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“At the Pace of Relationship”

This past summer of 2023, *The Barbie* movie made its debut in the US and quickly became a pop-culture phenomenon. It was very low on my list of movies to see, however, until our own Mary Ann Hitt posted on social media that not only had she seen it, but that she loved it. If Mary Anne says so, it must be true, I thought. And so it was that I became one of more than a billion people to see this movie.

What I certainly never expected was that I would see it not once, but three times, each time laughing, crying, and joining in a group of snot-covered, red-eyed people in the movie theater bathroom, all blotting our faces and laughing at ourselves in slightly embarrassed and surprised communion.

Perhaps you are hearing this and wondering a couple of things: first, what on earth could be so compelling about *Barbie* to warrant three movie viewings? And second, what does any of this have to do with Sunday service at SPC?

There were many lovely themes layered into *The Barbie* movie: loss of innocence, discovering the brokenness of an imperfect world, loss of identity and the feeling of being ever insufficient, even the humorous portrayal of a belief that we can somehow achieve perfection. But the part that gets me every single time, overcomes my stubborn resolve to definitely not cry for the fourth time, is the ending. It's the final risk Barbie takes to let go of every false persona and enter a real relationship with a real and imperfect.

In this near to last scene of the movie, something has changed for Barbie—she doesn't feel like Barbie anymore and doesn't quite know what it means to not be Barbie either. She's faced with what it means to choose to be embodied as a *Fully Human* Being.

In this scene, Barbie's creator Ruth Handler turns to her and says, “Being a human can be pretty uncomfortable. Humans make things up like patriarchy and Barbie just to deal with how uncomfortable it is.”

But Barbie looks at her, and knowing she'll be uncomfortable in this imperfect world, that she'll have the same ending as every other human and will someday die--chooses it all anyway. She chooses because she has felt something greater than perfection: she has experienced love.

Not that she's fallen in love with a person—a kind of love we might call “eros.” Or even a love for her kin, that love that's defined as “filial.” No, the kind of love that can see the truth of life's brokenness and choose to love it anyway is a bigger love. This is the love that's called agape. It's what I imagine Paul is speaking of in his first letter to the Corinthians when he describes all that love is.

So it was, that I asked this group of youth to join me in an act of holy imagination, where we might enter the story of the world that Paul beheld. Can you imagine, I asked, a world and church turbulent with the divided hearts and minds of a whole host of human differences and disagreements? A world full of people all claiming in their different ways and disparate voices to be the authority on what it means to live in relationship with God? With divisions that seem to be pushing people further away from being the church with one another and further toward ever more separate factions. A world where “same teams” and “enemies” appears to be clear.

I'm not sure I have perfectly described Paul's world, but what I do understand is division. And what was Paul's response to division? To choose love, not erotic or filial love, but agape love that goes big, reminds us just how much more we're capable of than our small, fearful, uncomfortable selves. This kind of love is patient, kind, doesn't demand its own way; isn't irritable or rejoicing in wrongdoing. It is prepared to bear up with hope and endurance, without end.

How, we pondered together, could it ever be possible to choose this kind of love? Especially in a community, or even in a youth group, where people can really rub us the wrong way? Where we are often thinking different thoughts about what it means to be church? Or what walking with God looks like? Or even why it matters that we do? How might we choose this kind of love in a place and with people who hurt us, and can make us feel grouchy and insensitive and downright snippy? How could it be possible when we find ourselves wanting to check-out, wishing we could look at our phones rather than think about the Bible of all things? How is it possible when we get hungry and anxious and sometimes think about how uncomfortable it is to live in the bodies we're walking around in and with so many maddening thoughts that perpetually come?

I almost never have certain answers—for myself or for them, but I do believe that the answer to how any of this is possible is because, like it or not, love keeps choosing us. This is the gift of age and of living through hard stories that I keep discovering: that I've always been inside of this love, living within the presence of God.

Yet this awareness comes and goes. It seems to not arrive quickly enough or remain long enough. But recently, a writer friend of mine reminded me of this: “God moves at the pace of relationship.” And how do I understand this as true? Through the time I spend returning to relationship with the marvelous youth of SPC.

