July 10, 2016

Luke 19:1-10

At the Movies: *Wreck It Ralph*

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For the last three Julys while the choir is on a break, we have done Greenland Hills At the Movies during worship. After the events of this week, I wasn’t sure if we should do that. How can we watch a movie clip during worship when we have had such tragedy in Dallas? How can we watch a movie clip during worship when we haven’t yet come to grips with the death of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, and then we had our own tragedy with the senseless murders of Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, and Lorne Ahrens. Murders of those who have given their lives to protect us. Police involved shootings and public mass shootings have become a way of life now in America. But when it comes to your own city, when it happens right here in the city we call home.

So, Friday night I watched our movie for today again. And I saw Ralph wanting to change. He doesn’t want to be the bad guy anymore, he wants to be different. And that is what you will see in the clip we will see in a few moments. But if you see the rest of the movie, you will see Ralph change by embracing hope, by opening his heart to love others. You will see Ralph become different because he doesn’t let fear win. We are people of faith and tragedy does not take away our hope. Fear does not stop our faith. We worship so that we can transform our hurting hearts to hopeful hearts.

MOVIE CLIP – Beginning of movie to 6 minutes 10 seconds

Ralph was designed to be the bad guy, but it was destroying him from the inside. Our fear is destroying us from the inside. Ralph didn’t want to be a bad guy anymore, and he wanted to change. That wonderful word that we use in church repent, means to turn around. To make a 180 degree turn. You are walking this way, and you decide you want to change, you want to open your heart more, so you have to turn around, you have to repent. The Greek word for repent in the New Testament means to change one’s mind. We have been headed down a path and we have to turn around and go the other way.

Have you ever felt like there was no hope for change? I have felt that hopeless many times this week. Have you ever wanted to be something different, but you couldn’t for whatever reason? Have you ever tried to be better, but failed again and again? Is it possible for people to change?

I want to share with you the story of Zacchaeus that is in Luke’s Gospel. In Jesus’ day a tax collector was the ultimate bad guy. They not only took money from their fellow Jews to give to the Romans, they took too much money from their neighbors so they could line their pockets with the excess. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, he was rich, he was short, and he was hated by the people of Jericho.

 (Luke 19:1-10 The Message) Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn’t see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by. When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home.” Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, “What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?” Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, “Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I’m caught cheating, I pay four times the damages.” Jesus said, “Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost.”

Zacchaeus changed. How was he able to make this radical change? Jesus. In Jesus Zacchaeus found someone who loved him in spite of his sin. That changed him and made him want to be different. If Jesus can change Zacchaeus’ life so dramatically, Jesus can change our lives today. Jesus can change the lives of each and every one of us. Zacchaeus knew what he had to do to be changed. I wonder if we know what we must do to let Jesus change us? This week as my heart broke again and again I thought of all the many ways we need forgiveness. I thought about all of the ways that we let fear take ahold. Where is the hope?

Friday our Bishop of the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church sent a letter that he asked we read during worship today. Here are his words, “Tragedy struck Dallas Thursday evening. Five Dallas law enforcement officers were killed, and seven officers and two civilians were injured. An evil act borne out of hatred devastated their families and the people of our city. Prayers of lament and courage have been offered to God, the giver of life. Prayers for their families and the loss they will forever experience have come from our hearts and our lips. We mourn and grieve with them and with the people of Baton Rouge and Minneapolis.

 Violence in our society has become commonplace. One death because of violence is one too many. While we will pray and mourn today, it is now the time for the Christian community to begin the work of reconciliation. On Sunday, the appointed Gospel lesson for the day is the parable of The Good Samaritan. The lawyer’s simple questions to Jesus about how he might inherit eternal life and who is his neighbor provoke answers from Jesus that speak to us and our condition today.

Our neighbors are not only the people we know; they are the people we do not know and who may not be like us. They live in other parts of our cities or communities. They work in different occupations. They have different levels of income. And, yes, they have different colors of skin than ours, and even different religions. Specifically, they, too, are children of God. If we can begin by embracing that truth, then we can forge ahead in creating communities where our children and others’ children will no longer live in fear or mistrust or even hate for those who are different than they.

Racial tensions divide us. As Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings said Friday afternoon, race is complicated. Let us not allow the complexity of the racial issue to deter us from the work Christ has called us to do. We will continue this work until all are seen as our neighbors and as valued by God. Join me in continuing prayers for those who were killed or injured. And may we pray and work for the community God desires.”

How do we do that? How do we quiet our fears, find hope and find the ability to change? How do we address the injustice, violence and division in our world and proclaim God’s vision of a world that is very different? We can retreat and focus on other things. We can despair and say that this will never change. Or we can hope. We can sustain the hope that God is working for justice, righteousness, and peace. And that God is calling us to join in that work.

What can we do to resist and fight injustice and evil in whatever ways they present themselves? May God reveal that to us and then give us the courage to move beyond prayer and actually act. We want Jesus to confirm our prejudices, but Jesus shatters them. Those we distance ourselves from, Jesus touches. We are God’s hands and feet and voice in this world. And love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We get rid of an enemy by getting rid of hate. The new Dean at Perkins School of Theology, Craig Hill, said “By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power.”