

Moonrise Kingdom

Isaiah 29: 13-14

Matthew 13:44-50

July 14, 2013 (8th Sunday after Pentecost)

Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker

I. Introduction

There is a moment in the movie *Moonrise Kingdom* where the protagonist, Sam, speaks words that have probably been on the lips of anyone who has been in a significant romantic relationship, where he says to Suzy, his love interest, "I love you. You don't know what you're talking about." The twist in *Moonrise Kingdom*, of course, is that these are two 12-year-olds who have fallen in love through a pen pal relationship and want to build their lives together.

We're doing this sermon series on Oscar-nominated movies because summer is a time when we can maybe engage things a little bit more lightly and have some fun. When my wife Jeannine looked at the lineup of Oscar-nominated movies that I was going to preach on, she noted that -- given the fact that I was trying to do something light -- they were all sort of heavy movies. "You start talking about *Les Mis* and *Lincoln*, and you know, she said, "You need something else in here." So, since light is not really my forte, I talked to my friend, Pat House, who suggested this delightful and quirky comedy by Wes Anderson that we're going to be spending a few minutes with this morning.

II. The One Thing Needful

It's a story of these two 12-year-olds who fall in love through their pen pal relationship and run away together. They run away from home, appropriately causing

chaos in the lives of the adults around them, for whom they are problem children. But echoing this wonderful passage from Isaiah where conventional wisdom is often turned on its head, it's really the adults in this story who are, by and large, the ones with the problems, and these two young 12-year-olds who are modeling a different way of being. They have discovered love and what being in a loving relationship was about, and they have figured out that there is nothing else that really matters. So, they leave home, they risk everything, to pursue this thing single-mindedly that they have realized will give them joy and meaning and purpose.

It's a wonderful metaphor for how Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, which is that once we encounter a loving relationship with God through Jesus Christ, everything else takes on a different perspective and everything else takes on a different priority as this single thing becomes what we pursue with single-minded passion.

The parables talk about a man who randomly stumbles across some buried treasure in a field. This is not an uncommon practice in Jesus' day when there were no banks -- there's a whole legislative body of work around how one determines ownership of treasure found buried in a field. And this person trying to secure his claim to it sells everything he's got to buy this field with the treasure. Likewise, the merchant who has been looking for beautiful pearls his whole life finds the most beautiful pearl he's ever seen and sells everything he has to claim it.

The interesting twist on these stories though is that the kingdom of God is not the treasure and the kingdom of God is not the pearl. The kingdom of God is the

whole narrative of the parable. Jesus says that kingdom of God is like this, and he describes a process by which someone discovers a thing that is of ultimate value and gives up everything that they have to claim it. And what I think is important to pay attention to here is that it's not getting the pearl that is the goal. It's the process of getting the pearl, of selling, of divesting ourselves of all of the other stuff that is what the kingdom of God is about.

So, to use the Appalachia Service Project (ASP) as an example, the kingdom of God is a place where everyone has a roof over their heads. But the kingdom of God gets experienced as we help build roofs for people, right? Or, likewise, the kingdom of God is a place where all of the mysteries of the divine get revealed. But we experience the kingdom of God as we engage in Bible study and learn together about where God is calling us. The kingdom of God is a place where every tear is dried because death and loss are no more. We experience the kingdom of God when we sit with the person who is suffering and mourning and help them see the resurrection power of Christ.

I think that's important because we often, I think, carry in ourselves this sense of, particularly around religion, "I don't really understand it or have it all together, and therefore, I need to keep my mouth shut lest anyone figure that out."

What I think Jesus' point here is that the kingdom is found as we journey towards the kingdom, so that being on the journey together is where we experience the reality of the Risen Christ.

III. One of the messages of Moonrise Kingdom is that being on that journey, not only changes us, it changes the people around us.

Now, one of the other wonderful pieces of this movie *Moonrise Kingdom* is that as Sam and Suzy are seeking to get to the Moonrise Kingdom, this place apart by themselves, which they get to very briefly -- most of the movie is about the journey -- what's interesting about the movie is as they pursue this goal with this single-mindedness, what ends up happening is that the people around them also become transformed. There's something about watching these two 12-year-olds pursue their dream that gets all of the other rather stunted people around them to realize that maybe they've been selling their own lives a little bit short, and maybe they could engage in a different way, so that the troop of scouts that have been pursuing the two 12-year-olds to find them end up having an epiphany and helping them on their way to escape, and the sheriff who has been leading the hunt for the two ends up at the end of the movie offering to take Sam, who is an orphan, into his own home and to create a new family. So, there's something about watching this search for meaning that allows the transformations of people around them, which I think is a very powerful image of what evangelism is about.

