you are precious children of God, no matter who you are. All of Christ's teachings remind us of the good news. That news proclaims that *you are somebody*. If any religion or church that you belong to hurts you with sharp words and cuts you down, breaks

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<sup>3</sup> Rachel, "Who Am I? Henri Nouwen and Christian Identity," *Many Horizons: Philosophy, Theology and Hermeneutics*, May 26, 2014, <http://manyhorizons.com/2014/05/26/henri-nouwen-christian-identity/>, accessed July 8, 2019.

you down to dust and makes you ashamed of your brokenness, making you feel that you are nobody, these are lies. You need to find a new religion or church.

8.

Church ought to be a place, a community of God, where everyone is fully accepted as they are with a celebration of joy. Everyone is sacred because of who we are and how God created us in the divine image. There is no exception, so everyone is equal. At the end of the movie, the critic James Bennett says to P. T. Barnum,

Putting folks of all kinds on stage with you, all colors, shapes, sizes, presenting them as equals . . . I never liked your show . . . but another critic might have called it a celebration of humanity.

The movie *The Greatest Showman* challenges us to rethink what church ought to be. If we imagine our Los Altos United Methodist Church as a circus, where are we in this movie? Let us remember that we are not the audience but the actors who are transformed by God's grace. We are glorious, precious children of God because we belong to God. Our show is not limited to this building; we can expand our stories to our broader communities as part of God's story. We are called to be part of God's story, reaching out to those who long for a home where they can experience a full sense of joy and a celebration of who they are. The show must go on, and let our excitement and celebration continue through us and beyond us. Amen.