

*Defying Gravity*  
Isaiah 1: 10-17; Mark 7:1-8  
January 17, 2010  
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## **I. Introduction**

In the 1939 movie classic, *The Wizard of Oz*, a little girl from Kansas named Dorothy is in her house when it is picked up by a cyclone and dumped in the magical land of Oz. As it happens, the house lands on the Wicked Witch of the East, who Dorothy learns had held the inhabitants of Munchkinland in bondage for many years. And as the Munchkins celebrate their new freedom, they sing a song (that all of us could probably sing as well) that goes: “Ding, dong, the witch is dead. Which old witch? The Wicked Witch! Ding, dong, the Wicked Witch is dead.” Not accidentally, the 2003 musical *Wicked* opens in a like manner, but at the other end of Dorothy’s story with the inhabitants of Oz singing about the death of the sister of the Wicked Witch of the East, the Wicked Witch of the West. They sing, “Good news! She’s dead! The Witch of the West is dead, the wickedest witch there ever was, the enemy of all of us here in Oz is dead. Good news!” And yet, as we explored in last week’s sermon, it’s a little less than clear in both versions of the story that either witch is quite as wicked as she seems, or that it is the forces of good that have, in fact, triumphed.

We are spending the month of January exploring faith themes that we find in the book and movie of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, as well as Gregory Maguire’s 1995 prequel Wicked: the Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West. Throughout Frank Baum’s story of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, and in a very explicit way in Maguire’s book Wicked, there is the message that things are not quite as simple as they seem. The “good” characters and the “wicked” characters are a little more nuanced than we have come to expect in stories.

In stories, we get clued in right from the very beginning on who the good guys and the bad guys are. Usually, there are easy visual clues (the good guys are riding white horses and the bad guys are dressed in black); but even if that’s not the case, we can usually tell fairly quickly who’s who, and that lets the narrative of the plot unfold quickly. The problem, of course, is that while in real life people are somewhat less easy to classify, our need to identify clear and unambiguous heroes and villains persists.

## **II. Seeking Absolutes**

The book unChristian, published by the Barna Research group, starts off by saying that “Christianity has an image problem.” David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, the authors of this three year study, published in 2007, focused their research on 16 to 29 year olds

and explored their perceptions of our faith; and the results were rather troubling. They documented a profoundly negative view that many, many young people have about Christianity. And topping the list of most frequent words that young people used to describe Christians were “judgmental” and “hypocritical.” That’s a serious image problem.

Except, it’s really not an image problem; it’s more of a reality problem, isn’t it? We, as Christians, believe in a God of absolute power and authority, who has shown us in clear ways what right and wrong action is. We have been given the revelation of Holy Scripture and the witness of the lives of the saints to show us right from wrong and help us know how to live our lives. That instills in us a tendency to judge right from wrong when we see it and to be clear on what God expects from us, doesn’t it?

Long time Metropolitan Memorial member John Broderick, who died last week, had published his first novel last year. And in that novel, one of the main character says, “We are all sinners, I know that much. ‘All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,’ the Bible says, but some people come up a lot shorter than others. Like my husband Frank, for instance. I know that Jesus says, ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged’ ...but if a woman can’t judge her own husband every now and then, I don’t know who can.” Judging does seem to come to us fairly naturally.

Except that also running throughout Scripture (and the lives of the saints) – right there in the Sermon on the Mount – is this very explicit command from Jesus to *not* judge: And when you look at the harshest criticisms that Jesus leveled at people, they were religious people, whom Jesus was criticizing for being judgmental and hypocritical.

In our gospel lesson from Mark today, Jesus is being scoped out by a group of scribes and Pharisees who have come from Jerusalem to see what his ministry is all about. And, of course, they immediately fix on the fact that Jesus’ disciples are not cleaning their hands in the way that every pious Jew was expected to, and they use this as an opportunity to criticize Jesus and his piety (or lack thereof). Their observation is an excuse to discredit and disregard Jesus’ ministry.

