**“The Word Became Relationship”** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
2nd Sunday of Christmas The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
John 1:1-18 Saint Paul, Minnesota
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Who here this morning has seen *Wicked*—either the musical or the movie? How many have read the book? Our family first saw the musical in Chicago in 2007, and went together to see the movie a few days ago while in Kansas City.

The musical first appeared in San Francisco before a now-21-year run in New York. It revisits the beloved characters and settings first introduced in *The Wizard of Oz*. But whereas the Judy Garland classic – and the novel that inspired it – focused on a coming-of-age journey and the assembly of human characters, here we’re more concerned with Oz’s famous witches, notably Glinda, the *‘Good’* Witch of the South, and Elphaba – infamously labelled as the *‘Wicked’* Witch of the West.

But are those labels fair or accurate? How did they get them in the first place? That’s what the musical, and now this two-part movie, attempts to explore.

*Wicked: Part One,* opens with the famous on-screen death of one of its main characters, before quickly skipping back to her origin story. It’s here that we first meet Elphaba (played by British Catholic actress Cynthia Erivo) and get some snapshot insights into the tragic upbringing that shaped her. Yet while that shape *appears* to be monstrous (she has bright green skin for magical reasons involving a weird potion and maternal adultery), it belies a gentle, kind character whose only vice seems to be bouts of powerful, righteous anger. On her first day at a university apparently attended almost entirely by 30-somethings, she meets the glamorous Galinda (Ariana Grande), externally perfect but, internally, somewhat vacuous. Through a plot contrivance they become college roommates, and embark on an initially frosty relationship that, over time and through the magic of song, sees them become firm friends – a central relationship that defines the whole film.

Both women help the other with a core problem, blurring the lines between who exactly is meant to be *‘good’* or *‘bad.’* Galinda’s social clout helps integrate the formerly ostracized Elphaba into the heart of the college community and enables a romantic relationship for her wheelchair-bound sister. Meanwhile, Elphaba opens a locked door into the world of magic for her roommate, gaining her personal attention from Michelle Yeoh’s stern sorcery teacher. The friendship strengthens, and the two embark on a journey to the Emerald City to meet its incumbent Wizard, played in melodramatic style by cult hero Jeff Goldblum. Yet what appears to be a trip to reward and celebrate Elphaba’s magical prowess quickly turns more sinister, and we realize that while there are wicked forces at work, they are coming from an unexpected direction…

And so, in part, it’s a story about two people who start out as ‘frenemies’ and rivals who then become friends, but who throughout struggle to communicate effectively because of their wildly different backgrounds, life experience, and personal values.

Which is why some of the most moving stories are about how two people can make a journey from a standoff of frustrated and scarcely suppressed violence to a relationship of genuine peace. An example of such a story is the story of *Virginia Axline,* who was a primary school teacher in 1940s Ohio. She went back to college and studied with psychologist *Carl Rogers,* where *s*he developed the practice of *child-centered play therapy,* which offers warm, nonjudgmental acceptance to children and patiently allows them to find their own solutions at their own pace.

In her famous book *Dibs*, she describes a child of that name who seldom speaks, is often withdrawn, and frequently lashes out in violence. Over the course of a year, by listening and not judging, Axline induces Dibs to find words for his feelings and begin to interact with his family and peers. She never asks questions like, *“Did you have a good time?”* because they require a particular answer, which can leave a child trapped. She never says, *“See you next week,”* because she won’t make promises that might not be kept. Gradually trust and space and permission develop, and eventually the *words* emerge, and the violence ceases. The book is subtitled *In Search of Self*, but I’d call it *Establishing Relationshi*p or even *Finding Words*.

Which brings us to our text this morning: *“In the beginning was the Word.”* This sentence says that *communication,* the desire to share and relate, the urge to engage and listen and receive and open up—is at the very core of all things, indeed the reason for the creation of all things. *“The Word was with God, and the Word was God”* (John 1:1). In other words, the essence that created existence, the forever that conceived of time, the everywhere that brought about here is at its heart about *communication*—nonviolent communication, partnership, relationship, togetherness. In fact, that’s one of the primary purposes of existence—*to communicate fully with one another and to communicate back with God.* There’s nothing more important than that.

