

Defying Gravity - The Gospel Goes to Broadway (Wicked)
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 14:1-14

And if you loved the original Wizard of Oz, or 1978's groovy remake "*The Wiz*" starring Diana Ross and Michael Jackson as much as I did, you might have assumed that the prequel "Wicked" is about two girls and how one became good while the other became wicked.

But of course, that's not completely what the musical is about. It's more about how a young woman named Elphaba is treated wickedly because she was born an unnatural shade of green.

One of the main points that "Wicked" is trying to get across to us is our tendency to label people, to stereotype, even demonize people who seem different. It all began when Elphaba left her parent's home with her "tragically beautiful" sister Nessarose to attend "dear Old" Shizz University.

As an incoming freshman, Elphaba is immediately judged by her peers to be an outsider. One of the things we tend to do when we're uncomfortable with people is we label them, demonize them. In one scene, as Elphaba tries to find her voice in the classroom, roommate Galinda says about her "*I guess the artichoke is steamed!*", causing the class to erupt in derisive laughter.

It's important for you and I, as followers of Christ, to not fall into the trap of dehumanizing or labeling someone. Remember the story of Zacchaeus¹, who was known by everyone in Jericho as a short, stingy tax collector?

Remember how he climbed that tree in order to see Jesus in the crowd?

Jesus didn't go up to the that tree and say, "Listen, shorty! Hey you stingy, corrupt excuse for a human being, get out of that tree!"

No, he said something more like "Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus. We both gotta eat. We're both human beings. Come on down from that tree and let's have some lunch together". Jesus called him by name. Later that afternoon Zacchaeus repented, giving back all the money he had extorted. The man who everybody labelled was transformed by this humanizing experience with Jesus.

¹ Luke 19:1-10

It's important for us to be aware of our tendency to be afraid of that which is different, our tendency to dehumanize the "other" in those situations. It is our Christian responsibility to see others as our brothers and sisters.

You know what helps? Learning people's stories.

One of the great moments in the story of *Wicked* is when we see Elphaba and Galinda, who spent their time at Dear Old Shizz University mostly hating each other, realizing that their relationship over the years has been a blessing. They find that they are more alike than they are different. Realizing they needed each other, and that they learned so much from each other led them to sing that wonderful song "For Good".

Every person has their stuff. Their physical, mental, cultural, spiritual challenges, it's good to remember that. We've heard a lot lately about how our society is becoming more and more divided with an "us vs. them" mentality.

Our job as Christians is to realize, and help others to realize, that "they" are us, and "we" are them. This is probably the more important thing we can do with our time on this planet. Because if we don't do it, we'll destroy not only each other but this precious world we share.

Upon finishing their studies, Elphaba and Glinda head to the Emerald City to meet the "great and terrible" Wizard of Oz. In this musical (and in the film, too) the Wizard is a complicated character.

He says he likes to make people happy, and yet, suppresses those who speak out against him. He says he tries to treat every citizen of Oz like his own son or daughter, yet hides from them behind a terrifying smoke and fire laden façade. And when Elphaba tries to tell him of something bad happening to the animals of Oz, he deflects. He knows, of course, because he caused the troubles in the first place.

The Wizard – he's smart – and he's heard of Elphaba's powers, so he tries to get her on his side. Of course she considers it, because "*once you're with the Wizard, no one thinks you're strange*"! She's always wanted a good relationship with a father figure, to be accepted.

But then, he tricks into using her power to change her friend into a flying monkey, in order to spy on any subversive behavior, saying:

"When I first got here the land was full of discord and discontent! Where I come from, everyone knows the best way to bring folks together is to give them a really good enemy!"

And then, when she refuses to work for him, Oz turns on her. Of course, the citizens of Emerald City and Greater Oz still think the Wizard is wonderful, and they can't fathom that suppression and intolerance might happen in their fair land, even as it happens under their very noses!

There are a number of moral and ethical and religious themes throughout the musical, but the dominant thought that kept running through my mind the last time I saw the show was the interesting parallels between Elphaba's life and the life of Jesus.

Both Jesus and Elphaba were considered weird and different and were ultimately rejected by their own people.

When Jesus was a young man, he met with teachers in the temple who marveled at his wisdom. When Elphaba is a young woman away at university, her teachers discover that she, too, is highly gifted.

Jesus is tempted by the devil in the wilderness with everything he ever wanted if he would only serve at the tempter's side. Elphaba is tempted by the Wizard, with the same promise.

Jesus gets angry at the temple, confronting those in power. Elphaba gets angry at the Wizard and does the same.

Jesus' actions in standing up to those in power determine his future... he will be persecuted. The same for Elphaba.

Jesus told the disciples that they would be a lot like him, but that in the end they would do greater things than he would do. And I don't think he was just talking about those in his presence – he was talking to you and me too. In fact, I believe that Jesus was counting on it.

The true meaning of the word Christian is "little Christ". Think about it. You may be the only Christ a person will ever see. You never know when you will be called upon to be an instrument of God's love, bringing light and life to others. Think about the power you have to change lives!

One last comparison between Elphaba and Christ before we close... at one point in the story, they both had to leave those they loved.

Elphaba has to leave so that Galinda can fulfill her role as the Good Witch. Fortunately, she'll do that as a much wiser and humbler person, Galinda can do a lot of good in Oz if she stays and fulfills her calling.

Jesus also has to leave his disciples, giving them an opportunity to carry on the dream he taught and live into their true calling.

The poet Ann Weems² writes in her book *Reaching for Rainbows*, "*Christ came by and we learned his dance. The Lord does his dance on the temple floor,*" the Lord does his dance with a Tax Collector, the Lord does his dance with a woman from the street. The Lord does his dance with all the wrong people.

So, come now. Let's be little Christs. Let's dance where the music leads us. And like Jesus, and like Elphaba, we'll defy gravity. Amen.

² Ann Weem's Reaching for Rainbows