

Sermon: Little Miss Sunshine July 25, 2021 John 13:1-17  
 Rev. Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church

Henri Nouwen was a popular and prolific writer on faith and spirituality. A Yale educated Dutch Roman Catholic priest, and a clinical psychologist, Nouwen wrote some seminal books which were very popular 20 to 30 years ago. I heard Nouwen speak a few times and it was always a grace filled experience. I even shared breakfast with him once, but that was in a silent retreat house so the conversation was limited to a nod and a smile.

Of his 60 publications, his most famous book is *The Wounded Healer*. It is a bit dated in presentation, with two sets of King Crimson lyrics in the text. But its essential message is timeless. Written particularly for those who care for others, in this book Nouwen suggested that the experiences in life that wound us most deeply are also those which give us the most strength. Being in touch with our own woundedness, our own brokenness was an asset that could inform our relationships of care. Claiming our own woundedness created compassion. Our own failures created understanding for the failures of others. In woundedness, since we are all wounded, community may be created.

Nouwen lived for many years in the L'Arche community in Toronto. In a Toronto journal he wrote a reflection on the gospel that Meg read today. I no longer have a copy of the article, but I remember his thesis. He suggested that darkness wins when we try to be strong, when we work to appear invulnerable, successful and invincible. God wins however when we dare to be vulnerable, to show our weakness, to be open about our woundedness. Being open about such things may lead to the possibility of solidarity, community, compassion and caring...

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On summer Sundays we have been reflecting on movies that you have suggested to us. We have looked at *Nomad Land*, *Chariots of Fire* and *Mary Poppins*. The movie for theological reflection today is *Little Miss Sunshine*.

*Little Miss Sunshine* came out in 2006 and it won Oscars for best original screenplay and for best supporting actor, Alan Arkin, in 2007.

It is a comedy. It is the story of a blended family struggling to find its way.

The father, played by Greg Kinnear is promoting a program for personal success but he himself is astonishingly unsuccessful. His family's finances are entirely invested in his project. But no one is interested in his book, speeches or seminars and so the family is in financial peril.

The mother Sheryl, played by Toni Collette, values family, but family bonds are fraying. She is trying to hold her new family together and it is not going well.

Uncle Frank, Sheryl's brother, (Steve Carell) is the Number One Proust scholar in the world, and has just attempted suicide because he fell in love with a graduate student who dumped him for the Number Two Proust scholar in the world.

And the teenage son Dwayne (Paul Dano) hasn't spoken in nine months. He's not depressed, exactly; he's been reading Nietzsche and has taken a vow of silence while training to get into flight school. Plus, he openly hates *everybody*.

Abigail Breslin plays the young daughter who is practicing for a children's beauty pageant, the Little Miss Sunshine contest. She is an atypical pageant participant, tutored by her grandfather, Alan Arkin who in his final years has thrown away decorum and reserve and has embraced his uninhibited self.

And together, this motley crew heads off across the country in a broken-down VW van, 700 miles from Albuquerque to Southern California, hoping to find success in the father's business and in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant. And as the plot of the film moves forward their collective failures mount and their personal failures and shortcomings becomes more visible to one another other...

Its summer and it may be a time for family road trips. I have some great memories of such trips as a parent and as a child. Such trips force us to be really be together, to set aside schedules and distractions and to just be together as family. We share the joys and hardships of the road. Car breakdowns, wrong turnoffs, getting lost, unexpected events are all part of the family road trip experience.

So it is for this cinematic family. Community and care are created on the road and conversations happen that wouldn't have happened at home.

Uncle and teenage nephew share stories of failure and suffering. A young sister comforts her brother when his hopes are dashed. They endure a great loss on the road which brings them closer together. And finally they arrive at the Little Miss Sunshine contest where they learn that maybe the world they are trying to succeed in is quite broken too.

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In the gospel today, Jesus is in the upper room, on the night of his betrayal. He strips down, kneels at his disciples' feet and begins to wash them. He, their Master, their Rabbi, stoops to be a servant, humbles himself at their feet.

Peter rebels. Jesus will not wash his feet. It's beneath Jesus, surely, to take this lesser role, to be a servant, to be weaker, to be vulnerable...And it is so hard for Peter to be open about his need, to be vulnerable, to receive care.

But Jesus insists. If you want to follow the way of Jesus, you must be a servant to others. You must let other be a servant to you. Jesus is creating a community of servant care.

Or as Nouwen wrote, God wins when we risk being vulnerable, to appear broken, to be open to compassion and care from one another

Or as Leonard Cohen wrote in his song Anthem

Ring the bells that still can ring  
 Forget your perfect offering  
 There is a crack, a crack in everything  
 That's how the light gets in.

Little Miss Sunshine has a recurring motif. As this ragged struggling family makes its way across country, they have to join together to push their old van to get it started. The starter motor is broken and they cannot afford to fix it. At every stop on the way they all have to push together to get their van to go. Together in brokenness they move forward. They grow closer in care and compassion.

We take a moment now to listen to a hymn, the servant song...

Two of its verses speak to the theme today...

We are pilgrims on a journey,  
 We are trav'lers on the road;  
 We are here to help each other  
 Walk the mile and bear the load.

I will weep when you are weeping;  
 When you laugh I'll laugh with you.  
 I will share your joy and sorrow  
 'Til we've seen this journey through.