

Sermon: We Must Talk About Bruno

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Scriptures: James 1:19-25; Mark 6:45-52

“In our darkest moment, we were given a miracle. The candle became a magical flame that could never go out and it blessed us with a refuge in which to live. A place of wonder... an Encanto.” So begins the tale of the family of Alma Madrigal, whose story is told in the fabulous Disney film, *Encanto*, our third film in August at the Movies: Disney Edition. The last three weeks, we have been discussing the intersection of faith and film, looking unique places God is still speaking today. So far, we have discussed *Moana* and our call to care for the earth, as well as *Beauty and the Beast*, which reminded us that it is not our place to judge others, but God’s. We must see the worth of the individual beneath the surface of even the most beastly of humans.

Today, we move on to *Encanto*, which takes us to the mountains of Columbia in the place of wonder known as Encanto. Over time, the extraordinary Madrigal family finds that the miracle of the candle I mentioned moments ago continues to grow. Their house, their casita, itself, comes alive to shelter and care for them. When Alma’s children came of age, the miracle of the candle blessed each of them with a magical gift. In fact, all children in the Madrigal family, when they come of age, get one of these unique gifts that helps maintain their home as a paradise. Well, all that is, except Mirabel whose gift never came, much to her and her family’s disappointment. Mirabel finds it difficult to deal with this strange fact of her “ordinariness” in a family that is otherwise extraordinary. Why them and not her? No one knows why.

Mirabel’s mother can heal, her sister Luisa has herculean strength, her other sister Isabela can make plants and flowers grow at will. Her aunt’s mood controls the weather, her cousin can shape shift, another has superhuman hearing. On the night her youngest cousin, 5-year-old Antonio, is to receive his gift (to communicate with animals), Mirabel begins to notice that the casita, their home, is cracking and the candle, which once burned strong and bright, is flickering. She realizes something is wrong. Something is

happening to the miracle. When she tries to tell her grandmother, her abuela, who certainly runs the show, she is silenced and abuela tries to reassure all who are attending Antonio's party, that all is well in the casa. But Mirabel knows something is wrong and she must figure out what it is.

Mirabel's first stop is her sister Luisa, who brushes off her concerns for the most part because she's overwhelmed from the constant demands everyone places on her. She tells Mirabel to go to her uncle Bruno's room, a forbidden tower in the casita, which might hold the secrets of what is happening.

It is not long before things begin to go awry not just with the casita, itself, but also with the magical gifts. Luisa finds her power is weakening, literally, as she is not as strong as she used to be. Slowly, the cracks become larger and Mirabel's journey leads her to stumble upon her Uncle Bruno, who everyone doesn't talk about (as we saw in the video today). But Bruno's gift of visions (he's the prophet in the family), is misunderstood. His ability to predict what was coming caused everyone to fear him thinking he caused the visions to come to fruition. So he hid himself away, feeling unwelcome and unloved by the very people who should have loved him and believed the best about him. Bruno and Mirabel can relate to one another in feeling like outsiders among family who are flush with useful magic.

At a pivotal moment in the film, Mirabel has had enough of her abuela blaming her for everything and finally snaps at her for deeming her not good enough for the family. Mirabel blames abuela's overbearing nature for weakening the family's magic. This argument creates a fissure that splits the nearby mountain and demolishes Casita. At this moment the candle extinguishes, leaving the Madrigals powerless. A devastated Mirabel runs away from the family, who scramble to find her.

When, abuela finally finds a tearful Mirabel back at the river where her husband died, she explains more about her tragic backstory and how, determined to preserve the magic, she ignored how her expectations were harming the family. Abuela finally

accepts responsibility for what happened. Mirabel and abuela reconcile and the two, with Bruno in tow, assemble the Madrigals to rebuild Casita with the townsfolk joining in to help. At the very end, Mirabel installs a new doorknob on the front door, which restores the family's gifts and brings Casita back to magical life. In the final scene, it's not just Mirabel who is invited back into the fold, but Bruno as well as they join the family, united and proud, for a group photo. And they all, as they saying goes, lived happily ever after.

It's a really nice thought, isn't it, happily ever after? And wouldn't it be nice if all our stories end this way? Of course, given the complexities of the relationships that reveal themselves throughout the course of the *Encanto*, we must assume that, like all human relationships, those in the Madrigal family will continue to be layered and complex. It's unlikely that Bruno so seamlessly blends back into the family dynamic. We would expect some growing pains in that process. Mirabel and Isabella, who face moments of conflict in the films probably do still face some bumps in their sisterly bond. All human interaction can be fraught with complications. We're all individuals with fearfully and wonderfully formed brains, bodies, and souls that, when combined with our life experience form us into the beautifully complex earthly creatures we are. We grow and we change and so, too, do our relationships familial, ecclesiastical, and otherwise.

The best of relationships and the worst have one very key thing in common: communication. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "communication" can be defined thusly: "a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior." It is a way of building rapport, and, in an increasingly technologically connected world, the means of communication have evolved, haven't they? In many ways, we are more connected than ever and yet, sometimes it feels like these technological advancements have driven greater distance between our hearts. For better or worse, however, technology is here to stay. Technology isn't the point of this sermon, so I will say just this about it: we should consider that what we put out there online is there forever. If we speak ill of someone, that offense is on the record. And while we may not feel that it means as

much when communicated online, the people we hurt with our words (online or not) are still people with feelings whose hearts can be broken by our callousness whether it is seen on a screen or heard from the proverbial horse's mouth. In short: words matter whether they are said aloud or online.

