

God Lifts Us Up

June 28, 2020

Scriptures:

Matthew 10: 40-42

⁴⁰ "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple — truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Romans 6: 12-23

¹² Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³ No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

¹⁵ What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, ¹⁸ and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

²⁰ When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Good morning Grace United Methodist Church! Today, in our opening passage from Matthew, we are reminded by Jesus to go forth in his name. When we do so, we will be welcomed as he was welcomed, and we will be blessed when we choose to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Then, in our passage from Romans 6, Paul reminds us that we are set free from sin and all other things that bind us through our saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Using these truths found in the word of God and the themes of letting go and making new friendships from the movie "Up" we will explore how our kind and loving God always seeks to be in relationship with us and always seeks to lift us up. As we prepare to do so, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Today we begin a sermon series entitled "God at the Movies". Each week over the course of the next seven weeks, we will study the lectionary readings from Romans and Matthew and we will use an animated Pixar movie to further explore our connection to and our relationship with God. If it is possible for you, I encourage you to watch the given movie each week before joining us for church. Each week's movie is listed on a post on our church Facebook page. The movie that I will be tying into today's message is "Up", Pixar's 2009 offering.

Just in case you have not seen the movie or if it has been a while, I'll give you a quick synopsis. The main character is Carl, an elderly widower. His sidekick is a young Wilderness Explorer named Russell. They first meet as Carl mourns the loss of his wife Ellie. Russell knocks on Carl's door, seeking to earn his next Wilderness Explorer badge. As the world closes in on him, Carl remembers the dream to travel to South America to see the famous Paradise Falls. Carl ties thousands of balloons to the family home that sits in the heart of the city, dwarfed by the modernity and skyscrapers all around it. As the house rises into the clouds, Carl is off to fulfill a promise made long ago to his young bride. Only once airborne does Carl discover that young Russell is out on the front porch, fearing for his life. Carl and Russell go on the adventure of a lifetime as Carl finally lives out his and Ellie's motto, "Adventure is out there"! Along the way, Carl finds peace and begins to live again, while Russell begins to understand what true friendship is really all about.

Our first passage, from Matthew 10, is essentially about welcoming Jesus and welcoming one another. In the children's message, we explored the idea that as disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to welcome others in a warm and friendly and open way. As we think about being welcoming, this morning there were signs of welcome. As people entered the parking lot, they were greeted and given bulletins and were directed to places to sit or park. Over the course of this past week, as my family has settled into the parsonage, Mike has checked in a couple of times. Cindy, Dylan, and Porsche have stopped by to help out, and just yesterday, several of the Trustees took time from working on the parking lot to make sure all was well at the parsonage. Up in Bismarck, Karl has posted that they have received a warm welcome from church folks from McCabe as well as from a few neighbors. That is what we are called to do by Jesus – to be welcoming and loving. The encouragement in the children's message was to put out the welcome mat and to mean it – to welcome one and all – whether they are just like us or if they are a little different from us, whether they belong here or if they are just checking us out.

In the movie "Up", after Ellie's death Carl was not very welcoming, right? The movie opens with a quick recap of Carl and Ellie's romance and charmed marriage. They are unable to have children but go on many adventures as they grow old together. The penny jar never quite gets them to Paradise Falls – life gets in the way of adventure. Then Ellie passes and Carl is left alone in the once rundown house that they fixed up into their dream home. Carl holds on against the world as the city grows up all around their small home. A businessman clamors to buy him out but he holds doggedly to the home that is now a memorial to his dear Ellie. Carl just hunkers down, refusing to budge.

The first time Russell knocked on his door, Carl slammed the door in Russell's face – except Russell had stuck his foot out into the doorway. He had a foot stuck in the doorway. Russell was taking his Wilderness Explorer charge to be kind and friendly very seriously. And then, Carl loses his temper and accidentally strikes one of the construction workers, sealing the fate of his and Ellie's house. Instead of extending an apology and seeking grace, he grumped off into the house. Carl wanted nothing to do with the rest of the world. He was not living out Jesus' words of welcoming others. Perhaps you too have struggled with this idea at times too. I know I have. I am particularly susceptible to being unwelcoming or at least unfriendly when I feel super busy or when I am really tired. More than once these past two weeks, Kristin has said, "Maybe we better wait till tomorrow" to do this or that. Her words have been gentle and gracious reminders that I need an attitude adjustment.

