

## Sermon Looking for a Wizard for Sunday, January 14, 2017

Just before Christmas, a number of us from the church went to see the stage production of *The Wizard of Oz* at Syracuse Stage, thanks to Nancy Hallock's organizing us to do so. It was a really good production. The stage sets were magnificent and the cast was great. I was a little apprehensive since the old movie is one of my all time favorites and I don't like people messing with my favorites, but the show was really good in its own right.

Now, I don't plan to give you a review of the show, just to say that this was what got me thinking about the idea of how we see ourselves and how people find a way to develop the best in themselves. I'm sure you don't need a recap of the plot. Let's focus on how the Scarecrow, the Tinwoodsman and the Lion get their desires, I was going to say heart's desires but the Tinwoodsman's desire *is* a heart so that doesn't work. And, of course, on Dorothy's discovery about herself.

When we meet our heroes, somewhere in the suburbs of Munchkinland, I think, they all feel the lack of something in their lives. Whatever it is, brain, heart, courage, they are all convinced that having this something is what keeps their lives from being perfect and that without it they are so incomplete as to be immobilized, literally in the case of the Scarecrow and the Tinman. They are galvanized (no pun intended) into action by Dorothy who is unwilling to accept the status quo. Now,

we have to remember that Dorothy is quite the little rebel. When her aunt and uncle say that Toto, her dog, will have to be put down “because they can’t go against the law,” Dorothy is unwilling to let a human institution, the law, stand between her and what she knows is right. So, right from the start, Dorothy is not willing to let things go and she’s also not willing to let other people passively accept their fate.

It is part of human nature to passively accept our fate, to write off as inevitable and immutable our limits and lacks. We all too readily accept the version of ourselves that others give us. Sometimes we are told not to try to change or to improve by those nearest and dearest to us, like the parents who tell their children not to attempt college or the wife or husband who discourage their partner from a new business venture. Often we are told we should limit ourselves ‘for our own good’ or because we might get hurt if we try to do something new. The Cowardly Lion’s parents, perhaps themselves somewhat timid felines, may have told him not to get aggressive and so put himself in danger.

But sometimes we are told what to be or what not to be by larger forces, forces that stereotype us by gender, race, nationality, sexuality, disability or class. If you are of the Scarecrow race, for example, it is well known that you are a know nothing strawman who will never have a thought in your head. And it’s pretty clear

that a man made of tin does not need a heart and, indeed, would be defying nature if he were to get one. This is why stereotyping in all its forms, the models presented on TV and in the movies, the characters in popular books, the stories followed or ignored in what papers are left, can be so destructive and why control of these images becomes such a battleground. We live in very homogeneous communities and often our only understanding of people not like ourselves is through the media. We assimilate our beliefs about people in ways we are not conscious of, but ways that become very deeply rooted. How do we see inner city, African American citizens? How do we see members of the LGBTQ community? How do we see poor people? Often our perceptions have been so thoroughly conditioned that we can no longer see clearly, even when we have such people in our lives. So the perceptions of how people are 'supposed to be' influences both those who are stereotyped and those who take in the stereotypes. We are all the poorer for having our vision so obscured.

So, whether a person's sense of their limitations and deficiencies come from the family circle or from the larger society or, as is usually the case, from a combination of both, the fear of moving outside the small circle of familiarity is very strong. In almost all cases, to do so is to invite ridicule, at the least, and in other cases, it can bring physical danger to the person. Look at what almost happens to the Scarecrow. Change, personal or communitarian change, is

frightening and, at least for me, it is often tiring. Much easier to hope someone else will get up from their armchair.

This is where someone like Dorothy comes in. We need that confidence, that enthusiasm, that single minded vision to get us moving. And she does. Once she gets the crew motivated, that's when things get interesting. Because Dorothy, like most of us believes in a savior more than she believes in herself or in her friends. This is a hard habit of thought to break. We are usually discouraged from seeing ourselves as wizards. After all, think what would happen if everyone went around thinking they could create change! Or improved without buying a library of self-help books by various wizards.

We know the rest. The wizard has done a great job of convincing the Ozians of their dependence on him. There are no atheists in the City of Oz. When Dorothy and company return from their expedition to eliminate the wicked witch, however, the wizard is forced to admit his fallibility and, in the process, to reveal that they are, in truth, as powerful as he is, as powerful as everyone is, once they find the key to their own abilities. They have had the power all along but they needed to find it for themselves. Perhaps what is not so explicitly said, is that they were able to find it in community, in the company of each other, not as isolated beings but as people acting to create good for each other as much as for themselves.

