

***Reel to Real Sunday – McFarland, USA***  
A Conversational Message for Sunday Morning Worship  
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
Sunday, November 17, 2019  
Text: Ruth 2:1-12

Welcome to our first “Reel to Real” Sunday when the morning message is a conversation spurred by a movie rather than a sermon where I do all the talking. Yay!! The “Reel to Real” idea has been around for decades but is usually formatted as an educational session and is usually targeted at high school kids. But, I thought, why should they have all the fun? I also thought a “reel to real” morning message on a Sunday would be an excellent way for us to do something different every now and then even as we explore societal issues that are both vitally important, and potentially controversial. Discussing these issues within the context of responding to a film will hopefully make it a little easier to engage with the topic as we shift our own perspectives, even if only slightly, which is always the goal of any really good film.

In all candor I’ve been thinking about doing this kind of Sunday message for a long time and then, after I saw *McFarland USA*, I knew it was time to try. I love movies, I confess. All kinds of movies from old black and whites from the 1930’s to the contemporary films being made just for streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Movies, and really good television shows, have the power to shift our perspectives by creating an imaginary world we enter into by our own choosing. This makes

it possible for them to encourage us to look at really controversial issues from the safety of the emotional distance from the topic we create for ourselves. In this way movies and television shows are able to convey new ideas as well revealing unpleasant truths we'd just as soon not think about too much. This is not new information. We all know that during World War II Hollywood produced a plethora of war movies to build up morale at home by showing "our guys" defeating the evil enemy at every turn. More recently, some truly outstanding movies like *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, *Lincoln* and *Selma* and even *Black Panther* have created incredible cinematic worlds in which the explosive topic of race relations in this country can be considered within the context of really good storytelling. Movies can and do help us to understand these difficult and challenging topics in a way that is safe precisely because the film is just telling a story into which we are invited as observers. We do so, perhaps not expecting to be changed by the experience, but we are. Our perspectives are broadened, our thinking is expanded, our hearts are opened – if only a little. But, often a little is all it takes to help us see the world and the people in it in fresh ways.

This is the thinking behind today – this Reel to Real Sunday when we are going to have a conversation about some incredibly painful questions our society is wrestling with every day. The movie *McFarland, USA*, produced by Disney Studios, is a

powerful exploration of the questions which have been dominating our news headlines for the past several years:

Who deserves to be considered a real American, and who doesn't?

Is white privilege real and, if it is, what does it mean in real life?

What of the least of these in our society – the invisible people living and working at the margins of our lives – without whom something as basic as having food on the table would become impossible? Who is invisible in our lives and what happens as a result of their invisibility?

What happens to a person when he or she allows him or herself to engage with another person so different from themselves?

Where is God in all of this?

So, with all of this in mind, let's begin our conversation about *McFarland, USA*.

Discussion questions:

- Who was able to watch the movie?
- Of those who have seen it, is someone willing to briefly summarize it for the folks who haven't seen it?
- Which of the characters in the movie did you most identify with? Why?

- The protagonist or main character of the movie was Jim White, played by Kevin Costner. How and why did Jim White's name become a running gag and a powerful symbol of otherness as the movie unfolded?
- What did the boys on the cross country team teach "Blanco"?
  - How did they feel about being pickers?
- What would you say are the main points this movie was trying to make?
  - *White people are usually blind to their own privilege and react to people different from themselves with fear and suspicion.*
  - *It is possible to be both Mexican and American.*
- What was the turning point for Jim in this movie? Was it the same as it was for his wife and daughters? Why or why not?
- What was the most memorable scene in the movie for you? Why?
- What most surprised you about this movie? What did you come away from the movie feeling?
- Where did you see God at work in the story this movie tells?
- Were you surprised at Jim's decision at the end of the movie to stay at McFarland?
- Any other comments, thoughts, observations?
- Anyone have an idea about why I chose the scripture I did from Ruth as our biblical foundation for this conversation?

- Ruth went to glean in the fields of Naomi's kinsman Boaz both to find food for them and to bring herself to Boaz' attention.
- Ruth was only safe doing this because Boaz ordered his men to leave her alone and the workers to left additional food for her to glean.
- Ruth in this moment symbolizes the vulnerability of the people at the very outer margins of society. This woman, one of the only women specifically named in the lineage of Jesus, was on this day a picker and she did so as a foreign woman in a foreign land. What does this tell us about how Jesus expects us to treat others living at the margins of our own society?

I thank you for participating in this little experiment along with me. Did you like this as a change of pace? Would you be interested in doing it again? Then, get those movie suggestions to me! In the meantime, please remember that God is always reaching out to us, speaking to us, through every aspect of our lives – even the movies and television shows. Amen.