Sometimes the sin in our lives can create barriers to our being welcoming and friendly to others. When we have allowed sin to "*exercise dominion in our mortal bodies*", as Paul puts it in Romans 6, then we have separated ourselves from God and often from others in our lives. In the movie, it was Carl's unresolved grief that was his barrier. He allowed the bitterness to take root much as a sin can take root and keep us isolated and secretive and withdrawn. In our passage from Romans, Paul equates sin to death and righteous living to freedom and eternal life. In our lives, sin can keep us trapped like Carl's grief did in the movie. On one level it is a conscious choice. We usually know when we are sinning. At that point we can choose to be made right again, to accept the grace that Jesus offers. But sometimes we can be like those that Paul speaks of in verse 13, those struggling in wickedness. We cannot seem to escape sin's grasp – we are

obedient to it instead of to God. Maybe it is an addiction, or it is a guilty pleasure and we cannot seem to escape its pull. Maybe we want to escape but feel so guilty that we think ourselves unworthy of God's love and grace. We can become stuck in a dark place. Grief can be much the same. But there comes a point in both when we must choose to move forward.

For Carl, the house that he and Ellie called "home" was slated to be torn down. As he sat feeling sorry for himself, reminiscing about his past, he saw a glimpse of hope. Carl suddenly realized that he had a choice. He made the decision to get unstuck and to go on an adventure. The retired balloon salesman tied thousands of balloons to his house, making it a floating house. He made a choice to escape that which had him trapped. When we become aware of our sin, we too have a choice. Do we keep sinning, as some in the Roman church were clearly doing, or do we choose instead to be "*instruments of righteousness*"? Do we move from death to life, from being slaves to our sin to being slaves of God? For you and for me, this is often a choice that we have to make day by day and sometimes even moment by moment. What is it that allows us to be freed from sin and death and to live righteously, seeking to do the will of God?

In the movie, Carl allowed grief to lead him to be angry and mean, hurtful and isolated. Again, sin can do these things to our lives as well. And then Carl meets Russell. He was innocent; he sought only to do good for Carl. He met a grumpy old man and saw not someone to avoid or to reject or to be unfriendly to, but he saw one worthy of his time and love. Russell was determined to make Carl's life better by serving him. In a way, he is much like our Jesus. When we do struggle with sin, it is Christ who seeks to redeem us and to free us from our sin.

It is Jesus who seeks to cleanse us and to restore us. It does not matter who we are or what we have done – Jesus sees us all the same: as another child of God in need of freedom from sin and death.

Maybe you are dealing with grief right now. Maybe you are missing Karl and Michelle and the kids. Maybe that is your grief right now. Perhaps it is sin that you are struggling with right now in your life. My friends, I ask again, what is it that can free us from the things of this world that bind and trap us? God's grace is the answer. And love is his guide. As Paul writes in Romans 6, verse 14, *"For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace"*. It is God's grace that allows us to be freed from all that binds us, to live free, to live lives that are pleasing and acceptable to God.

Through obedience to God we become faithful to living out Jesus' teachings as we seek to grow to be more and more like him and to transform the world around us into his image. In verse 22 we read these words from Paul: *"Now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life"*. Paul reminds us that as we choose to align ourselves with God we are increasingly transformed into the image of Christ. Eventually, we gain the salvation of our souls as we enter into eternal life. John Wesley called this "going on to perfection". It is an ongoing process where we attain perfection only when we stand by Jesus' side.

Now, the process is not easy. It is a challenge every day, as I said earlier, to live a life that is holy and pleasing to God. Sometimes the challenge is within us, sometimes the challenge comes from life, and sometimes it is a bit of both. Life took Ellie far too soon for Carl.

The challenge within was dealing with the deep grief in a healthy and life-giving way. Carl needed to be set free from the chains of grief. Russell was the wedge that pried its way through that hard and crusty exterior to help Carl to live again. As Carl's house lifted off and experienced a little turbulence, a couple thousand feet off the ground, he heard a knock on the door. A scared Russell begged to come inside. Reluctantly, Carl let Russell in. Slowly but surely, Russell began to work his way into Carl's life and heart. As the odd pair works their way to Paradise Falls, something amazing happens. A new friendship is formed, and Carl begins to experience love and hope again in his life. He begins to truly live.

My friends, if you or someone you know is struggling with life, there is someone who wants to get a foot in the door. In fact, Jesus is begging for us to open the door to our hearts. In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says, *"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me"*. Jesus desires to be in a relationship with us, to walk through life with us, to weather those storms that are sure to come, to lift us up out of those valleys that we will certainly walk through, to bring us life abundant.

In Christ, God seeks to lift us up, to bring us life that is truly life. All we have to do is to open the door, to invite Jesus into our lives. It is then that we receive the free gift of God's grace. It is grace that allows us to live life in Christ in the here and now and to one day live forever in his presence in eternity. God seeks to lift us up. Grace United Methodist Church, may we open our hearts and lives to God. In doing so we will receive the reward of righteousness, the salvation of our souls. May it be so for me and for each of us. Amen and amen.