

“THE GOSPEL IN GREAT BOOKS:
III – *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*”

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Micah 6:1-8

Luke 10:25-37

This morning I bring to a close my sermon series on “The Gospel in Great Books” with a book that you will find included in almost every list of “The Greatest Books of All Time” – Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I’m fairly certain that most of you read this book when you were in school, and if somehow, you managed to escape that joy, then you saw the movie which starred Gregory Peck. It’s one of those books that after you read it, you never forget.

A pastor named David Green has said that “Personally, it’s one of those rare books that changed the way I viewed the world and I like to think made me a better person. Every few years (he says) I’m compelled to pick it up and read it again. And I know the same is true for millions of others.” (On-line, “The Gospel of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, David Green, 2/17/13)

He’s right. I’ve read it a number of times, most recently on my vacation in the Outer Banks the week after Easter. And you know what? I’ve found, every time someone would see me reading it, they would want to talk about it, and how it impacted them. It’s that kind of book.

It’s so powerful a book, and the main character, Atticus Finch, such a compelling figure, that people have been known to name their children after him. As a matter of fact, as of a few months ago, when my cousin’s daughter had a baby boy, I know have a third cousin named Atticus. (It’s a big name for a little baby, but wait until he gets old enough to know the story and the power behind his name!)

At any rate, on the off chance that someone hasn’t either read the book or seen the movie, let me briefly tell you the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The Finch family – father Atticus, son Jem and daughter Scout – live in a small town in Alabama. Atticus is a widower, so he’s raising these two children mostly on his own, but there’s a woman who’s practically a part of their family – an African-American woman by the name of Calpurnia – who cooks and cleans, and minds the children while Atticus, a lawyer, is at work. The Finches, by the way, are white – that’s important to the story.

Living right near the Finch family is the Radley family, who have a son named Boo – somewhat of a recluse, if you will. Because he never comes out of the house, he is, of course, of endless fascination to Scout and Jem and their friend Dill.

They make up all sorts of stories in their minds about him and they spend their summers trying to sneak a look at him, and see what's going on.

Meanwhile, Atticus is asked by the court to defend an African-American named Tom Robinson who has been accused of raping a white girl by the name of Mayella Ewell. This story takes place in the 1930's, so right there you know that racial issues loomed large at that time in the south. And this case was fraught with racial issues. The prevailing notion among whites was that Tom was guilty, while the African-Americans thought he was innocent.

Atticus accepted the case, and then the trouble began. People began to call him names, they turned away from him, questioned his sanity, taunted him, and worst of all, said these things to his young children as well. It was a terrible time for them all, and there were times when Miss Scout was ready to put up her dukes to defend daddy's honor.

Well, the time comes for the trial, and it is fairly clear to everyone that Tom has been brought to trial on circumstantial evidence, and as the witnesses are brought forward one after another, there is significant evidence of his innocence. (Actually, it appears that the guilty one was Mayella's father, Bob Ewell – guilty of beating her, and then pointing the finger at Tom.) Despite that, the jury convicts him. And sadly, later, he is killed while trying to escape from prison.

But the anger of the community and especially of the Ewell family at Atticus for defending Tom Robinson lingers. And one night, in order to get back at Atticus in a way that he knew would hurt him the most, Bob Ewell went after Scout and Jem as they were walking home in the dark. He tried to attack them, but someone came to their rescue, saving them, but mortally wounding Bob Ewell. That someone was Boo Radley – the elusive one they had wondered about so often – ended up being their savior.

My telling of the story doesn't do justice to the power of this book, so I encourage you to read it, if you haven't already, or read it again, if you have, or at the very least, watch the movie. Its lessons are timeless, and its lessons are clearly right out of the Bible, so let's look now for a few moments at the Biblical truths lived out in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The first Biblical truth is this: Every person is of sacred worth, and every person is worthy of dignity and respect. From the very first chapters of scripture, when God creates human beings and calls them good, to the very end, and especially in the stories of Jesus, it is clear that every person is of sacred worth, and worthy of dignity and respect.

Look especially at how many times Jesus turns toward those from whom others turn away, and look at how He crossed human "boundaries," caring for those that others would call outsiders – whether because of nationality, or behavior, or appearance, or whatever. Jesus' arms of love were wide open – open to all in such a

way that they knew he valued them for who they were, just as they were. His belief about their sacredness and worth was reflected in His words and His actions.

The sad thing about *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that, more often than not, such was not the case in that Alabama town. Not everyone was treated as a person of sacred worth – and the reason was mostly because of the color of their skin, or their socio-economic standing. Sadly, even the “good” Christian people, acted that way as well.

