

Movie Message: Finding Neverland
Mark 10:13-16
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St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
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Is there enough wonder in your life? My guess is that you have never worried about your lack of wonder. We don't lose sleep because we don't have enough wonder. Oh we worry about not being happy or feeling too much anger, but wonder...we hardly know what it feels like.

Jesus knew wonder. In the midst of terrible human suffering he was able to be in touch with wonder. His disciples mistakenly thought children would hinder his mission but they were wrong. Children embody the quality of wonder and Jesus made time for them.

The dictionary defines wonder as being filled with amazement or awe. Amazement and awe was not at the top of the list for emotions felt by most of early 20th century English society. They were more concerned about discipline, rules, and being seen with the right people.

In today's movie, "Finding Neverland," James Barrie was a well-known playwright in London who was going through a bit of a dry spell when he met Sylvia Davies and her four boys in a park. Barrie possessed a childlike spirit and easily connected with the boys. They became friends and often enjoyed being together. Unlike most adults Mr. Barrie encouraged them to use their imaginations in playing, acting, and writing.

In this scene they all have returned from a picnic and flying a kite. The boy's grandmother is not happy about their escapades in childish silliness. She is there to see there is some proper English discipline in this family.

Video Clip (24:52 – 26:00)

Life was hard for people living in England in this time. There simply was no time for childlike play and wonder for the majority of children. Many of them were forced to work in factories. If you don't give children time and permission to express wonder then where will wonder be found? Wonder exists first and foremost in the heart of a child. Something happens to us when we grow up. We become sophisticated. We give up our childlike ways. We don't want to be like a child. The result is that many children lose their childlike spirit. They bury their sense of wonder replacing it with adult sensibilities instead.

In the movie James Barry and the Davies family spend much time together in imaginative, creative play. One such experience is a day in the country where they attempt to fly a kite.

Video Clip (22:32 – 23:40)

What we see in this scene is that building a sense of wonder about life is about encouraging each other to believe. So much of the adult world is about competition: winners and losers. Wonder is a quality that often comes from the encouragement of people around us. This is how God wants us to live. God knows there is great pain and suffering in the world. We gain some insight into James Barrie's life when he tells Sylvia about the death of his brother.

Video Clip (31:40-33:27)

Dressing up like his dead brother was the end of the boy James. Do you know when the boy or girl in you died? Can you point to a specific time or event when you were forced to grow up, to give up your sense of childlike wonder?

I don't want to be too hard on my father but I clearly recall sitting on his lap one Christmas giving me the straight talk about Santa Claus. I was crushed! I think I was 12!

For many it is the harsh reality of life that forces us to grow up. But we mistakenly think that growing up means leaving our childlike spirit behind. Do you ever have moments when you are so tempted to give yourself over to the wonder of something, but you are embarrassed to think or act or speak like a child?

When I was a young pastor I visited 92 year old Mildred in a nursing home. I loved visiting with Mildred because she never lost her childlike spirit. She once told me that she cannot hardly believe what she sees when she looks in the mirror. "In my mind's eye I am still an 11 year old girl running around on her grandfather's farm."

Mr. Barrie was inspired by the Davies family to write a new play called Peter Pan. On opening night he had convinced the producer to set aside 25 seats. The producer wanted to know who was going to pay for these seats, but Barrie simply insisted that he provide them and scatter them throughout the audience. Reluctantly, the producer agreed.

Video Clip (1:09:19 – 1:12:40)

The truth is that children's laughter is infectious. Childlike spirit will rub off on you. Barrie knew that in order for his play to be a success it needed children in the audience. With children present the adults would begin to view the play through the eyes of a child.

Video Clip (1:16:13 – 1:17:14)

There is this axiom of life on this earth. It seems to be that the longer we live, the more hardship we see, the less likely many of us are to submit to wonder. We want to peer behind the curtain instead of enjoy the show. We want to break the toy apart to see how it works, rather than take pleasure in playing with it. We want to know, rather than believe.

Does your adult search for knowledge and truth keep you away from belief? Does your quest for knowledge that can be proved by science prevent you from giving your heart over to the wonder and awe of God's presence in the universe?

When Irma Zaleski was little, in Poland before the War, she used to spend every summer at her grandmother's house in the mountains. Zaleski writes, "She lived alone, in a house built by local craftsmen on the edge of a torrent. The noise of its rushing waters was the background of every moment of our holidays and the first sound of eternity which I learned to hear. My grandmother was the kind of grandmother that everybody should have. She was brilliant and wise, although a little bitter at times. She had lived through wars, revolutions, a bad marriage and the death of two children. What had saved her sanity, I believe, was her love of beauty and a passionate interest in all the things of the mind. She loved literature and art; she was fascinated by science. Above all else, she loved the beauty of the mountains among which she eventually died."

"I must have been 5 or 6 at the time. One night, I was awakened by my grandmother leaning over my bed. There was a noise of a great storm outside. Grandmother picked me up and carried me out onto a big veranda which ran all along the front of the house. Look! she said, and turned my face toward the mountains, Look, this is too beautiful to sleep through. I saw black sky, torn apart every few seconds by lightning, mountains emerging out of darkness, immense, powerful and so real. Thunder rolled among the peaks. I was not frightened - how could I be? I was awed. I looked up at my grandmother's face and, in a flash of light, I saw it flooded with wonder and joy. I did not realize it then, of course, but now I do, that what I saw was ecstasy. My grandmother was the first to point out to me a door to joy."¹

We all need people like this joyful grandmother to show us how to see the wonder and joy, even in a raging storm.

But not everyone has such a person. For them James Barrie created a place of wonder he called Neverland. Sylvia Davies was unable to see Peter Pan due to her illness. So they brought the play to her.

Video Clip (1:27:17 – 1:29:02)

¹ -Irma Zaleski, The Door to Joy, Parabola, Summer 1998, 50

“If you believe then clap your hands!” Even the grandmother’s heart was transformed. How about your heart? Does it need to be transformed so that wonder can once again have a place? I have to confess that when watching a movie that is about to take me to a place of wonder that I often resist by finding something about the scene to criticize. I try to peer behind the curtain instead of enjoying the show. I want to break the toy apart to see how it works rather than take pleasure in playing with it. It is my way of keeping wonder at bay.

This is so sad because God created us with a huge capacity for wonder. Jesus knew this when he invited children to come to him. James Barrie knew this when he wrote this wonderful play about a place called Neverland. You see, wonder is not just a nice emotion. It is at the heart of the kingdom of God. Wonder has an energy that leads to love. To make room for wonder is to be fully alive. Is wonder in you?