Interestingly, Jesus does not even pretend to engage their criticism. He moves immediately to address the *real* issue, which is their judgment; or rather, their *need* to judge. The Greek word that Mark uses here, “hypocrite,” literally means a “play actor.” And Jesus is criticizing the fact that they are playing the role of being pious, when in reality, their hearts are very far from the source of true piety. They’re using piety as a tool to vilify someone they perceive as a threat to their power and control. Jesus doesn’t play by their rules, and since he is not part of their team, he must be wicked.

Likewise, in the musical *Wicked*, Elphaba – the young woman who will eventually be known as the Wicked Witch of the West – has discovered that the Wizard is really the force behind the corruption in Oz. The Wizard tries to recruit Elphaba to his team, an offer that she rejects. The play reaches its dramatic crescendo in a song called *Defying Gravity*, in which Elphaba realizes that she’s

got to stand against the Wizard, even if it means that she will be judged, vilified, and misunderstood by all the people of Oz – a song we will hear in a few minutes. She opts for a life of authenticity, rather than conform to a system that she deems unjust. Authenticity is the opposite of hypocrisy.

### **III. An Unconventional Life**

A life of freedom and authenticity, however, can be a pretty frightening thing. It's frightening to us as individuals, and it can be extremely frightening to systems of authority. Systems like conformity, and we as individuals draw comfort from having clarity about what the rules are; it's a symbiotic relationship. Having a simple set of rights and wrongs is comforting because it gives us the parameters within which we can operate. Religion, historically, has done a good job of providing those parameters. They allow us to know who's on the team; who's good and who's wicked.

In addition to giving us safe parameters within which to operate, rules give us a sense of control. If we know what the rules are that we have to obey, then salvation is a little bit more manageable. Rules give us what we need to know to earn our salvation, rather than having to depend on God's grace. Rules put us in control. They also put us in control of others. Rules can be ways of imposing our view of the world on those around us, of making other people behave in safe and predictable ways.

And when people step outside those safe and predictable ways of behaving, they become "wicked." The wicked people are the ones "out there," who are different than we are. They're the ones who behave in ways that make us uncomfortable, who flout the established norms. And because they're different than we are, we can judge them and condemn them as "other." In the week that we commemorate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King and his work of civil disobedience we know that he was killed, as were other African American men and civil rights workers in the south or union organizers in the north -- all in our attempt to "keep the peace," to keep our community safe. Having an external opponent always draws us together as a community, even if only for a time.

Notably, however, Jesus of Nazareth – the one whom we claim to be the consummate revelation of God – had an unsettling tendency to ignore some of the rules of the religious establishment. He ate with sinners; he spoke with women; he ignored the laws of ritual purity; he reinterpreted how the commandments were understood. He didn't always behave in safe and predictable ways; he always acted out of love; but love isn't always safe and predictable either. We need to keep in mind, that it was the people like us – the good solid, stable church folks – that were the most uncomfortable with Jesus. He didn't fit our mold; he hung out with the wrong kind of people; he said the wrong things; he didn't play by the rules.

In our Great Hall session last week, talking about the *Wizard of Oz*, someone noted that if Jesus were to walk in the room at that moment, that he would probably be a character who we would not like very much. He would probably have some sharp words on our pretensions about being the “national church.” He would probably push us on how welcoming we are to folks who might not look or dress like we do (because the people who threaten us, who make us uncomfortable, were exactly the people Jesus spent time with). He would probably encourage us to step out of the narrow ways that we have defined ministry and look at the possibilities before us with new and imaginative eyes. That’s why he was rejected by the good, church-going folks; and that’s why he was killed by their church leaders.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As the munchkins dance gaily while singing “Ding, dong, the witch is dead,” there’s never a hint of doubt that the Wicked Witch was truly wicked. At the end of the musical *Wicked*, when the story has come full circle, and people of Oz are singing “Good News!” about the demise of Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West, they do so blithely unaware of the complexities of the story; merely happy at having identified and defeated their external enemy, and to be able to return to their safe and simple lives.

Our gospel text calls us to look a little deeper. It calls us to see that sometimes, the rules that we take for granted that define virtue and wickedness can be tools of our own creation that we have imposed upon God. Jesus models a different way, a way in which the quest for purity gives way to a willingness to roll up our sleeves and engage fully in the messiness of life. It will inevitably involve making mistakes; but with the knowledge that mistakes that are motivated by love are still sources of God’s transformative power in the world.

Amen.