

2025 03 30 – *Wicked*

Scripture: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the fourth Sunday of this year's Lenten Movie Series. During Lent we take time to theologically explore some of the movies nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards. Today, we will be talking about a film, a musical, called *Wicked*. This movie is actually a prequel to a movie that we all grew up with, *The Wizard of Oz*, so you will recognize some of the characters. How many of you have seen *Wicked*? What did you think of it? Did you enjoy it?

The movie begins with the death of the Wicked Witch of the West and the resulting celebration in Munchkinland. When the music ends, one of the children in the crowd asks, "Why does wickedness happen?" And Glinda, the Good Witch, proceeds to tell the story of Elphaba, the girl who grew up to become the Wicked Witch of the West.

Elphaba had a difficult childhood. She was ostracized by everyone, including her own father, because of her green skin. And, if that wasn't enough to deal with, she also had a temper and every time she got angry objects would start to fly in the air creating mayhem. When people looked at Elphaba all they saw was her green skin and her temper, so they either teased her or left by herself.

Elphaba met Glinda at boarding school. At that point, Glinda's name was actually Galinda. Galinda was the opposite of Elphaba. She was blonde and

pretty with doting parents and lots of friends. She was loved by everyone and was well aware of her pink perfection. When they met there was this immediate revulsion on both sides and we watched and listened as they sang a duet called “What is This Feeling?” and realized it was, in fact, unadulterated loathing.

I’m guessing that this is a feeling that many of us have experienced at some time in our lives when encountering someone (or something) that is the opposite of our expectations for this world. We might have perceived this other as ugly, dirty, smelly, stupid, useless, annoying, or even scary. It’s so easy to make assumptions based on difference and then write people off or even worse, call them wicked and make them our enemy.

Today’s scripture reading also explores this idea of writing people off because of who they are or what they have done. It is the story of a father and two sons. The younger son decides to take his inheritance and go off on an adventure to a distant land. We know nothing about his motivation, his hopes, his dreams, all we know is that he ended up squandering his money and returning home destitute. It would have been easy for the father to write off his younger son, to say, “Well you didn’t live up to my expectations. You messed up and good riddance.” He could have acted like Elphaba’s father and left him on his own. But, he didn’t, did he?

Now, the older son had met all their father’s expectations. He was obedient, dependable, and a hard worker. He probably wasn’t as spoiled as Galinda, but,

like her, he certainly knew that his life was secure. He knew he was his father's only heir.

Even so, we discover a crack in this elder brother's shiny veneer. When he returns home from the field and sees that his father is having a lavish party to welcome his younger brother home, he is indignant and jealous. He complains that his father's actions are not fair. He says, "Look! For years now I've done every single thing you asked me to do. I never disobeyed even one of your orders, yet you never gave me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends." In fact, he's probably right. His father's actions aren't fair. But they are merciful, and loving, and just. This father is not willing or able to "write off" either of his beloved sons.

In the movie we also begin to see the goodness and the wickedness that resides in both Galinda and Elphaba. There are moments when Galinda is mean and other times when she expresses true compassion. Like the time when she tricked Elphaba into wearing a truly hideous hat to a party but then, when Elphaba was being ridiculed by all in attendance, Galinda chose to support her by dancing with her knowing that everyone would follow suit.

It also becomes obvious that Elphaba's anger is what we might call, a righteous anger. Her fits of rage and the resulting mayhem are sparked by her sense of justice. She is angered when she sees others being treated unjustly. For instance, In Oz the animals are able to speak. They are just like everyone else: doctors, professors, nannies and civil servants. When Elphaba realizes that the

animals are losing their ability to speak, that they are being deliberately silenced and made scapegoats for all that is wrong in Oz, Elphaba recognizes the injustice. Her anger flares and she suddenly discovers the ability to control and focus the mayhem. She realizes that her ability to make objects move with her emotions is actually her power, her gift.

All of us have both good and wickedness within us. All of us struggle on a daily basis to live the best lives that we can live. Sometimes, like the younger son, we fail and need to ask for forgiveness. Sometimes, like Elphaba, our lives are so full of obstacles that we struggle to recognize our own worth, our own goodness. Sometimes, like the elder son we work hard to earn our success, and then question why we should care about those who chose (or were forced to) another, less fortunate path. Sometimes, like Galinda, we live our lives in a bubble that allows us to ignore the pain around us, until that bubble bursts.

Eventually, Elphaba and Galinda begin to see both the good and the bad in each other and they become friends. Their friendship brings them both to Emerald City where they look forward to meeting the Great Wizard of Oz. It is there that both their friendship and their understanding of what is good and what is wicked are challenged. It is there they have to decide which path to take.

Wicked is just the first movie in a two-part series. So we don't really get to see the ending. But that's OK, we don't get to see the ending in the story of the prodigal son either. We don't really know what is going to happen once the party is over, do we? All we know is that this father loves both of his sons, and he will

expect them to love each other with that same unconditional love, that same amazing grace.

Both of these stories are written to remind us that we are called to love others as the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being loves us. We are called to love with understanding and compassion, with empathy and mercy. We are called to look beyond our differences and to recognize both the possibility of goodness and of wickedness that exists within every person in God's creation. We are called to live our lives with the knowledge that we are all God's beloved children and that we all belong.

May it be so. Amen.