

Theme: The Gospel in Film
"August Rush"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

June 2-3, 2012 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Luke 15:3-10

So Jesus told them this story: "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away! "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."

VIDEO August Rush Sermon Starter

SLIDE August Rush

I want to invite you to take out of your bulletin your message notes and your meditation moments. Your message notes are chance for you to follow along and write something down that you might like to try and remember from today's message. The meditation moments are chance for you to build on what we are going to talk about each day this week by reading from Scripture and reflecting on some questions. I hope you will take them home because I think you will find them a blessing to your week and as you begin this summer.

As the summer season begins we have been looking at the gospel in several films. During the summer months many of us carve out time and money in our budgets to go to movies. Maybe you have been to see *The Avengers* which is been the top grossing movie this year and broke all the box office records for opening weekend a few weeks ago. Maybe you're looking forward to another film that is to be released this year like *Men in Black 3* or *Madagascar 3*. Maybe your type of movie is a chick flick rather than action. Whatever type of movie you enjoy a good movie can inspire us. It can bring us hope and make us laugh even when we might feel discouraged. A great movie can simply help us to have fun. Movies that have

great characters with people who face real-life dilemmas that are very much like the dilemmas that we face in life can give us courage and make us feel like we are not alone. We understand their struggle and it might give us a clue as to who we are or who we might be.

Movies, when they are more than just entertainment, can paint a reality that we can relate to, even when it is entirely fictional. We can find ourselves in the story and in doing that we learn a bit about ourselves. A really good movie can turn it inward to look at our own heart. This is the reason why we have been looking at film over the past few weeks.

I have a confession to make. I took a college course on the history of film while at the University of Colorado in Boulder. I thought it sounded like fun to get college credit for watching movies. But more than just having fun I learned in that class how a movie can be a work of art and can help us to see ourselves and see the world in ways that inspire us. Jesus used the medium of his day to do the very same thing and that medium was storytelling. While I will not suggest that any of the movies that we have studied during this sermon series are ones that Jesus would have made, I have no doubt that he would take these stories and use them to help people better understand themselves and understand God. That is why we are looking at how the gospel can be seen in well-known films over the past few weeks.

Today we continue in a series of sermons that are doing on the gospel in film. Two weeks ago we began by looking at the classic movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, and last week we focused on *Field of Dreams*. We turn our attention today to a film released in 2007, *August Rush*, starring Freddie Highmore. Unlike the previous movies that we have looked at, this film was not a box office record breaker. It was nominated for several Academy Awards but only won on the basis of its soundtrack.

I enjoyed this movie because it is a cross between a modern-day fairytale and heroic drama that might've been a parable in the days of Jesus. While the title of the film is *August Rush* the main character of the film is Evan. Evan is chasing after a hope and a dream and reminds me that each of us has a hope and a dream that we are chasing after as well. As you saw in the trailer, Evan was born to two musician parents after a one night stand. His parents' names are Lila and Louis. They meet by chance and have a short-term romance as older teenagers. Lila becomes pregnant but Louis doesn't know it.

Lila gives birth to Evan after she is involved in a violent car accident and she

is coerced by her father to give the baby up for adoption. Lila plays the cello and is one of the best in the world as she plays for symphony. Her father believes he knows what her future might hold if she is a young single woman with a child. He believes she will have to give up her dream and in some ways it is his dream to be a world-class musician. While Lila is unconscious in hospital from her accident her father turns the young boy over to the state and fills out the paperwork for him to be placed in foster care. The baby is sent out of the room before Lila has a chance to voice her opinion.

Evan ends up living in an orphanage in New York and I think at this point it would be good for you to meet him.

VIDEO August Rush 1

SLIDE August Rush

In this scene Evan is introducing himself to the new family social worker, Mr. Jeffries. Evan informs Mr. Jeffries that he has parents and he doesn't want to be placed within adoptive family. Mr. Jeffries tells Evan that he realizes that children are afraid of being placed in a new home, that it can be difficult for real parents to even find their children, and that is his job to make sure children are placed in good adoptive families because they probably will never meet their birth families.