Look at two of the main characters – Tom Robinson and Boo Radley – both of them were treated as less than human – one because of the color of his skin, and one because of his diminished capacities and his reclusiveness. For Boo, it meant years of being talked about and spied upon; for Tom, it meant his very life.

Thanks be to God for Atticus Finch. He believed to the very marrow of his bones in the sacredness and worth of all people, and he lived that belief, even though it cost him so much. He also taught it to his children. Listen to what he said to Scout one day: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” (Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 39)

He told her that as she struggled with the things people were saying about her Daddy, but he also wanted her to think about it in terms of how she was treating Boo Radley.

Oh friends, it’s so easy to fall into the trap of deciding some people are more worthy or less worthy than others. This world of ours doesn’t help, either, because in many ways we still rank people – sometimes because of race, but also because of wealth, or neighborhood, or nationality, or so many other things. Jesus calls us to do otherwise. As faithful Christians, we are called to treat all people – all people – as individuals of sacred worth, and honor them with the dignity and respect they deserve – and to do it even when the world pressures us to do otherwise. It’s what Jesus did, it’s what Atticus Finch did – it’s what we’re called to do.

The second Biblical truth that is so powerfully evident in this book is that the people of God are called to speak out against injustice in the world. That, of course, is what Atticus did so well throughout the book in so many ways. He could have refused to take the case, you know, but he took it anyway, at great personal and professional cost. He knew that it was a matter of justice for Tom Robinson, and he fought with every fiber of his being – because it was the right thing to do.

It took tremendous courage to do it, especially given the fact that he knew which way the wind was blowing – and chances were, he and Tom Robinson would lose. Again, words of Atticus, as he spoke to his son Jem – he told him that courage is “when you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what.” (Ibid, p. 149)

In the face of injustice, even injustice you may seem to have no chance of defeating, Atticus says, and Jesus would agree as well – “do it anyway and see it through no matter what.” It’s what Jesus did his entire ministry. It’s what led Him to go into the temple that day and in anger, overturn the tables of the moneychangers, because they were taking advantage of poor, vulnerable people. He had to do it, and it cost Him dearly – it was one of the things that led Him to be arrested, and like Tom Robinson, falsely convicted.

My friends, one of the toughest things we’re called to do as Christians is to confront and challenge injustice – because often there’s a high price to be paid as we do it. But as one wise person once said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” (Edmund Burke) May that not be said of us, as we strive to live as Jesus lived.

Finally, the third Biblical truth found in the book – that God chooses unlikely heroes. Atticus Finch was a fine upstanding Christian, a well-respected member of the community, a white man, the father of two children. He had everything going for him, until he did something radical – chose to defend a black man in a racially divided town. He was the only chance Tom Robinson had for freedom. In that day and age, given the prevailing beliefs, Atticus was certainly an unlikely hero. He could have played it safe, turned down the case, and gone on with a fairly normal life – instead, he did what he felt called to do – a hero in my book.

Boo Radley was clearly an unlikely hero. All through the book, all we hear about is his strangeness, his reclusiveness, and then, when they need him the most, to save their very lives, he comes out of the shadows and saves Jem and Scout. Who in that town would have ever thought that Boo Radley would be a hero?

God seems to specialize in choosing unlikely heroes. Look at the Gospel lesson – the unlikely hero was the Good Samaritan. He was literally from the other side of the tracks – he was from Samaria – a place, a people hated by the Israelites – yet when push came to shove, and an Israelite lay bloody on the road to Jericho, the Samaritan was the one who cared for him, at great personal expense. An unlikely hero!

And what greater unlikely hero in all of life is there than Jesus Himself? The Savior of the world, born a baby in a manger – a weak, helpless, defenseless baby. Who knew that He would grow up to be the One who saved the world? God did – the sender of unlikely heroes.

Friends, God is still in the hero-sending business, even today. Do you know that the woman who played Scout in that film with Gregory Peck so long ago, a woman named Mary Badham, even as recently as last year, was going around our country talking about the book and the movie, but more importantly than that, offering a message of tolerance and acceptance of others. She’s a strong advocate of education and having people of different races, nationalities, and cultures come together to talk and begin to understand and appreciate each other. (David Green)

An unlikely hero herself, perhaps!

My friends, who knows? God could call you as well, to be one of His unlikely heroes. It could be you He calls to affirm someone's worth and dignity. It could be you He calls to stand against injustice. It could be you. As Micah reminded us in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning – "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?"

My prayer this day is that this wonderful book has stirred up something in all of us, that we may go forth from this place committed to those things that Jesus lived out so well – the dignity and sacred worth of all people, speaking out and acting in the face of injustice, and being ever ready should God call on us to be one of his "unlikely heroes." May it be so.

Amen.