**A Sunday Review of *Little Women***

A sermon delivered at Lawrence Park Community Church,

January 19, 2020

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Even if you did not see the latest *Little Women* movie, you probably read the book when you were a child. I did. Four young girls and their mom, the March family, sort of struggle to make a go of it during the American Civil War. Dad is away fighting. Money is short. The mother—Marmee—is incredibly loving even though she claims that she is always angry deep inside. She teaches the girls, likewise, to always be nice. And the girls are (very) pretty and fine and kind and even forgiving. In fact, there is so little evil in this movie that it would never qualify as a fairy tale—fairy tales, at least, have witches, wolves and ogres.



Still, the four little women struggle—a little bit—to make something of themselves. The eldest, Jo, wants to be a writer but doesn’t really succeed until she gives up writing stories she thinks will sell and, instead, writes the story we’re seeing in the movie. Fine.

Meg wants to be married, have children and beautiful dresses. And all of Meg’s wishes come true. In fact, her husband is even willing to give up having a winter coat just so Meg can have another pretty dress. Very fine.

Amy wants to be rich and almost marries a man for money, until she is saved from this fate by marrying the neighbor boy for love. Fortunately, the neighbor boy is also very rich. Much too fine.

Unfortunately, halfway through the movie, Beth dies of rheumatic fever. That part of the movie, though brief, is very sad, though Beth is very brave. A nice bit of melodrama.

But still, most of the movie is unbelievably upbeat, with just a bit of politically correct women’s rights sprinkled in for depth. It’s a life where, as Marmee sings in the solo we just heard from a previous production of *Little Women*, “everything is fine.” Everything is fine.

At one point in the movie, the March family and friends are having another fine day at the beach. They are playing badminton, flying kites, flirting with visitors from England, and running into the water. It’s a pretty scene of life lived, even in the midst of war, the way we would all like to live.

During this scene Jo reads a quotation from a novel by George Eliot. It goes like this: “We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it, if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers.”

“We could never have loved the earth so well if we had no childhood in it.” Now, most of us—if not all—had good childhoods full of beaches and flowers and fine memories. I certainly did.

Everything was fine when I was growing up. Like the Marches, the Suke family didn’t have much money. I remember moving into the first home my parents actually bought, back in 1962. It was on the wrong side of the tracks and looked it. My father borrowed the down payment—five hundred dollars—as a personal loan from the bank manager who then also gave him a regular bank mortgage for the other 3,500 dollars. We rented out the upstairs, including the only bathtub in the house, to a Uruguayan immigrant family, to pay off the personal loan. For several years the entire Suk family took its baths in the kitchen sink. And we were happy.

My childhood was fine. I remember running through the empty lot across the street, beside the Loblaws parking lot, with an empty jar to catch bumble bees. There were hundreds of them, and I loved chasing them, bottling them, listening to them buzz to be free, and finally letting them go again.

Later on, we lived a few blocks from Lake Ontario, where we sometimes watched thunderstorms roll across the sky from the West, breathing fire, thunder, and lightning. My dad would gather us kids on the porch and then point at the lightning and say, “look at that! Look at that beauty. And wait, wait, the thunder is coming! Yes! Lovely!” And none of us kids ever feared the thunder, because our parents taught us to laugh with it.

Most of us grew up this way, in good homes with loving parents. Not all of us, but most.

But in spite of this, our attention is usually drawn back, again and again, to all that is wrong in this world. It cannot be otherwise.

So, in church this morning, along with all those happy childhoods, we commemorate with heavy hearts the horrific downing of flight 752 in Iran. We will have a moment of silence during the congregational prayer not so much because we need to meditate on the horror of it, but more because we have no words that I can say or you can imagine that really get at the ugliness and tragedy of that event. It breaks our hearts and has undone the Iranian community here in Canada and around the world.

And there is more. This past month twenty-two people died in a shootout between police and a drug cartel in Mexico. One factory fire in the Sudan killed twenty-three and another fire in Bangladesh killed forty-three. Eighteen people died, in India, during protests against a proposed anti-Muslim immigration law. A car bomb in Somalia killed seventy-eight. Here in Toronto trans activist Julie Berman was murdered, one of seventy Toronto homicides last year. Well, and then there are impeachments and global warming and crowded hospitals and homelessness . . . it would be easy to go on.

Our attention is necessarily drawn, again and again, to all that is wrong in the world—or we struggle with memories of our own personal pain. Unlike the Marches, not all of us grew up with great parents. Some of us suffered terrible assaults, growing up. We have all experienced surprising deaths or inexplicable prejudice or hatred, or unexpected setbacks.

There are plenty, plenty reasons not to be happy with the state of the world, and on many Sundays, whether through song or sermon, these hard realities are addressed with as much sensitivity and wisdom and concern as we can muster.

But back to the movie. While watching it, I was just about falling asleep on account of the mostly very boring nice lives of these four Little Women, but then it occurred to me that there is something about this movie that I needed to hang onto, as well. There is, in spite of all the tragedy that surrounds us, so much that is fine, too, in life.

You see, we rarely focus on what is “good enough” in our lives. Our emotional antennas are primed for fight or flight, because that is how we evolved. No one ever was fittest and survived by ignoring potential trouble. So, paying attention to trouble is built deep into our DNA and is also the basis for the entire news and entertainment businesses.

But what rarely makes headlines or great movies are the things that are just fine, like how the electrical grid continues to work and how 95% of people who want to work have jobs right now and how most families are healthy and loving. What doesn’t make the headlines is how the air is cleaner now than fifty years ago. What doesn’t make the movies is that according to the World Bank, fewer people are dying of hunger or in armed conflicts, now, than ever before in human history.

And so, if there is one thing that I take away from Little Women, it is that it is okay, just now, or anytime, really, to also give thanks for our childhoods, for growing up in a world that has also been as generous to us as it is. We are privileged. Most of us have much to give thanks for, in spite of the tragedies that surround us.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that all the good in our lives is a reason to ignore tragedies to others, like the crash of Flight 752. We can’t ignore that, or fail to mourn with those who mourn, or raise a hand to protest such tragedies and many more.

But as people of faith our response to all that is wrong with the world has a context. And that context includes thanksgiving for what is good, gratitude as a source of our passion for healing what is broken. We should, as the Psalmist suggests, come into God’s presence with thanksgiving. We should make a joyful noise with songs of praise. Because such thanksgiving empowers and encourages us to love one another, to do justice and love mercy, to receive the kingdom of God and its priorities, just as children receive any good gift with open arms.

So sure, breathe in the fine—nice dresses and wonderful jobs and good marriages and decent moms and dads and health and wealth and lovely memories of childhood—breathe in the fine, but breath out the sort of gratitude that causes you to roll up your sleaves and get busy. For we could never have loved the earth so well, or set to work to make it better, if we did not have all the gifts, from flowers to health to kitchen sinks and bumble bees, that we mostly enjoy.