We have seen this happen again and again. We have often been part of it ourselves. If there is to be a new heaven and a new earth, it is usually because some people see the gap between what is and what should be and act to bridge that gap. So we see now, when we talk about the gap between rich and poor, when we talk about bigotry, when we talk about hatred, when we see the whole earth up for sale. We worry about jobs, about care for the elderly, about the way our children are being raised. We worry about our future; we worry about our children's future; we worry about the world's future. The times we live in are often harsh and we sometimes feel very alone and helpless as we contemplate the gulf between our reality and our vision of what could be. And so we look for a wizard. We look for a wizard because we know too well our own weakness. How can we change anything when we feel so powerless in our own lives?

Tomorrow is the day we honor Martin Luther King. We can sometimes forget, as we honor him, that it took many, many other people to begin to right some of the great wrong of racism in this country. Great leaders should be honored. It is immensely hard to get up from that armchair and put one's life on the line. It takes someone who has not only vision but resolve and persistence, those quieter attributes, to keep going through defeat and danger. But it is also all too easy to honor those leaders who have made this a better country and to forget that they are human beings. They are not gods. They, too, became tired, became

discouraged, were unsure, were hurt by the insults people hurled at them. They, too, wanted to go on living, were afraid for their families. They were no different from each of us. Martin Luther King is one example. Pick any cause and we will find other people with the same resolve and courage. And, in addition to those whose names we know, there have always been many, many people whose courage, brains and hearts lead us to better place, people just like us. It is too easy to see those who are honored for their bravery and devotion as more than human. It then becomes a short step to seeking the next person who will save us from ourselves. It is too easy to spend our days seeking the new wizard. Instead we should seek the wizard in each of us.

One definition of religion is that it binds, but to what does it bind us? Religion acts both to reaffirm the status quo and to challenge it. Religion can empower us or make us feel helpless. Many religions offer us different wizards, wizards who ask for our unthinking allegiance, who ask us to observe rituals, to follow a set path, and by doing so take the danger of choice and the fear of being wrong away from us. But they also take away the joy of our own self-discovery and agency. I think what makes our religion unique is that in place of yet another wizard, we call on what is within us to effect change. We ask to find the wizard within.

I have been reading *Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic* by Matthew Stewart. I recommend it highly and I have to warn you that you will probably hear about it again. It is a lucid account of the beliefs that shaped the American Revolution, particularly the broad set of beliefs called "deist." We are definitely the heirs to that tradition. In reference to our search for truth, the second line in our affirmation, I'd like to quote a little here: (p. 261)

The crucial premise of radical, original liberalism is that we often do not know ourselves very well at all, and that the ideas that constitute our desires are often unworthy even of ourselves. We do however have a power of understanding that will seek reasons and evidence just as surely as rocks will fall and planets rotate, and to the extent that we make way for this power, we realize ourselves. Genuine liberalism seeks to make possible radical freedom: not a freedom to commit random acts of faith but the freedom to set aside every dogma that stands between ourselves and our rational self-realization...

A genuinely liberal political system likewise aims not to satisfy the existing impulses of the majority but to hold the actions of an entire collective accountable to reason...

Genuine liberalism is at bottom a system designed to ensure that self-government among naturally passionate individuals takes place, as it must, through acts of understanding. It is both a republic of learning and a learning republic. In its ideal form—never perfectly realized in any specific set of institutions—it is a truth machine, and the purpose of its truths is freedom.

‘The quest of truth is our sacrament’, we say every Sunday in our Affirmation of Faith. Sacrament. According to dictionary.com. and excluding specifically Christian rituals, something regarded as possessing a sacred character or mysterious significance. A sign, token or symbol, an oath; solemn pledge. All these, I think. For us UU’s the quest of truth is sacred, is a sign or symbol of that which is greater than what we can ever encompass and is a solemn pledge that we make each week. The quest of truth is one of the enduring foundations of our religion. It is a never ending journey, and the phrase means not that we will find ultimate truth, because that is ever beyond us. Those who tell us they have found The Truth have usually cut it down to fit. Instead we commit to the quest.

This quest begins within our own skins, our own ability to seek a way to see what is around us and within us with clarity and as much objectivity as is possible for human beings. At the same time it is a recognition that our sight is always limited and partial, that we are always the victims of our own self-delusions and desires. That is why a community is necessary for this kind of seeking.

A community of seekers is also necessary for another reason. As I said before, there are many, many forces that keep us from trusting ourselves, from believing in our own abilities, many forces that keep us fearful of thinking differently than others. When we believe in each other, when we come together, in



a community, we help us overcome our fears and reaffirm our insights. We acknowledge that we need to talk to each other and learn from each other, respectfully, understanding that no one has cornered the market on truth. We are at work on a very important endeavor-creating a community that has not existed before, a community of all for all, a community where we will all be wise and loving and brave. A community where we all come home.