

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Jesus and the Real World”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Genesis 1: 26-2:3, Psalm 8, Matthew 28: 16-20

May 18, 2008

A certain person...

 this is the way Jesus usually starts a parable,
 in order to protect the innocent, I suppose.
A certain person I know well,
 strongly recommended...no, insisted,
 that I watch a certain very-well-liked movie.
This person did this on more than one occasion,
 to which I was slow to react,
 until I saw reviews of the said-mentioned movie
 in *The Christian Century* and in *Christianity Today*,
And I thought to myself...hmmm...perhaps I should check this out and
watch it.

 There must be something to it, besides mere entertainment.

Now whenever someone suggests I watch a specific movie
 or read a particular book,
and when he or she suggests it with a sense of urgency,
 several questions usually play around in my mind.
What is this movie or book about, and what does it have to do with me?
How has this movie or book spoken to the person who recommended it?
And, once we've both experienced the same medium,
 how does this common experience alter our relationship, if it does at
all?

Jesus is preparing to share a final common experience with his disciples,
eleven minus one, before he passes off the task of earthly ministry
into their fumbling hands.

It is sometime after Resurrection Day and sometime before Ascension Day,
which slips beyond the horizon of Matthew's Gospel,
and the expectant eleven are gathered in Galilee,
the place where, in the beginning, Jesus uttered the compelling words,
Come, follow me.

And the word became flesh as they left their nets, their boats, their families,
and their familiar sea-side scenario, and started following and doing
the very things that Jesus talked about.

When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor", they blessed the poor,
and God saw that it was good.

When Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors",
they loved and prayed for their enemies and persecutors,
and God saw that it was good.

When Jesus said, "Heal the sick", they healed the sick,
and God saw that it was good.

When Jesus said, "Welcome the children," they welcomed the children,
and God saw that it was good.

Theirs became a ministry of word made flesh in deed.

They did what they said; what Jesus had taught them to say and do,
just as God once created and continues to create by speaking and then doing;
by word made manifest in material reality.

So when Jesus said for them to wait for him in Galilee,
that's what they do.

And they wait for Jesus to meet them there,
back on their old stomping grounds,
where Jesus first began to create new order out of chaos,
by speaking the Kingdom of God into being.

God has a preferential option for beginnings, it seems.

Just when the conclusion seems immanent: the last hooray,
the end of the road, the jumping off point, the last nail,
the final common experience, even death;
God resurrects and recreates in surprising new ways.

This movie that was recommended to me by that afore-mentioned certain
person

is called *Lars and the Real Girl*.

It's a quirky little movie, a parable, really,
set somewhere in the Midwest, where it seems to be perpetually
winter,

and where people named Lars
and people who are Lutherans might reside.

As the parable unfolds,

two brothers have returned to *their* old stomping grounds,
to the childhood home where they were raised rather dysfunctionally
to settle now as adults.

An older brother is married; his wife expecting their first child;
the two of them now occupying the main house.

A younger brother, Lars, is excessively shy and reclusive,
safe only in his narrow, restrictive routine

of coming and going to work and to church,
of keeping obstinately to himself at mealtimes,
and of confining himself in the evenings to his garage apartment,
behind the main house.

It's an upstairs/downstairs kind of set-up, with the couple in the big house
constantly trying to entice the loner out of his little house
to at least eat with them, to at least talk to them.

And of the recluse in the little house, who apparently struggles
with great social anxiety,

trying to confine and maintain the only lifestyle that he can manage:
his own.

The movie is billed as "a wry absurdist comedy,"
but I didn't find it funny, in a ha-ha kind of way,
but instead, warmly revelatory,
in a heart-strangely-warmed kind of way.

The tension in the parable arises when Lars

orders a life-sized anatomically-correct doll for himself over the
Internet,

and introduces her to his family and friends as Bianca,

his new girlfriend, a wheel-chair bound missionary from Brazil.

Oh no, I thought. This is not going to be one of those kind of movies, is it?

But I trusted that a certain person wouldn't lead me down that path.

The older brother, Gus, thinks that Lars is nuts,

but at his wife's insistence, they play along with Lars' delusion.

They both come to realize that Lars has been struggling with deep psychological problems and a lifetime of loneliness stemming from neglect as a child,
and that he has been unable to get emotionally close to anyone, most especially to women.

And so they invite Bianca into their home for conversation, for dinner, and give her a room of her own, because Lars tells them that she is a very religious girl.

At the advice of their local doctor, who explains that Lars is working out deep-seated issues from his past that have held him captive all of his young life,

Lars' brother and his wife go out into his imaginary world, enter into his delusion, and meet him there and love him there, where he is.

When Lars' sister-in-law tries to bathe the slippery silicon Bianca in the tub and wash her hair, I think I was supposed to laugh at that part of the movie;

but I found myself wanting to cry at the generosity of this family's spirit.

And I recalled times when I have done similar silly things with suffering people

just to be with them in that moment:
climbing Pilot Mountain to see the ravens at the top,
binge-eating Boston cream pie in the car,
singing Christmas carols in October,
rearranging furniture at night, or taking watercolor classes.

Funny how we can be cajoled by love into these strange life-affirming dances.

At any rate, as a result of his family's generous spirit and compassion, Lars begins to feel that he is not alone, that they will always be with him, no matter what, and as a result, he starts to engage life and the real world once again.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch priest and writer once said,
"It is far from easy to enter into the painful experience of loneliness.
You like to stay away from it.