Evan has this conviction in his heart that he will find his birth parents. He doesn't want to leave New York City in particular because he is afraid he will never find his parents if he does. He is afraid he will be too far displaced and he will never find them. Evan then decides to leave the system and the orphanage in which he is living in altogether. He actually escapes and set out on his own and ends up all alone on the streets of New York City, searching for where he belongs.

Evan's unique gift is that he can hear music all around him. He hears it in everything and he sees it in everything. He sees it in birds chirping and in basketballs bouncing on the streets. Glass in a wind chime tinkles in the wind and he hears a song and somehow he believes this is a connection to his parents. He feels like his parents are calling to him or drawing him to themselves. If he can just follow the music then somehow, someday, somewhere he will find his parents. He wanders through New York City listening and hoping.

Evan then meets a little boy named Arthur who is playing the guitar in a city park. Evan is fascinated by the music and he strikes up a conversation with Arthur which results in Evan going with Arthur to spend the night in an abandoned movie theater. This is Arthur's home where he lives with many other homeless children

and teenagers. Each of them go out during the day on street corners of New York and do music or other things to entice people to give them money. They bring the money back to this theater where they all live together and of course there is a leader of this collection of children. He is a creepy man played by Robin Williams and his name is "Wizard." He claims that he takes care of the kids and he loves them, but the reality is that he is exploiting them by pushing them out on the streets to use their musical gifts to make money and then he keeps a great portion of it. Evan finds himself in this new environment where there is music but this is not quite the home that he envisioned. Let's take a look.

VIDEO August Rush 2

SLIDE August Rush

In this clip Wizard played by Robin Williams meets Evan in the abandoned theater where dozens of homeless children live. Wizard tells Evan that music is God's reminder to us that there is something else in this universe. Evan asks if this is a school and Wizard replies that is a business. He then collects the money that children receive from donations given to them on the street as they play their music.

"Music is God's little reminder that we are not alone."

There is some insight in that phrase even though it comes from a sketchy character in the film. Evan knows that this is true for him because the music reminds him that his parents are out there somewhere. Music is the thing that inspires Evan and gives him hope that someone is out there who loves him and who wants him to be in their family.

Music plays a significant role throughout this film as Evan learns to play not only the guitar on the streets of New York but many other instruments in ways that make beautiful sound. He recognizes that he can make music as a way to not only hopefully reach his parents but in a way that brings other people joy.

As I watched this film I am reminded of the role that music can play in our lives. From beginning to the end of Scriptures we find the presence of music and singing and playing instruments. That's why music is so much a part of what we'd do in worship, because it is a means of communicating with God. There is an old saying that, "singing is like praying twice," and you know that there can be a way that music is a holy experience that touches our soul. Lifting our voices in song together is a gift in worship that allows us to praise our God and also participate together in something beautiful, recognizing that each voice adds to the harmony

and melody of not only the song but life and the kingdom of heaven.

Music is a gift to us and some of us are more gifted than others. Some of us can be in the choir or in front of people with microphones or instruments. Some of us can run the sound system and help blend all of the pieces together in a way that makes beautiful music. And then some of us make music sitting in our cars or in the shower or anywhere where others can't hear! Whether we are talented or gifted in music or not, most of us enjoy music of some sort because it speaks to something deep inside of us. Music can inspire us and bring us hope and it is why every movie that comes out in today's world has special attention paid to it when it comes to music or the soundtrack. A good song with great music or melodies finds a way inside of our hearts. It fills us with pride and joy and sometimes tears.

Music is a powerful way to worship and in the very beginning of the Scriptures we find people who were called to be musicians in the Temple as people came to worship God. Their whole life calling in their entire role in the body of worshipers was to provide music that would bring God glory and lift other people's hearts. Music is played at festivals and feasts and celebrations throughout the Scriptures. After Moses leads the people through the Red Sea they have a huge festival where they play the tambourine and Miriam sings a beautiful song which is a cry of thanksgiving to God. The book of Psalms is a book of hymns of the early church with songs of praise being lifted up again and again to God. Music is not just about the arts but it is a gift from God and we can use it to glorify God.

