Springfield Presbyterian Church

March 14th, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Through Grace Alone

1. Amelie

The movie Amelie (a-mollie) came out in 2001, but it is set in June of 1974 in a Parisian community. Amelie is a girl who faced much tragedy growing up, struggling with losses and creating her own internal world into one of imagination and creativity. As she wanders around her parent’s apartment, a bottle of perfume falls on the ground and reveals a small hole in the wall where she finds an old matchbox full of memories. She makes a promise to herself – if she is able to find the boy, who is now a man, and give this box over to him – she promises that she will spend the rest of her life making people happy, not for reward, but simply out of the desire for joy.

 And, as you can imagine, she indeed does find the man and he is brought to tears as these memories sweep back into his world and he reconnects with estranged family members. But upon this transaction, Amelie is set to task – she is now on a mission to make people happy. And what follows are lovely and humorous and joyful presentations of love and care for others. She helps a blind man to the Metro. She convinces her father to travel after taking one of his garden gnomes and giving it to a flight attendant to take pictures with it all around the world. She helps one of her friends take ownership of a grocery stand.

 These acts are not grand in nature, necessarily, but poignant and funny and delightful. Ultimately though, each act does change the person who she helps, and grants them joy. And while it was never her intention, for she was never seeking to be paid back for her good deeds, the storyline finishes with Amelie finding happiness herself.

1. Quirks of Grace

I love this story because she takes delight in sharing joy with others and shares it in the quirkiest of ways. Her destiny is created in her own mind – she is called to this mission and she doesn’t do these acts out of frustration. She finds joy in watching others feel joy – an admirable virtue for any of us as we live out our lives.

III. Affirmation

 I know that while you have probably not helped a blind man to the metro or sent a garden gnome on a wild adventure – I know many of you do acts of simple kindness, out of the goodness of your heart, out of the faithfulness of your calling, and from the love that you seek to return to God’s children. We can never hear enough affirmation around this, so I hope you know that you are seen and heard – when you help pack blessing bags, when you write a letter or a card, when you help at the food pantry, when you deliver meals and laundry, when you share a story that encourages – I see you, we see you, as you look around this virtual Springfield family, we are a people who serve out of the love that we first experienced ourselves. At our best, we are the joy givers, and just like Amelie, we often receive unexpected and unasked for joy in return.

 It is important to keep these values in mind, particularly as we hear our readings from this morning Scriptures. In the Gospel message and in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, they are both trying to set some of the world’s beliefs in a different, more sacred and holy trajectory. We hear many messages this morning that are contrary to what the world espouses. We hear that Jesus Christ came not to condemn, but to love, not because we deserve it or we’ve earned a bunch of heavenly brownie points, but just because we are who we are. He came as well to take all that was in the dark and confusing and harmful and put it in the light, so that priorities would be shifted and what is good would be revealed.

 In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, this message is expounded upon, where Paul is sharing that we are a sinful people, we deserve less than what we have, but that is not what God has chosen for us. He continues to emphasize that it isn’t because, again of those good works that Christ has come, but by grace alone. In this, all the power dynamics of the world in the vision of God’s Kingdom here on earth are thrown to the ground and shattered. We’re all on equal footing, at least in God’s world, and that’s the way it should be in our earthly world.

 IV. Lenten Journey

As we see God’s love in Christ, through this Lenten season, our vision is renewed and restored. The call of the Kingdom is once again set heavy upon our hearts: bring things out and into the light, share with all, find love in community, forgive and be forgiven, serve and let yourself be served, and above all, may you do these things through the love and grace of Christ. As the days get longer and hopefully warmer, we continue to march and mark our steps as we seek to make it to the day of Resurrection. And my friends, we are so close to seeing the hope on the horizon, the joy of a tomb emptied, and flowers that push up from the frozen ground and seek to bloom around us. On this anniversary of COVID closures, a full year of the pandemic, I don’t know about you, but I want to RUN to that day, I want to run to a day of resurrection where things are easier, where we are all vaccinated and I can embrace people and travel and laugh and sing off-key without a mask. And that day is on the horizon, we continue to see evidence of hope week in and week out, and the day will come where these doors will be opened and life as we know it will be normal, if not better and more extraordinary than normal.

But as we know, you can’t have Easter without Lent. You cannot have the joy of the Resurrection without first walking in the sadness and struggle of Lent and all that it has to teach us. While no one wanted to see the days of COVID and while we all want those days to come to a close, I hope that when the doors open and we have those triumphant resurrection moments, that we do not take what we have for granted. And so too, in this Lent, we do not take grace for granted. In the struggle of our griefs of different shapes and sizes, grace comes alongside. In the trials of racial division and looking towards a future where we pray for justice one day, grace comes alongside. In the sadness of loneliness, of isolation, and six-foot distances, grace comes alongside. In the difficulties of polarized politics and contentious images of American against American, grace comes alongside.

Grace is messy, grace is confusing, grace is unearned and often goes unmentioned, but grace is where we find ourselves today. It is where we find ourselves in the text, but it is also where we find ourselves as we seek to live out the Kingdom of God here on earth today. Grace abounds, grace was, grace is, and grace will always be an integral way of how we understand God and one another.

So, go out into this world and be assured by God’s grace and God’s love that is unconditional. Go out and continue to do those good acts of grace, for the love of God, not for your own heavenly victory lap. And go out, go out with that hope on the horizon, even as we walk in these Lenten muddy waters, go out and know that the day of resurrection is near. Amen.