I think of how many meetings and adventures and long nights we've spent together—the group of us discovering what it means to be church to each other. Discovering what it means to try to investigate the Bible or topics like loving one another and our enemies too, and realizing we might have conflict with the text or with each other. Discovering what it means to be really sleep deprived after an all-night church lock-in filled with Bible study and pop song lip-sync contests, and still wake up to attend early service at church the next morning. Or it's like a story we received of awe—of a group of teenagers who don't all love to hike but love to be together, walking through the woods to discover that hidden there is a gushing waterfall, a preserved field of Virginia Bluebells and Trillium flowers, a house that was brought from China piece by piece so a faraway culture could be preserved through its walls. It means not always understanding or agreeing with one another, realizing that relationship is inherently risky, and still showing up for relationship anyway. I think that's how we get to know ourselves within God too: through the sometimes prickly and uncomfortably challenging way of relationship that Jesus walked in—that God-sized, agape love that Paul is reminding us to live out.

It's in this kind of relationship that we don't have to reconcile the gorgeous and the tragic parts of life, or the flash of a moment perfection of a field of Virginia bluebells with the perpetually imperfect notion of human connection. I've come to see that these opposites don't cancel each other out. I am a storyteller and understand life through stories. I am coming to see the way that God has written us into the story of time and the way that we are coming to understand Jesus through the story we're writing in relationship together.

In our story of relationship, we discover that life is so beautiful, and life is so hard. And somehow, in this risk of being known by one another, we are made stronger for both the beautiful and the hard. The absurd faith we have in each other is somehow bolstering us up so we can continue to understand the kind of deep love that won't let us look away from each other, won't let us turn our backs, but keeps us deciding to be part of one another—no matter how risky it is.

Evelyn Bailey expressed it like this: “The more time we take with each other, the more our relationships grow and expand. It takes a while to trust someone—and it's the same way with God.”

The risk it has taken for the youth and me, the risk it takes us as a church or the broader us of humanity is worth it, if it's love we're endeavoring for. I have witnessed and experienced the way that a love that takes us outside of feelings, outside of desires or opinions, wakes up some divine quality in us such that we recognize in ourselves and in each other the “dignity that is more gracious than the smallness that fuels us with fear and force.”

One last story. In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel told a story of his childhood in a Nazi concentration camp. In his recalling, thousands of Jews who'd gone without food or water for 3 days, were driven out of their barracks before dawn into the thickly falling snow. They were herded into a field where they were forbidden to sit or even move much. There they would stand

in a straight, still line, facing the back of the person in front of them, until evening when they'd be herded onto a train that would take them deeper into Germany. As they stood, the snow collected in a layer on their shoulders. When their thirst had finally become intolerable, one man suggested they eat the snow. But the guards wouldn't allow them to bend over. So the person in front of this man agreed to allow him to eat the snow that had accumulated on the back of his shoulders. The act spread through the line until there in that field, they were no longer individuals suffering alone—they were a community acting together. They became the place of nourishment, of love, for each other.

These kinds of acts might take us by surprise, unexpected as they are in the midst of human suffering, or even in us living separate human lives. It doesn't really surprise me any less that these youth members keep choosing to come together to talk about how we might love God and one another. In a world tugging at their seams with choices and decisions, I think in part they keep coming back because they're discovering how it feels for relationship to grow, how it feels to expand and trust, and to learn to be love for one another. There's no greater yes pulling at our seams than that. This is how we come to know the truth of what Kate Bowler says: "To be fully known in all our humanity is a God-sized project—but blessed are we living our human-sized lives in the company of each other."

And that's what I see in that final scene of *Barbie*. Imagine it—Ruth reaches out her hands, tells Barbie to hold them, to close her eyes, and then *to feel*. Then, with a gentle exhale Barbie sees what it means to choose to enter this world, with all its flaws and brokenness, into the community of other humans. She sees sunlight through the tree; a baby held within a family of adults, children being spun by adult arms, someone jumping into a pool of fellow swimmers, a group of friends celebrating a moment bowling, people dancing, two sets of aged hands clasped together. She witnessed patriarchy and hurting hearts and now she is witnessing the way that being human includes deep, abiding love that keeps choosing to show up within us. So it is, with a final and whole-hearted "yes" Barbie enters the complexity of it all. And so may we too.