Kate Murphey and Dottie Yunger and I all took a day together to sort out responsibilities now that Jimmy has transitioned back to Tennessee and Dottie is coming on staff. We had a really interesting conversation about what evangelism looks like in a place where everybody knows the story of Jesus Christ. You're not going to find someone along the street who doesn't know who Jesus is and doesn't know what the story is, by and large. There were centuries when evangelism meant introducing people to the story. You know, when you look at the Book of Acts, it's the

apostles telling people about this encounter they had had with Christ that had change the world. For centuries, almost all of our history, evangelism was going places where the story hadn't been told and telling the story.

What does evangelism look like in a place where everybody knows at least the basic outlines of the story? I think what it looks like is being able to share with people why we are on this journey in which we have found the kingdom to be present. It's about living lives in such a way that people look at what's happening to you, to us, and saying, "I want to be part of that. Maybe I've been selling my life too short. Maybe there is new life that I wasn't aware of."

I think that part of the reason that we get hung up on evangelism sometimes in our church is that we struggle with that word. Our image of evangelism is, "I've got to tell somebody about Jesus and convince them that I'm right," and "Gosh, darn it, sometimes I'm not even sure what I believe about Jesus, so how am I going to tell somebody else what they should believe about Jesus?"

I wonder if evangelism as a concept would change a little bit if we understood that we are here today, we are engaged on ASP and then Vacation Bible School and Bible studies and all of this work because we have found ourselves being transformed. We have found ourselves deepening our relationship with the mystery of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. And we may not have all the answers, but we're starting to figure out that being on the journey is how we experience the kingdom. And maybe evangelism is about inviting people to be on this journey together, to be on a journey of exploration and living into the kingdom that is now and not quite yet. And maybe if we

got comfortable talking about that, we would find other people engaged by how we were living out our lives, what motivates someone to take a week out of their life, a vacation time for most of the folks to go on ASP and devote themselves to building somebody else's house?

You know, most of the people that are building somebody else's house in Appalachia have work to do on their own homes. Amen? Maybe not Lee Crockett (!), but most of the rest of us. But there's something about that process that is transformative and that draws us. I think that when people see that, there is an opportunity for invitation to say, "Come along and see what this is about. Come along and see how life can be transformed as we seek out the kingdom together."

IV. We Do Not Convert, God Does.

The other myth about evangelism, of course, is that our witness saves people. We use this language in the church all the time, we go, "Win souls for Christ." Well, you know what, I can't win a single soul. I know that. God, however, can win a lot of souls, and God working through me and through my witness and your witness and your life can do some amazing things. And it is not accidental -- there is rich Biblical imagery throughout this movie -- but particularly around Noah's Ark, and it is not accidental -- that the story of *Moonrise Kingdom* comes to its culmination in the midst of a wild Noah-like storm where all of the people of the small island have gathered together in a church. Of course, for centuries, Noah's Ark has been used as a metaphor for the church, the place where people gather for safety and refuge. And it is as these people gather in the midst of this wild, threatening storm that all of the connections get made that allow for the movie's resolution. See, Sam and Suzy didn't

change everybody by themselves. They opened the door, and then God gathered them all together so that this magic transformation could happen. God is the one who touches people's lives. We don't change it. We can offer an invitation. We can be a vehicle. But it's always God who is doing the work. It is God who is touching us and leading us forward and through us, the people around us.

V. Conclusion

A couple of years ago, we made a decision as a community of faith that part of what was going to define us was that we were going to be a culture of radical hospitality. Now, we claimed that language at a point when we were frankly not widely known as a church of radical hospitality. But you would be stunned by the number of people I talk to who say to me, "I never came to a church that I found more welcoming." I am so excited that our decision to be something has led to the point where we are that thing. And I would love to see us make a decision also to reclaim our call as evangelists, to be a community where people see the good news lived out and hear the good news of what God is doing in the world and in their lives. That's not to say that we've got the answers. It's not to say that we are going to browbeat people to see it the way we see it. It's about being a community of invitation where people come and they see transforming work happen and say, "I want to be part of that," and they hear our stories and they say, "I want to be part of that."

I want to challenge us to think of ourselves as witnesses for the transforming work of God, and in that process, invite people into a life of joy and grace and power.

Amen.