The tension in this movie builds because Evan has a desire to use his musical gifts in a way that is positive and uplifting. He wants to not only find his parents but bless people however Wizard has a very different plan for using Evan's gift of music. Wizard wants to use the gifts and talents of children for his own personal gain. I watched this film I was reminded that we can do the exact same thing with any of the gifts that we are given. We might be given a gift from God but we have an opportunity to either use it for good and to bless others and the world, or we can use it for our own personal gain. We have to decide daily if we will use our gifts to bless others in a way that will bring life or if we will use our gifts in selfishness.

We also can choose to ignore our gift and not use it to bless others or to bless the world. We could choose not to sing or to play an instrument or to teach or to lead or to care for others. Sometimes we just bury our gift and set aside instead of using it. In many ways this is just as damaging as if we only use it for

ourselves. God calls us to use the gifts that we been given in life-giving ways and we find that in doing that we are blessed.

I was visiting recently with a doctor who attends our church who decided a number of years ago to give 10% of his time being a doctor giving that to others, whether it is people who can't afford it or people in other parts the world. He recently upped that to 20% because he has earned plenty of income and he realizes that his gift has been given to him to be a blessing to others and not just a benefit to himself. What gift have you been given that you might share with others? Maybe you cook well or you have an ability to sit with people who are suffering and hurting. Maybe you have a way with children or an ability to teach. Maybe you have the gifts to be a pastor or a Stephen Minister who walks with others through times of grief and hurt.

Evan learns to play the guitar very well and he becomes one of Wizard's children who goes out and works for Wizard and makes money for him. Large crowds are drawn to hear Evan play on the streets of New York and Wizard realizes that Evan is his meal ticket. He is going to make Evan a superstar but he needs a new name and so he renames him what becomes the title of the film, August Rush. You get a picture of this gift in this scene from the movie.

VIDEO August Rush 3

SLIDE August Rush

In this scene we see Evans gift of music as he hits the streets of New York City. He is so good that people stop, watch and applaud him for his musical talents. They donate large amounts of money into Evan's guitar case and Wizard is overjoyed by his newfound talent.

There is some great music in this film as Evan who becomes August begins to unharness his musical talent. His quest, however, is not about playing music for the sake of music but about finding something deeper, his family. He believes that somehow, in some way, music is his hope and will help him be reunited with his family.

August isn't the only one who is searching. His biological mother has discovered that Evan is alive and possibly even in New York City and she goes on a quest to try and find her son. She has a deep desire to be reunited and she goes to agency after agency in New York to find him. She filled out all the paperwork and tries to make all the connections because she is desperate. But it's been 11 years since he was born and so finding him is not easy. She goes to the orphanage

where Evan had lived and has a powerful interaction with the caseworker that Evan saw earlier in the film. She brings to him a desperate plea to find her child.

VIDEO August Rush 4

SLIDE August Rush

In this final clip we find Lila introducing herself to Mr. Jeffries. She tells her story to him and Mr. Jeffries asks, "Why now? Why do you want to find him now?" Lila explained that she had always wanted her son but she doesn't want to wait the procedural six months to try and find Evan.

"I have always wanted him."

This is the Gospel. This is the good news that God has always wanted us. God has always wanted you, no matter where your journey in life is taking. This is our story and it is the story that we find in Scripture today as Jesus is talking with the crowds 2000 years ago. Can you picture or imagine God saying those words about you, "I have always wanted her. I have always wanted him."

God keeps track of the days and the minutes and the years since we have been apart from one another and what he longs for each of us is to discover and remember that we belong to him. There is a yearning in Lila's eyes in this scene and it makes me think of God's eyes and how he longs for us. Jesus reminds us clearly that we have a loving parent who in this same way as Evan's mother, is chasing after us.