But here we run into two problems. First, not all communication is healthy—some words are cruel and destructive. (This was true even before Twitter.) Second, words are sometimes only words. Words aren’t always rooted in feelings, actions, or integrity; sometimes words are just lies.

Which brings us to the next important sentence from John, a sentence about communication and how it turns into trust and relationship*: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (*1:14). Here lies the fulfillment of the whole reason for the existence of all things. Everything that happened before this moment is a backdrop and preparation. Everything that’s happened since has been echo and embedding. This is the central moment, in which God’s original desire to be with us becomes more than words. Jesus appears, fully human, but Jesus is also fully divine. Jesus is the perfect communication of God to us, and Jesus is the perfect communication of us to God.

The whole of Jesus’ life is like Axline’s year with young Dibs. Jesus is creating an environment for us where we can live *beyond cruelty and lies* and finally find ways to dwell beyond violence *in patience, understanding, and trust.* He’s in search of our self, listening and not judging, offering open inquiry and not closed questions, inviting us to wonder and discover and allowing us to find our own solutions at our own pace. Jesus is the Word of God that offers us the epitome of communication, *through which* we may find a relationship that lasts forever.

Of course, cruelty and lies enter Christ’s story soon enough. They catch up with Jesus in the end, when his communication meets the world’s violence, and for a moment violence prevails. But the light of communication and relationship shines in the darkness of violence and promises that, if we can only find time and patience, we will eventually see trust and relationship emerge from even the most violent of our failures to find words.

Which brings us back to *Wicked.*

The characters of Galinda/Glinda (she drops the first ‘a’ in a hilarious moment of virtue-signaling) and Elphaba *are deliberately complex.* Both women have noble traits and obvious flaws; both try to be good and feel the pull to do bad. Each is a product of upbringing, circumstance and personal decision, and the resulting point is clearly made: *people are much more complicated than we want them to be.*

And yet that doesn’t stop us from applying such labels and categories. *Prejudice and fear* - both of the outsider *and of becoming one* are powerful drivers. The opening song lays these tensions bare: as villagers celebrate the death of the Wicked Witch, Glinda transmits a profound sense of discomfort. *We want to write people off but, deep down, we know it’s not right to do so.* It’s a message that the Church might want to both amplify and reflect upon – *the gospel of Jesus is all about redemption for those who might feel written off yet, so often, we can be guilty of pronouncing or reflecting that very same sense of judgement.*

The other relevant theme for Christians involves the nature of *anger.* At first, Elphaba is ostracized because her occasional fits of rage lead to dangerous explosions of magic. *Yet,* as we learn more about her, we realize that this is always motivated by her keen sense of *justice,* and by observing things in the world that are not as they could be. Like Jesus in the temple courts in [Matthew 21](https://www.esv.org/verses/Matthew%2021/), *Elphaba’s anger is entirely righteous* – a virtue perceived as a flaw.

As the film reaches its conclusion – the midpoint in the *Wicked* story – this goes a step further, and Elphaba assumes *another Christ-like position:* that of *speaking truth to power.* Motivated by a desire to overcome *injustice,* she challenges the powerful to turn from their own evil. What happens in response is somewhat resonant with the world we know: those in power fight to hold on to it, both claiming a supernatural book as their own, and identifying a common enemy that will unite the people behind them. *If it’s intended as a commentary on American politics, it’s not a bad one.*

As Samuel Wells put it: *“Civilization is about learning ways to resolve tension and conflict without violence. But sometimes the best of us can teeter toward becoming profoundly uncivilized.”*

To be more provocative: *does this also challenge the Church?* How ready are we to listen to those uncomfortable outsiders who seek to bring challenge, especially to the established, privileged order? Do we hide behind the power of our ancient text, or hardline dogma that is impossible to fight? In embracing the message of *Wicked*, *we can’t just draw parallels with Jesus’ own heart for inclusion, justice, and redemption;* we must also face up to the hard challenge that *we* can sometimes behave like the powerful wizard in his emerald tower.

Friends, Christianity is, finally, a story in which communication prevails over violence. *This is the wonder of the incarnation.* The Word becomes more than words. And it inspires us to let the Holy Spirit of patience and tenderness turn our own violent frustration and anger into relationship and trust—and eventually to let those words become flesh, in embodied gestures and commitments of solidarity and love.