

2020 03 15 – Little Women

John 4:1-42

Today is the third Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the third Sunday of this year's "Lenten Movie Series." During this season of self-reflection, we are using popular cinema to explore issues of spirituality and justice. All the movies that we are considering were nominated for Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards. This week's film is *Little Women*.

Little Women is, of course, based on the children's novel of the same name by Louisa May Alcott. How many of you have read the book? (*wait for show of hands*) This is actually the sixth time this story has been made into a movie. So how many of you have seen one of the previous movie versions? (*wait for show of hands*). How many have seen the most current version? (*wait for show of hands*). I think it is safe to say that I don't have to worry about spoiling the ending for you.

Little Women is the story of the March family: Meg, Jo (Josephine), Beth, Amy and their mother, Marmee. The story is set in rural New England around the time of the Civil War. During some of their teenage years, the father of this family is away fighting for the Union army so the women are left to care for themselves. In this movie we watch Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy complete their journey from childhood to adulthood.

We watch as each one of them struggles to determine for themselves what it means to be a woman in the 19th century. Meg dreams of being an actress, Jo wants to be a famous writer, and Amy hopes to be a world-renowned painter. Beth, the quiet one, is a talented musician, but she is content to play for her family. We watch as they struggle with poverty, illness, temptation, jealousy, disappointment, and, of course, love and loss. We watch as they come up against societal expectations that would have them letting go of their dreams and choosing marriage instead. We listen as Jo laments:

Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts.
And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty.
I'm so sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for.
But I'm so lonely.

Today's scripture reading also has a woman as its main character. This woman, like so many of the women in the Bible, is not given a name. When Jesus meets her, she is coming to the local well to draw water. For nearly two thousand years she has been known only as "the woman at the well."

So what do we know about this nameless person? Well, she is a Samaritan and, in the reading, we are clearly told that Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans. She also arrives at the well at the heat of the day when most women would have been there hours before. It's possible that she is being ostracized because of her living arrangements. The woman at the well has been married five times and is now living with a man who is not her husband. It's not clear whether her

previous husbands had died or whether they had divorced her. But it's very possible that she had no say in any of those marriages. In Jesus' time women were legally the property of their husbands and had very few rights of their own.

Women have, for centuries, been treated as second-class citizens in nearly all cultures around the world. There's a reason why the United Nations declared March 8th at International Women's Day. This year the theme is "I am Generation Equality: Realizing Women's Rights." They are using the twitter #EachforEqual. Yes things are better now than they were in the first century, or even the 19th century, but equality has not yet been achieved. The organizers of International Women's Day put it this way:

The emerging global consensus is that despite some progress, real change has been agonizingly slow for the majority of women and girls in the world. Today, not a single country can claim to have achieved gender equality. Multiple obstacles remain unchanged in law and in culture. Women and girls continue to be undervalued; they work more and earn less and have fewer choices; and experience multiple forms of violence at home and in public spaces. Furthermore, there is a significant threat of rollback of hard-won feminist gains.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/12/announcer-international-womens-day-2020-theme>

Greta Gerwig, the writer and director of *Little Women*, has taken a 150 year-old story and created a film with something to say in the 21st century. She has

created a work of art that connects with the issues that women are dealing with, still, today. We see Amy, being told by her elderly aunt that it is up to her to support her aging parents and her sisters by marrying rich. We watch as Amy lets go of her dreams in order to marry one of the wealthiest men in London. And then we breathe a sigh of relief when she is able to marry for love instead. Even today, a lack of financial independence leads women to enter loveless marriages and stay in abusive relationships.

Women want the right to choose for themselves. When Meg lets go of her dream to be an actress and chooses marriage and children instead, Jo begs her to change her mind and Meg replies, “Just because my dreams are different than yours, it doesn't mean they're unimportant.” All over the world, women are still demanding the right to choose: to choose what happens to their bodies, to choose who they love, to choose, without judgement, their own destiny.

In the movie, Jo refuses to let go of her dream. And, despite some setbacks, she becomes a famous author. Jo stops writing for a while when Beth becomes ill. But Beth knows she is dying and asks Jo to write her some stories about their lives. It is then that Jo begins the collection of stories that is eventually reworked into a novel and named, “Little Women.” Jo is able to use her gift in such a way that eventually her voice is heard around the world and across the centuries

The woman at the well is given a similar gift. Despite her gender, her religion, and her status, it is this woman that Jesus chooses to talk to. He says, “Give me a drink,” and when she questions him he tells her about the life-giving power of

the Spirit of Love. He speaks of the water in the well and says, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give them will never be thirsty." It is this woman who receives the gift of living water and hears Jesus say, "I who speak to you am the Messiah." It is this woman who leaves her water jug and goes into the town telling the people, "Come and see someone who told me everything I have ever done! Could this be the Messiah!" She tells her fellow Samaritans, and they come. The woman at the well becomes a preacher and her testimony is heard around the world and across the centuries.

We all have gifts that God has given us. We all have abilities that we can share with the world. As Jo said, "Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty." Women want the opportunity to realize those gifts. Women want to be able to both follow their dreams and live in loving relationships too. May we, in our faith community, work for justice so that all may have equal opportunity, so that all may the right to choose and to create their own destiny.