In Luke's gospel we have a powerful image of God as a Father who is looking for a lost sheep and God as a Mother who is looking for a lost coin. Jesus is making it crystal clear, in a culture that values money above all else at times, what God values most is finding you and you finding God. God is looking high and low and constantly wooing you towards him. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called this *prevenient grace*.

SLIDE Prevenient grace is "the grace that goes before."

God goes before us, like a Shepherd looking for sheep and like the woman looking for a calling, hunting high and low and leaving clues so that we would know that we are missed and we are loved by God. Jesus is gathered around with Saints and sinners as he tells us these two parables. Notice in the stories what happens after the lost has been found. First, they embrace the sheep or embrace what was lost. Then they throw a party! They have a celebration!

Jesus drives this point home when he says;

SLIDE *"In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!"*

This tells us something about God and about the heart of God. If we are to be Jesus Christ to the world, and if we are to have his heart, then we also must have a heart for those who don't know God and who feel far away from God. We must do whatever we can to reach out to them, if it means changing our music or changing our worship style or changing our priorities, because this is where we find God at work.

I sent a letter out to our congregation, and you have a copy of it in your bulletin today, about a new staff person that will be joining us in August. His name is Zack Esgar and he and his soon wife to be Kelsey will be joining our team this summer. He will help with hospitality and evangelism, helping us to be focused on reaching out to the lost, as part of his role here on our Aspen campus. But half of his job will be helping us see how it is that we can connect with the next generation, primarily college students and young adults. Zack has a heart for this but the truth is we all should have that heart in some way. We all need to care about the fact that there are people in our community who need God and who need hope but feel far away.

God tells us clearly through these parables that every person is a child of God that he wants at home with him. Every child is worth seeking and searching after and turning over the whole house to find. Every child is worth chasing out into the world and into the wilderness. It's okay to leave behind the other sheep or the other coins even to go out and to find that which is lost.

The other day I was looking at an article online about a young boy who disappeared years ago and they were just solving the crime of who had taken the boy and killed him. They had a picture of him as a young boy and then they had a computer-generated picture of what he would look like today. I found it interesting that the picture of what he looked like today was a clean-cut, handsome and well groomed young man. When we see a picture of a child and we picture what they will look like as an adult we tend to picture something beautiful.

The reality is that most of us, as we grow, don't look like that beautiful picture that we have when we are children. We've had brokenness and our lives which has caused hurt and sorrow. We have experiences that can cause us to look older or to look different. We go through times our lives where we don't shave

every day or take care of ourselves physically the way we need to in order to look like that picture. Very few of us end up looking like that beautiful, computer-generated picture as we become adults.

But that is what God sees. God sees what we can become and he sees us as having ultimate worth and value. He sent his son Jesus Christ to bandage up our wounds and to heal our brokenness so we would know that we belong in the kingdom of God with God forever. This is the character and the heart of the God that we worship and the God that we serve each and every day.

This is a story of hope that we are meant to cling to just like Evan clings to it in this film. Just as he knows his parents are out there somewhere, we must hold onto hope that our God is not only out there but longs to be in here, inside of our hearts and with us always. At the end of our search we will not only find our heavenly parent but we will discover that he has been with us all along, just as Evan's parents were with him all along in the music that he heard.

Have you ever lost something that you couldn't replace? I'm not talking about your car keys or your smart phone, but something of sentimental value to you just can't replace. Have you lost something like that? Or have you ever been that parent standing at customer service at Wal-Mart practically in tears saying, "Please call my child over the loudspeaker. I can't find them anywhere!"

Do you remember what it's like to lose something that you desperately love and care for, whether it is a thing or person? Imagine that feeling times 10 or even 100 is how God feels towards us. God is not some deity who sits far off in a castle or in heaven and doesn't care about us. God doesn't want us to come before him and grovel about our rights and wrongs. God is one who desperately and passionately longs to be with us, to know us and to be in relationship with us, no matter what we have done or where we have been or how far away we have found ourselves.

