

February 22, 2015 – The Imitation Game

Genesis 9:8-17

Mark 1: 9-15

Today is the fourth and last Sunday in movie month and this week's movie is called *The Imitation Game*. This is one of the movies that has been nominated for best picture at the Academy Awards and, of course, tonight the winner will be announced. How many of you have been able to see this film?

What makes *The Imitation Game* unique amongst the movies that we have talked about this month is the fact that it is based on true story, a story that actually happened. It is the story of a man named Alan Turing. Turing was a British mathematician who specialized in cryptography – he loved to solve puzzles. During the Second World War he worked with a small group of people to solve the Enigma code. This was the secret code that the Germans were using to send military information to their troops.

Alan Turing was a brilliant man and very successful in his school work and eventually in postgraduate work at both Kings College in England and Princeton University in the United States. While still in his early twenties he wrote a paper that talked about the possibility of a machine with the ability to think like a person, to imitate the brain of a person. One of the sections in that paper described a game where questions would be asked of a person and also of a machine and only the answers that were given could be used to determine which was which.

It is from this paper that the movie gets its name *The Imitation Game*. Turing was, of course, describing the machine that we now call the *computer*.

Alan Turing had an amazing mind, but it was clear from the beginning of the movie that he struggled in other aspects of his life. In flashbacks to his childhood we see that he was teased and bullied because of his eccentric behaviour and his inability to understand the subtleties of both verbal and non-verbal communication. Now, we would recognize his behaviour as a mild form of autism – what used to be called Asperger Syndrome. But in the 1930's and 40's he was just seen as strange or anti-social or rude. When he had his interview for a position on the Enigma team, he very nearly lost the opportunity just because of his awkward and sometimes abrasive social skills.

Turing was also a gay man in a time when homosexual acts were against the law. This meant that it was impossible for him to even attempt to have a long-term relationship with another man. Any endeavors to express his sexuality had to be done with great care so as to avoid detection and prosecution. If his superiors had been aware of his sexual orientation, Alan Turing would never have been asked to take part in a top-secret military operation. Even in more recent years governments would not hire known homosexuals into positions that included access to confidential information. They were worried that if their sexual orientation was discovered by enemies of the government these people would be easy targets for bribery or corruption.

Alan Turing's story highlights two human attributes – sexual orientation and difference in ability - that can separate us from one another. Because of our fear of those who are different, we have allowed sexual orientation, gender, disability, race, culture, religion, class, and even age to create walls between us. These differences are still used as excuses for war and violence, for discrimination, imprisonment and even capital punishment.

In today's reading from Genesis we were reminded of God's promise to all creatures on the earth, a promise that was made in the form of a rainbow. A rainbow that contains all the colours in our visual spectrum and that represents the diversity of God's creation. In the reading from Mark, we hear how, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, before his time in the wilderness, he was baptized and assured by the Spirit that he was God's beloved child. We are all God's beloved children and God's loves us in all of our differences.

Alan Turing was different and because of those differences he could easily have lost his opportunity to work on the Enigma project. If that had happened it's very possible that the Second World War could have had a very different ending. You see Alan Turing designed and built the computing machine that was able to break the Enigma Code. Without his help, military historians have estimated that the war would probably have lasted another two to four years and millions more would have died.

There is a line in The Imitation Game that is spoken at various times throughout movie and it goes like this:

Sometimes it's the very people who no one imagines anything of
who do the things no one can imagine.

It's why high school reunions are so popular. It's always fascinating to see what our classmates are doing 10 or 20 years after graduation. So often it's the quiet ones, or the bullied ones, or the ones who were "different" that have found the perfect niche and have made significant accomplishments in their areas of expertise.

How we view and understand difference is constantly changing. Just last week there was a show on the CBC that discussed a study of people with autism. It suggested that each occurrence is just as unique as a snowflake. This seems to be true even when two siblings have symptoms of autism – even though they have similar genetics are still unique. Within the autistic community people are now trying to advocate for a shift in attitudes toward the view that autism, especially mild autism, is a difference rather than a disability. It is thought that a disability requires treatment, but differences are just a normal part of God's creation.

In early 1950's Alan Turing was convicted of "Gross Indecency" and given the choice of a prison term or chemical castration. He chose to take the drugs - they impacted not only his body, but also his mind. He ended up committing suicide at the age of 41. Because of the secrecy around his work, Turing's

contributions to the war effort were only made known to the public in the 1990's and it was in 2013 that Queen Elizabeth issued an official pardon for this "secret" war hero.

But there were another 49,000 men in Britain who were convicted of homosexual acts from 1885 to 1967 and a letter was published last month suggesting that they all should receive the same pardon. This letter was signed by many well-known people including the British actor, Benedict Cumberbatch, who plays Alan Turing in this movie

If this were to happen, it would be just a small step in our goal to honour and celebrate the diversity that is God's creation. Like the animals who entered the ark and like the colours of the rainbow we are all different and yet we are all beloved of God. It is up to us to take down the barriers that separate us and to welcome all to God's table.

Now let's listen as the choir share their gift of music. .