Still it is an experience that enters into everyone's life at some point...
You might have felt it when you were homesick in boarding school,
or angry about nonsense rules which you could not change.

You might have felt it as a young adult in a university
where everyone talked about grades
but where a good friend was hard to find..
You might have felt it as a teacher when students did not respond
to your carefully prepared lectures,
or as a preacher when people were dozing
during your well-intentioned sermons....
Loneliness is one of the most universal sources of suffering today....
Children, adolescents, adults and old people are in growing degree
exposed to the contagious disease of loneliness in a world
in which a competitive individualism tries to reconcile itself
with a culture that speaks about togetherness, unity and community
as ideals to strive for.”
(Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*. p. 3-5)

Lars is lonely in his tightly-defined imaginary world,
and his brother and sister-in-law enter that world
to offer him the freedom to find his own way
back into the real world.

The greater beauty of the movie, however, does not find its locus in the
family,
but rather in the community where they live
and in the little Lutheran church there.

The community certainly isn't required to play along with Lars' game.
My other anxiety throughout the film was that someone
would take a pin to Bianca, so to speak,
reveal her for the inanimate hunk of plastic that she really was,
and throw Lars further into psychological disintegration.

It's a mean world in which we live, and part of me
always expects the worst of people, sometimes out of their ignorance,
and at other times out of their pure mean-spiritedness.

But this community chooses not to react that way.

Instead, they react out in love.

The community welcomes the stranger, Bianca, into its collective life,
hiring her as a part-time mannequin at the mall,
styling her hair at the salon, welcoming her in worship,
giving her a make-believe life of her own.

The townspeople becomes holy fools, for Lars' sake;
they lose their real lives, for Lars' sake;
they become all things to all people, for Lars' sake.

Unbeknownst, they follow Jesus, for Lars' sake,
leaving the comfort of their own world, to go out into his world.
Henry Nouwen would say that this little community offers Lars hospitality,
which he defines as friendship and freedom for a guest.
"Hospitality is not to change people," Nouwen says,
"but to offer them space where change can take place.
It is not to bring men and women over to our side,
but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines...
Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host,
but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own."
(Nouwen, p. 49)

Back in Galilee, Jesus meets the odd-numbered eleven there
where they have been anxiously and patiently waited, as told.
And he gives them this eloquent exhortation,
this carefully-crafted commissioning
that will motivate and inspire the church
to great feats of evangelism, mission initiatives,
and church growth throughout its history,
hopefully until Jesus comes again.

It is simple, memorable, and direct:

*Go out into the world and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything
that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you
always, to the end of the age.* (Matthew 28: 19-20)

But I can't help but wonder if the resurrected Jesus
didn't meet those worshipful but wary, doubting disciples
there on that mountaintop, perhaps the same mount
where he spoke about ministry to the dispirited,
to those who have lost a loved one, to the unbearably shy,
to those advocating for the justice for all;
perhaps the same mountaintop where he dazzled them with his
divine brilliance, but also with his holy insistence
on dwelling with and among them in the muckety-muck
of daily coming and going.

I can't help but wonder if Jesus didn't huddle with the befuddled disciples
there on that mountaintop, drape his arms across their backs,
pull them close and say something more like:

Life is difficult for so many people.

*It's hard for them to get out of bed, go to work,
and put on a good face to eat or socialize with people.
For so many of them, loneliness has damaged their souls.
Play the fool if you must, but go out into their world.
Don't expect them to come into yours.
Go out into their world.
and love them there just as they are.
And I will transform lives, both yours and theirs,
making disciples of all of you.
I will claim you together and redeem you in your baptism,
and call you by name, and you will all be mine.
And none of you will ever be lonely again, because I will be with you,
even to the end of the age.*

Why did this certain person suggest that I watch *Lars and the Real Girl*?
I think it was meant to convey a message to me,
both as invitation and admonition.

I think it was meant as an invitation to risk my comfort
and to take notice of all the Lars-types around me:
to notice those who slide around the periphery of the action,
the quiet ones who do not beg for attention,
the undemanding ones who slip unnoticed into and out of my life;
to notice them and to make the effort to step into their world,
and to get to know them on their terms, not mine.

And I think it was meant as an admonition to the church, which I represent,
admonishing us to embrace and embody Jesus' great commission
in this way:

with a strong ethic of compassion and a generosity of spirit;
with a willingness to go out into the real world where people
must function day by day and meet them there,
instead of expecting them to show up on our turf, on our terms;
and with a guiding theology
that God has a preferential option for beginnings,
for resurrections and renewals, for restarts and
restorations.

Even as Jesus' last words to his disciples,
were the beginning of the church's ministry to the real world,
so, too, if any person or family or community is in Christ,
that entity is a new creation,

with infinite potential for what was, to be beautifully
transformed
into what is yet to be, crowned with glory and honor.

C.S. Lewis, in speaking to the value of each human being once said:

It may be possible for each to think too much

of his own potential glory hereafter;

it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply

about that of his neighbour.

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory

should be laid daily on my back,

a load so heavy that only humility can carry it,

and the back of the proud will be broken.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses,

to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to

may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now,

you would be strongly tempted to worship,

or else a horror and a corruption...there are no ordinary people.

*(C.S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 14-15)*

Go out into the real world,

and make manifest the glory and honor of each person,

each a bright and beautiful thing,

wondrously created in the image of God,

in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.