In this film we see Evan and his mother desperately chasing after each other, trying to find each other. In so many ways that is very much like our story as followers of Jesus. We have a God who seeks after us and this is what we are meant to model as we seek to be Jesus Christ to the world. Part of being First United Methodist Church is having the heart of God and the heart of Jesus Christ who was willing to hang out with those who didn't know him and tell stories about a God who longs to find all who are lost, even if we don't realize it. We are called to be like Jesus Christ in chasing after and seeking out those who feel separated from God—those that feel alone or feel without hope.

This is why we exist and why we start new campuses and why we bring on new staff to reach those who aren't a part of this church. This is why we start new worship services and why we go out into our community next weekend to serve others and to love them out loud. We take our resources beyond these walls and into our community and into the world because God calls us to seek out those who feel lost and alone. This is why some of you have trained as Stephen Ministers, to care for those who are hurting and who feel lost and apart from God. We do this because this is the character and the heart of our God and he does it for us, and God calls us to do the same for others.

I don't want to spoil the ending of this movie for you in case you haven't seen it and now you want to, but I will tell you that August does escape the clutches of Wizard and that he gets an opportunity to go to Juilliard School of Music and study. He is an 11-year-old boy among young adults and he writes a beautiful symphony that he eventually is allowed to conduct a concert in Central Park in New York City.

Evan's hope for finding his family, and his ability to hear music in everything around him and the desire of his parents to find him all come together in a beautiful symphony that will inspire you and touch your heart. It reminds me that all of life is God symphony which comes together to hopefully inspire you to hear the voice of God that you are made by God to be loved by God.

Today we come to a holy moment in our time of worship where we get to come to the table with God. One of the reasons we have an open table for communion here in the United Methodist Church is because our God is one who is seeking out all of those who feel far away from him, and this is one of the places that we can feel reunited and close to him. Maybe you have felt apart from God at some point this week, even if you're here in worship every weekend. Maybe this is your first time in worship in months or years. Maybe this is your first time in worship ever.

No matter what place you are coming from, there is a place for you here at this table and this table is about celebration. We celebrate as we come forward that what was once lost is now found. This is the joy of this table and it is the joy of communion and it is the joy of the Lord. Won't you come to the table and remember that what was lost is now found?

Instructions for communion will be given here and then a time for each person to come forward and to receive the gift of the bread and the cup.

Sermon Series: The Gospel in Film

Sermon Title: "August Rush"

Luke 15:3-10

So Jesus told them this story: "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away! "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

Meditation Moments

Monday, June 4 – Read Isaiah 40:26-31. "Sometimes the world tries to knock it out of you," says young Evan/August about his music. "But I believe in music the way some people believe in fairy tales." Isaiah spoke to people who had the "music" temporarily knocked out of them. God doesn't grow weary, even

when we do, wrote the prophet. God can renew your strength.

- *Today's passage addresses the weary, cynical complaint of the Israelite in exile: "My cause is disregarded by my God." In what parts of your life are you struggling with a sense that God isn't paying attention to your concerns? What steps does the prophet say will renew your hope and strength?*
- *"Life up your eyes," calls the prophet (we see the young musician in August Rush lift up his eyes all through the film). How, if at all, do you "lift up your eyes" in your spiritual life? How can you keep your inner vision aimed upward, especially in difficult and discouraging times?*

Tuesday, June 5 – Read Deuteronomy 30:11-20. In wonder, August asks Wizard, "So only some of us can hear [the music]?" Wizard's answer is penetrating: "Only some of us are listening." Similarly, Deuteronomy assured

Israel that God's Word wasn't far away, stashed out of reach. "Love the Lord, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him," was the call to them—and to us.

