

“Cars: It’s Lonely at the Top”

Philippians 2: 1-4

I probably showed my age and yes my maturity level when in this week’s Theology Tuesday, I quoted Will Ferrell’s character from Talladega Nights when I said, “If you’re not first, you’re last.” But I can’t help it. Every time I watch the movie, “Cars” and it starts up with the racing scenes, this quote comes to mind. “If you’re not first, you’re last”. Or as Lightening McQueen, the main character in Cars, says at the beginning of the movie, “There is only one winner and 42 losers. And I eat losers for breakfast.”

Of course, this goes against everything we are as people of faith. Instead, we say things like “The first shall be last and the last shall be first”. Nowhere in our sacred texts does it talk about eating losers for breakfasts. Dealing with our enemies, yes. But not eating losers.

Which is why even as much as I love the movie, “Cars”, I hesitated to include it in this series. Sure it is one of Pixar’s more recognizable films. Sure it is probably one of Pixar’s more profitable films, making an estimated 9 billion in product sales over the course of three years after it was released in 2006. I’ll let that sink in for a moment...9 billion in sales within the first three years of its release.

Too be honest, I felt like by including this film in a series about the Gospel, I was giving credence to the health and wealth message that has overtaken our culture. That by including a film in this series which seems to only focus on the theme of coming in first, I was almost solidifying the images and importance of winning that our culture thrives on in its daily life. Because, after all I cannot deny that this movie is about racing. It is about outmaneuvering, outsmarting, outpacing others. It is about being the best. It is about knowing that if you are not first, you're last.

But I realized something this week as I spent time with our text. I was reminded again that when communities of faith do not address the stark contrasts found between our culture and the Gospel, that if we do not give voice to the values that make us who we are, values such as love, grace and mercy, if we as people of faith do not address the stark contrasts found within our culture and our faith, then it is almost as if we are giving permission for the way of the world to be the loudest voice. And in doing so, we soon ignore the very real, the very present Kingdom of God that is in our midst, calling us to run a different race as the people of God.

So without further ado, let us watch a little bit of Cars, the movie.

As we can see, Lightning McQueen is self-centered. He is self-absorbed. He cares for no one but himself. He is selfish in every sense of the word. He fires his pit crew, thinking he can do this race all on his own. He forces his truck carrier to drive through the night, even though Mac is exhausted. Lightning McQueen can only think of his own wants and his own needs. Nothing is going to stop him from becoming the next spokesperson for Dinoco. In fact, he doesn't care who he hurts or who he has to push out of the way, just as long as he reaches his one and only goal...that goal being achieving fame and fortune. He is only concerned about beating everyone else. No matter the risk, no matter what he has to sacrifice, all that matters for Lightning McQueen is winning. Sounds familiar right?

I think it is safe to say that many of us have experienced this way of thinking and being in our own personal lives. At some point or another, all our focus has only been on what we wanted, what we needed to achieve to feel better about ourselves. And no matter what, we weren't going to stop until we got there.

However, something woke us up along the way. Somewhere along our race to the top, we realized that there is a real danger to this competitively driven way of thinking, that keeping up with such an all or nothing pace was draining us physically, mentality, emotionally, spiritually. We realized we just could not keep up with it anymore. Somewhere in our race we were calling life, something changed for us. Something changed in us and before long, we were wondering if

this Rat Race, this all or nothing pace was what we really wanted for our lives. At some point along our way to the top, we stopped and wondered “Is it really worth it?”

Now please don't hear me say ambition is a bad thing. We all need direction in our life. We all need focus to get us to our goals. But we aren't talking about ambition here. What we are talking about here is what Paul describes as “empty glory”. He says to the Philippians “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourself.” What Paul is really asking the community at Philippi and us as modern day disciples, is to address the false illusions that we have created around ourselves, to address the false illusions that we have created for ourselves. He wants us as people of faith to realize that these things are not who we really are. In fact these false illusions, our search for empty glory have taken us farther and farther away from who we are created be...that is beloved children of God. This things have taken us away from our calling as the people of God, a call which invites us to live in community with one another grounded in God's love and grace.

You see, the key word for Paul is “selfish”, only looking toward our own wants, looking only toward our own needs. This selfish way of being, this selfish way of living cannot be any farther from how Jesus lived his life here on earth, from the model Jesus gave to us as his followers. This way of selfishness cannot be

any farther from how we are called to live out the values of the Kingdom of God each and every day through our words and our actions.

As people of faith, we know that there is a different journey, a different pace, a different race we are called to run. “Unity cannot be achieved or maintained if we only think of our interests or care only for our own pride”. Being in community with one another takes us realizing that we should be looking towards interests of others rather than just being concerned about our own.

This is my ouch moment of the morning. It is hard coming face to face with just how selfish of a creature we can be, isn't it? Now you see, the real reason why I didn't want to include this film in this series. It had nothing to do with racing and winning. The reality is my reluctance to include this film in the series had everything to do with coming face to face with the false illusions of success and achievement we often create in our lives, create in our communities just so we can fit in. It had everything to do with coming face to face with the reality of just how lonely it really is at the top for us.

Now, I could leave this sermon right here, making us all depressed, wondering where the good news is for us. Where is the hope for us as we continue to struggle, facing the harsh realities of our own illusions of empty glory, as we continue to struggle, finding our place in a world which constantly urges us

towards the top. Where is the hope for us as people of faith as we continue to struggle to hear something else, to hear something meaningful, to hear something which will give our lives purpose, something that will drown out the louder, larger narrative of “If you are not first, you’re last”. Where is the hope for us as people of faith?

Well, yes I could leave us all wondering these things but what kind of preacher would I be? So let me say, for me, as a person of faith, it always comes back to the story of our God, a God who shows us each and every day the gift that is presently in our midst...the gift of community, the gift of others walking this journey with us. For me, each and every time the world tells me I must be first or I am nothing, I am reminded again and again that Jesus tells a different story...a story where ordinary bread and wine are transformed into extraordinary holy moments of grace for me and for others, a story where Jesus notices the people pushed to the margins, people who were told they were nothing and nobodies, yet Jesus embraces them as his friends. For me, each and every time the world tells me, “If you are not first, you’re last”, I am reminded that our faith story calls us to run a different race, a race where the first shall be last, and the last shall be first, a race where at the finish line, we find true glory....a glory that can only be found when we live out the values of the Kingdom of God in our lives. May it be so.

Amen.