**At the Movies: Building the Kingdom**

**Mark 10:13-16**

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It’s Fourth of July weekend - our annual celebration of independence and freedom!  Despite Covid-19, it feels like a weekend for fun - trips to the beach, a family barbecue, possibly a few fireworks in the backyard as we remember those who founded our country, fought for freedom from England, and established our Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Yet, this year, our celebrations are happening just as we are also facing a very painful part of our national history. This country we love was largely built on the backs of black and brown-skinned people taken from their homes in Africa and enslaved to work the plantations of our brand new country.  Though slavery was legally abolished long ago, the systemic racism which continues to threaten the lives of African Americans is, in many ways, just another kind of enslavement.

How does it happen that a country can be founded on principles of freedom and the right of each individual to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and, simultaneously, be deeply embroiled in trading human beings as slaves?  How did we manage to both fight for freedom for some and steal away the freedom of others?

The answer lies in our human tendency to dehumanize and objectify whomever we see as “other”, and it is certainly not unique to the history of the United States.  Throughout history, we see examples of one group or nation seeking to control or defeat another by taking away their humanity.  Perhaps the most famous is the Third Reich and its effort to wipe out the entire European Jewish population.  The question is how we, as followers of Christ, respond.  As odd as it sounds, Jesus would say we must become like children.

This is the last week of our sermon series, “Faith at the Movies”, in which we are exploring the theological themes found in recent films.  Today’s movie is “Jojo Rabbit” - the story of a ten-year-old boy who has been fully indoctrinated into the Nazi movement in Germany when he learns that his mother is hiding a Jewish teenage girl in their attic.

I have to be honest and say that for the first thirty minutes or so, I really didn’t like this movie.  The comedy was too raw, almost too satirical about a time in history that still feels like it should be treated with solemnity and sorrow.  But, in the end, I loved it because it leads you on Jojo’s journey from learned fanaticism to love and empathy.

The film opens with Jojo putting on his Hitler Youth uniform as he gets ready to go to a Nazi youth training event.   “Jojo Betzler, 10-years-old, today you become a man,” he says to himself in the mirror and then, “I swear to devote all my energies and my strength to the savior of our country, Adolph Hitler.”  As he utters these words, Hitler himself, or a version of him at least, appears in the room with Jojo.  It turns out that Hitler is not only the savior of the country but also Jojo’s imaginary friend.  To help prepare Jojo for the day ahead, Hitler drills him on how to say “Heil, Hitler” until Jojo bursts out of his home in excitement and runs through the streets crying, “Heil, Hitler”, “Heil, Hitler”.

As the film deftly moves between Jojo’s fanatical chant as he runs and actual news footage of crowds cheering for Hitler, we are quickly pulled into the hysteria of the time - and, honestly, it is very uncomfortable.  Yet, I think our discomfort is the point.

Once he arrives at training, we quickly learn that Jojo is not the tough young soldier he wants to be. He is sensitive, observant, and easily overwhelmed - making him a target for the older bullies.  He does have one friend, Yorki, and after an evening of book-burning, the two lie in their tent discussing the Jews.  “If I met one, I’d kill it like that.”  “But how would you know.  They could look just like us.”  “I would feel its head for horns - plus, they smell like brussel sprouts.”  “Oh, that’s right,” Yorki responds.  “I forgot the brussel sprout bit.”

The next day, Jojo ends up handling a live grenade which explodes when he drops it, damaging his legs and cutting his face and arms.  This makes him ineligible to be a soldier, but he doesn’t lose his obsession with all things Nazi - there are propaganda posters on his bedroom wall and his best friend is still imaginary Hitler. One evening, when his mom is away, he hears strange noises upstairs.  He finds a hidden door in a bedroom wall, and there, deep in the recesses of the attic, he finds Elsa, a Jewish teenager his mother is hiding from the Nazis.

The rest of the story explores how through his friendship with Elsa, Jojo begins to doubt everything he has been taught about Jews and war and the superiority of the Aryan race.  In the beginning, he decides he won’t tell the Gestapo she is there on the condition that she tells him everything about Jews. Why do Jews hang from the ceiling like bats when they sleep?  Where does the queen Jew lay her eggs?  But, by the end, he has fallen in love with her in the innocent way that ten-year-olds do.

The other person who challenges Jojo and his fanaticism is his mother, Rosie.  Through the course of the movie, Jojo realizes that his mother is a member of the resistance.  She hates the war while he glorifies it.  She secretly puts out anti-war flyers on the streets even as he hangs posters supporting the war effort.  But, he loves her and she is full of energy and sparkle.  One day on a bike ride, she tells him how it feels to fall in love.  “Love is the strongest thing in the world,” she says.  “I think you’ll find that metal is the strongest, followed by dynamite and muscles”, he responds.

She tries to tell him he is growing up too fast, that he shouldn’t be glorifying war but climbing trees and falling out of them.  “Life is a gift, Jojo.  We must celebrate it.  We have to dance to show God we are grateful to be alive.”

“Dancing is for people who don’t have a job.”

“Dancing is for people who are free.”

How can he resist her?  Both Elsa and Jojo’s mom teach Jojo to look beyond the indoctrination he has gotten at school, beyond the dehumanization of Jews and the glorification of war, and help him to open up to the power of love.

And I think that is where we find the theological theme in the movie.  What we learn from Jojo Rabbit is that through relationships, our biases can be challenged and, albeit slowly, unlearned.  That we can begin to see others with the innocence and acceptance of a child.  Because that is what happens to Jojo.  Through the conditioning of the Nazi party to prepare him to be a soldier, he lost his childhood, but through the love of his mother and his friendship with Elsa, he gets it back again.

When people brought their children to see Jesus, the disciples tried to send the children away.  But, Jesus said, “No.  Let them stay.  The kingdom of God belongs to them.  In fact, you will not enter the kingdom of God unless you become like them.”

In the kingdom of God, no individual or group is dehumanized or objectified.  All of God’s people are equally welcome, loved, and celebrated.  Children understand this naturally.  As Nelson Mandela put it in his book Long Walk to Freedom, “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.”

How can we, like Jojo, reclaim that natural acceptance and love for others?  We start by checking our own biases.  We all have biases we have been taught.  Perhaps not with the flagrant propaganda of the Third Reich, but by our parents and our teachers, our society and, to some extent, our experiences.  What are yours?  Do you hold more tightly to your purse when you see a young black man dressed in baggy shorts and high tops?  Do you grow impatient with the Indian waiter when you can’t understand his English?  Do you get uncomfortable when you see someone obviously born male wearing a dress?  Do you cross the street when you notice a homeless person with a cardboard sign asking for help?

We have to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves and willing to name and acknowledge that we have been part of a system that oppresses some people and rewards others.  And then we have to seek out relationships - honest relationships and honest communication.  Because it really is only through knowing a person who is African-American or transgender or homeless or an immigrant that we begin to see the fullness of their humanity.

As we open our own hearts and minds, we are called to help others recognize their own biases, to create spaces where honest dialogue can happen, and to be brave enough to model for others what it looks like to be vulnerable and willing to learn.

Finally, God calls us to continually hold out for humanity the hope of the kingdom of God.  With all the hate and distrust and anger we see in our country today, it can be hard to hold onto that hope.  Yet, we are the followers of the prince of peace, the Lord of love, the prophet who could see each person with the acceptance and love of a child.  Jesus cast the vision of the kingdom of God.  It is our calling to help fulfill it.

May it be so. Amen.