- *In Ecclesiastes 3:11, we read that God has set eternity in the human heart. In today's passage we're assured that the Word is very near us. Can you recall moments when you had a profound inner response to God? What are some of the forces in your life that tend to distance you from God's presence?*
- *There is urgency in this passage. Hearing God, and following what we hear, is a matter of life and death. (In the film, August's music was the driving force in his life.) What is the central driving force in your life right now? If it's following God, how can you feed and nurture that? If it's not, how can you move God to the center?*

Wednesday, June 6 – Read 1 Peter 4:8-11. God knows that each of us has a precious gift or gifts. We need to find and value them, and use them to bless others. In the film, Wizard, seeing his chance to profit from August slip away, tells him, "You don't know how precious your gift is." For Wizard, that means money, but God values all the joy and meaning our gifts can add to our life.

- *We aren't all musical wonders, but we all have gifts—things we do well, that bring us deep inner joy. What gifts do you have? How do you see God*

blessing others through you? (If you don't know what your gifts are, FUMC offers help, either in your small group, through a class or by calling Cherie. Visit www.fumcdurango.org and select the spiritual gifts online survey on the Aspen Campus home page.

- *In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says that using our gifts without having love renders them useless to God. Peter, in shorter, less-poetic form, makes the same point. What makes love so vital as the environment in which we use our widely varying gifts? Who do you know who is finding joy by using his or her gifts in love?*

Thursday, June 7 – Read Psalm 103:8-18. August's mother Lyla seeks him, and the social worker asks, "Why now?" "I've always wanted him," is Lyla's poignant reply. "I've waited eleven years, two months and fifteen days to find out that he's alive. I've been counting." Sounds like the psalmist's God. "From everlasting to everlasting, the LORD's love is with those who fear him."

- *God's love for us is "as high as the heavens are above the earth," says the psalm. The psalmist, like most people in his day, probably saw the heavens as a dome above the earth, the center of the cosmos. How does our greater knowledge of the vastness of "the heavens" give even grander meaning to this psalm?*
- *God is "slow to anger." God "has compassion," and "remembers that we are dust." How does this fit with the picture of God that Jesus taught and modeled during his time on earth? How does this fit with the picture of God that you learned as a child? How do you see God now?*

Friday, June 8 – Read Psalm 19:1-14. The boy David seems to have been an outcast in his family, but as this psalm shows, he saw and heard God all around him. At the end of the film, August smiles at his newly found parents, then looks upward. "The music is all around us," he says. David and August both tell us, "All you have to do is open yourself up. All you have to do is listen."

- *"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge....their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." Are you listening? What do you "hear" as you open yourself to the vastness of God?*

- *Verses 7-11 describe God's guidance for our lives in glowing terms. Which of the images used here best describe your experience of following God (e.g. joy, wisdom, soul refreshment)? What reward have you found in living your life according to God's principles?*

Saturday, June 9 – Personal Application: *We can all get better at hearing God's voice. If you're new to such listening, the Alpha course is a great place to start. If you have some experience, but want to more keenly tune your spiritual "ears," think about habits like meditation or journaling. For deeper reading on the subject, try Gordon Smith's book *The Voice of Jesus* or Dallas Willard's *Hearing God*.*

Family Activity: *Examine how well your family listens. Does one person interrupt others or dominate conversations? Does everyone have a chance to voice their thoughts? Do moments of silence need to be filled with spoken words? In your next family conversation, give each person an opportunity to speak before anyone speaks a second time. Repeat this, and during each exchange, work towards fewer interruptions and truly hearing one another. In your individual and family prayer time, build in moments of silence to listen to God. While listening, you may want to view a sunset or sunrise, gaze at the stars or walk in a garden. Read Psalm 19:1-4, a celebration of silence and how God is glorified through it. Listen, and receive the blessing of God's presence.*

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, there are times when your presence in this world is so obvious. Then there are times when I allow the noisiness of life to distract me from your constant and unwavering presence. Give me the focus to keep my ears tuned to your soft, sweet voice that this world constantly tries to drown out and allow me the strength to follow it. Amen.*