

**Sermon: "Finding God in the Movies: Moonlight" August 22, 2021**  
**Rideau Park United Church Text: Luke 7:1-10**

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A few years ago, on a family vacation in upper New York State we came upon a memorial stone, dedicated to the first Europeans settlers to come to the region. There was a list of names on the stone. They were all men. We know that these men came to a new land with their wives and children. That women too were part of this pioneering movement is a fact of historical record. But it seems that the women were not included on the memorial stone. The historians and the stone carvers remembered only the men. And the Mohawk nation that preceded these settlers by countless generations in that place? They did not get a mention on the stone either.

Sometimes the stories that we tell leave people out. Sometimes people are erased from the story with intent. Even the Biblical record sometime leaves people out, or rarely *intentionally* erases people from the story.

Consider Junia. Junia, Paul wrote in Romans 16, was a woman who was "great among the apostles". Junia was a leader in the early Roman church who was held in such great regard that she was given the title of apostle, the greatest honorific imaginable. In fact, Junia was not just an apostle but as Paul wrote, was great among the apostles.

And yet... in the NIV translation of the New Testament, finished in 1973, an American project, translators chose to change Junia- a female name- to Junias- a male name. A woman's name in Scripture was changed into a man's name. Why? Because, in spite of 2 millennia of translation and tradition, these 20th translators decided that if someone is called an apostle, that someone must be a man.

One of the great leaders of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century church, John Chrysostom, the Archbishop of Constantinople wrote about Junia in his comments on the Romans passage in the late 300s:

*"To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles – just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! ... Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.*

But in a 20th C version of the story, in one version, Junia is erased.

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Consider the gospel that Suzanne shared with us today. It's a story told in both Matthew and Luke. Jesus is in his chosen hometown of Capernaum. A centurion, a Roman officer lives there. He is a supporter of the synagogue and, even though he is a Roman, he is held in high regard by the Jewish elders of the town.

The centurion's servant is ill and the elders appeal to Jesus that he might heal the Romans' servant. As Jesus approached the Centurion's home, he is given a message that the Centurion believes Jesus can heal his servant even from a distance... and so, amazed at the Centurion's faith Jesus brings healing.

But maybe, maybe something, maybe someone has been removed from this gospel story. The centurion's servant. Another translation for the Greek word, here translated as servant, could be partner, boyfriend. The word translated as servant in our translation today has also been translated to mean intimate partner in other ancient Greek texts. The idea that the Centurion had an intimate relationship with the man he wanted Jesus to heal, is supported by the great concern the Roman has for his companion. At the very least the Centurion cares deeply for his servant.

Scholars debate the nature of the Centurion's relationship with the one Jesus healed. But there are reasons to at least consider that maybe the faithful Centurion of Luke 7 was gay.

Some get very upset with this idea for reasons that go beyond scholarship. Just as some said that Junia was called an apostle so she must not be a woman, so some say the Centurion is lifted up as exemplary by Jesus so he can't be in a same sex relationship. But on the basis of translation and scholarship it may be that in Luke chapter 7, a same sex partnership has been left out of the familiar story...

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In July and August we have been reflecting theologically on cinema. We have been looking for God in the movies. We have been reflecting on movies that you have suggested and the list you have created has includes Nomad land, Chariots of Fire, Mary Poppins, Parasite, Intern and now today- Moonlight. In Ottawa its Pride Week and today in normal times would be the Sunday for the Pride Parade, so the movie Moonlight fits well this Sunday ...

In 2017 Moonlight won Oscars for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor and Best Adapted Screenplay. Adapted from a play, Moonlight is the story of a life. It follows a young man, Chiron, showing 3 chapters of his life as he grows up in the harsh world of South Miami.

A different actor plays the main character in each of the three parts of Chiron's life. The film explores themes of masculinity, of identity... Chiron is defined by his community as he struggles also to define himself. He is mentored, bullied, wounded, supported, he faces violence and experiences love... He grows and adapts and changes as struggles to find his place and to find himself. He is a gentle and sensitive soul living in a harsh and brutal world.

The cinematography in Moonlight is beautiful. The camera tells much of Chiron's story. And while films about growing up and about struggling to find ones way in the world are not uncommon, this film tells the story of one who is often left out of central narratives. Chiron is African American – all the actors in this film are people of colour. And Chiron is gay. This beautifully touching film centers on a young gay man. One reviewer called Moonlight: "a Heartbreaking Portrait of Often Overlooked Lives...a refreshing, exhilarating portrait of lives that are so rarely depicted on film." (Richard Lawson- Vanity fair)

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The mission statement of Rideau Park United Church includes these words

*We recognize that, in order to reflect God's love and grace, and to faithfully follow in the path of Jesus, we are called to honour all God's children for their unique gifts... we offer care and*

*support to all, including those of diverse ages, abilities, gender identities and sexual orientations, races, ethnicities, religions, and economic backgrounds. All are invited to participate fully, with mutual respect, in the life and work of the church.*

Said in another way, as followers of Jesus we want to be sure that everyone is included in the story. In the story we tell about God's grace and love, no one should be left out.

In our first reading, an Ethiopian eunuch, someone who from the perspective of the dominant culture is sexually and racially other, a person of a nonspecific gender, meets the apostle Philip on the road. He is reading the prophets but does not understand. Philip explains the text to him and the eunuch asks to be baptized. Without hesitation, Philip baptizes the eunuch on the road. The Ethiopian eunuch is made welcome, included, made part of the story of God's people. Racially other, sexually other, neither male or female, the Ethiopian Eunuch is welcomed.

Moonlight, the film, tells the story of someone rarely depicted in film. It tells a story that includes someone who is often left out of common narratives. We can think of the Gospel narratives and of how Jesus extended God's grace to all, including those that others would have deliberately excluded. We can think of the sacred story and of God's desire to leave no one out... And we can follow Jesus by making sure no one is left out of the story of God's love.

Amen