But I digress. Communication is a vital part of the health of our relationships with one another. Poor communication tends to yield bonds devoid of common understanding and, often, breeds things like fear, envy, jealousy, contempt, and resentment. Clear communication, by contrast, produces love, empathy, acceptance, trust, respect, even contentment. Even when we disagree, when we communicate clearly both through our speaking and our listening, good things tend to result.

And communication is one of the primary obstacles in the film *Encanto*, in our personal lives, working relationships, and even within the church. The letter of James, which we read some of today, addresses communication and relationships almost immediately. Scholars are divided on the authorship of this letter, but for today, we are going to go with the research that this letter comes from James, the brother of Jesus. James is writing to a poor and oppressed Jewish-Christian audience during a time of great division in Jerusalem. James is witnessing and speaking to the disintegration of the social fabric of the region, referencing things like violence, anger, and killing. He's writing to an audience of both men and women and asking them to *listen*. "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry," James writes, "because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." He tells them to rid themselves of all the evil and "moral filth" around them and to look within to the "word planted in them, which can save..."

A key component of communication is listening to one another. If we aren't listening, effective communication is impossible. That's one of the things James is saying here and that's what the Madrigals discover over the course of the story. It's not just their inability to "talk about Bruno, no no," it's their inability to listen to one another and to young Mirabel, "the girl with no apparent gift." As their home begins to crack and break

down, Mirabel throws up the red flags, begs to be heard, but without a gift, no one will listen to her. Her worries are downplayed and brushed aside to the point that the only person who can relate to or is willing to entertain Mirabel's concerns is the one other person no one wants to talk about or talk to.

Mirabel is asking to be heard in order that action might be taken to save the magic of the candle, the casita, and the Madrigals, themselves. Alma closes her ears to Mirabel's worries, and in not listening does not know there is anything to do. Her sister Luisa listens, sort of, but does not act. It is not until the casita implodes and their magic disappears that anyone besides Bruno will give Mirabel the time of day. Mirabel is running around saying, "We must talk about the cracks in the casita! We *must* talk about Bruno! We must communicate!" And no one will hear her.

James, seeing the disintegration of righteousness in the community, can see there is a breakdown in communication, particularly of listening to hear one another. He implores the people not to merely listen to the word, but to do what it says. Those who listen and do will be blessed in their doing. When all we do is talk over one another, we can solve little in our communities. When we think we have all the answers and are unwilling to hear opposing viewpoints or even accept that they exist, well... just look around and observe the divisions springing up around you. I think we all see exactly what comes of this mentality—and it's very little good, my friends.

I love the Swedish rock band, The Cardigans (which is a fantastic name for a band by the way. As many of you know, this pastor has never met a cardigan she didn't like!). They have a song aptly titled "Communication," that came to me this week as I thought over the scriptures in light of this film. The Cardigans sing, "I'm talking and talking but I don't know how to connect... so I disconnect." And that really got me this week. "I'm talking and talking but I don't know how to connect. So I disconnect." That's exactly what's happening around us every day. We're all talking and talking (and talking and talking), but we refuse to connect. We can't, because while our mouths are open, our ears (and hearts) are closed.

We don't listen to one another. Then when we realize we're getting nowhere with all our talking and talking, we simply disconnect from one another and from the world around us. Apathy takes over. Indifference reigns supreme. Apathy and Indifference are a poison to healthy relationships built on love and trust—their existence precludes the possibility of peace throughout the world. Elie Wiesel, prolific writer and Holocaust survivor once famously said, “the opposite of love is not hate; it is indifference.” When we stop listening, we stop caring and become indifferent to one another's suffering. This indifference will destroy us all, friends. All our relationships and institutions, including the church.

This indifference is present in the film *Encanto* and causes the breakdown of their magical little domain and the near disintegration of their community. Apathy had seized James' community and love of neighbor is no longer present. James calls the audience of his letter back to the perfect law, which refers to the love of one's neighbor. Love of others is supposed to be the basis for all we do, it's exactly why Mirabel's alarm bells go off as she sees things begin to fall apart—her love of her family provokes her to action, but it falls on indifferent ears.

When we stop listening and communicating, the love that binds us together, the love of one another that is the bedrock of Christian community, that love breaks down and we are left as ships in a storm without a rudder or captain to guide us. Ineffectual so-called solutions to actual problems are tried and fail enough times that, eventually those who can avert their eyes from societal ills, do. Apathy reigns supreme and the social fabric that holds us together as communities large or small collapses.

As I look around at the anger being spewed at people each and every day, not just online, but on signs in our communities, I have to admit that I'm concerned. Folks are lined up outside of schools to shout down difference because it makes them uncomfortable. Folks put up signs with vile, hateful messages to make some kind of point regardless of who it hurts or whose eyes may see it. Folks are so busy being

angry at the other side, that they block messages of love and acceptance and shut down any solution to what plagues us. It's better to *be right* than to actually do what is right. And so I'm left to ask, how long, Lord? How long can we go on talking and talking, refusing to listen, before our own casitas fall apart? How long can we simmer in an apathetic soup before all that we hold near and dear is boiled beyond repair?

Will we listen to the Mirabels of the world as they raise the red flags about the cracks in our own foundation? Will we, as the disciples do in our gospel lesson from Mark today, cower in fear as the Lord offers us his hand of help, or will we let him get in the boat, calm the storm, and guide us safely to shore? Will we listen to the imperatives of Jesus, acting on the most important of all commands: to love God and neighbor, *or* will we ignore his example, preferring our own rightness to God's own righteousness?

I sure hope the answer is clear. Amen.