

The other night I decided to take up a recommendation from a podcast that I love and watch the movie *Brittany Runs a Marathon*. I had never heard of it before, but it was billed as funny, relaxed, just a good time movie about running. Coming off of *Girls on the Run* season, I was like this sounds great, and then an hour and 45 minutes later, I was laying on my couch crying, because this fun, irreverent movie about running was anything but that. For sure it was funny, but if you engaged deeply with the story, it was one that could lay you out flat, and then I found out it was based on a real story and it just hit me harder.

We follow Brittany Forgler, an almost 30 something living in New York City and just kind of living her life, not a lot of direction, but she has a job, she has friends, she goes out, life is just sort of *there*. She goes to the doctor because she has been having trouble focusing and wonders if there are meds that could help, and instead what she gets is a deep concern about her blood pressure, her BMI, her lifestyle. She leaves livid. Who is this guy to tell her that her life needs some changes? But eventually the wheels start turnings, what if I just ran one block? What if I ran two blocks? The annoying upstairs neighbor is always running so why can't I? That same neighbor invites her to a running group, she meets new people, her life starts to change, and suddenly, well, Brittany wants to run the New York City

marathon and she has roped her new found friends, Seth and said annoying neighbor Catherine into doing it with her. She gets a new job dog/house sitting, and ends up building up an amazing friendship hopefully turning into a relationship with the guy who watches the house at night, and honestly, all seems good. It sounds like a great basis for an enjoyable movie, right?

Well, here's the thing...Brittany...is not the nicest person. She's sarcastic bordering on mean, she doesn't let people in, she will support her friends, but refuses to accept their support. Any kind gesture gets labeled as pity, someone just wanting to help the "fat girl." She reams out Jern, her potential new boyfriend, because obviously he doesn't actually want to be with her, because who would, they're just being casual, this can't be love because people like him don't love people like her, and by the way he's lazy and has no ambition and no path. See? I told you, she is not nice.

This all culminates in a trip home to Philly for her brother-in-law's birthday. Now, her brother-in-law basically raised her after her dad died, so they're super close, and yet, she makes a *mess* of this birthday party. She ends up being unbelievably rude to one of his friends and the whole thing is just a disaster. At the end of the night he sits her down for a come to Jesus talk that pretty much asks her if everything he did for her had been for nothing. If she thinks that her life, her ability to connect with people, or

have people love her is so broken and wrong then why did he put all of his time, energy, and love into taking care of her, if she was just going to essentially reject that gift, not only from him, but from everyone else. He helps her to see that she had been given a radical gift of grace, love, and acceptance exactly as she was, and she had turned around and refused to give it to anyone else because at the end of the day she didn't think she was deserving of such a gift, and so there was no way she should or could give it to another person. I won't spoil the end, but I cried, and they all lived happily ever after, essentially, once Brittany got the reminder that grace is not something to hoard or take for granted, but is something to respond to and to share, even when the world is messy and broken.

If our first lesson this morning was a movie you could name it any number of things, *Lydia Runs a Cloth Store*, *Lydia Goes to Church*, *Lydia Meets Paul*, but what they all come down to is this: Lydia's life changes in ways she was never anticipating. To set the scene, we hear of Paul receiving a vision, a vision which calls him to Macedonia, or modern day northern Greece, and from the ancient version of Google Maps that we get, this was not an easy journey. There are ships across the sea and then many stopovers in various cities all on the way to ending up in Philippi. When the Sabbath comes, Paul and his companions decide to go find a place to worship. The

believing population is so small in Philippi that there is no formal church or synagogue, so they go to the most likely place they will find a group of people praying, by the river. It was Jewish custom that if there wasn't a formal place of worship in town, then believers could gather by the nearest body of water to pray. There amongst there group, Paul meets Lydia.

In a matter of a couple of words, we learn a lot of Lydia. She has come to the river to worship God, but it seems she is a Gentile, with no religious background, she's come because she is curious and there is belief in her heart. She is from Thyatira a city in what would be central Turkey to us, and she has found herself in Philippi because she is a dealer in purple cloth. This is a big deal and a huge revealer of information about Lydia. She is a businesswoman, an independent businesswoman who travels on her own and if she is dealing in purple cloth, the rarest of colors and the most expensive to make, only being doled out to royalty, then she is also a woman who is rolling in some major dough. She is wealthy, independent, and curious. She is movie material.

In response to hearing the group pray and listening to Paul, Lydia is moved to take the next step in her faith journey. She approaches Paul and requests that right then and there, she and her whole household be baptized. She is so moved that she just wants to make this leap and Paul does it, and

what I love about this story is what comes next. She doesn't just leave it at being baptized. She asks Paul and his companions to come and stay with her at her home if they have seen her as a faithful believer in God. Her response to the immense grace, love, and acceptance she receives on the banks of that river is fellowship and an extension of welcome. She wants to offer them what they offered to her. She has received grace and wants to give it in return, because what better way to live out this newfound faith of hers?

There are so many ways that this could have gone. She could have wondered if Paul just did this for her because she was wealthy or maybe because he took pity on her that she was a Gentile alone with this group of believers. Maybe he didn't really think she believed, but he just did it to get it over with. Maybe she worried he would judge her occupation because it would have obviously put her in contact with the upper echelon of Roman society. It even could have gone the other way. Here am I, wealthy businesswoman, what have I to do with you lowly itinerant preacher/tentmaker? There could have been any number of reasons for her to not open her arms and say please come stay with me, let me feed you, let me fellowship with you, let me do what I can for you, now that you have done this thing for me. Like Brittany she could have received this grace and

then doubted it, wrote it off, or didn't think it necessitated relationship, but she doesn't, she says come sand stay.

I think Brittany's story is so compelling and eventually heart-rending because while we want to sit back and cross our arms and go *this girl is the worst!* More often than not, our own worst instincts are to react to grace in the same way, to come up with all of the reasons why we don't deserve it or excuses for why we've received it and thus all the reasons we don't have to respond in kind. We say thank you so much for the grace and then turn around and immediately exit the building. In Lydia's shoes, our instinct might be to be like, "Thanks for the baptism, byeeeeee." We want grace to be about us, what we need, what we want, and don't about what it asks in return, and honestly, grace *doesn't* ask anything in return, there is no requirement, until we remember Jesus and his pesky little words about loving one another as he has loved us, that through him we have received grace upon grace.

Each of us sitting here can think of at least one, but most likely dozens of instances in which we have received unmerited, undeserved grace in our lives. The friend that forgave you for the snappish attitude when you were hangry. The co-worker who picked up the slack on a project. The family member who showed up when you were at your lowest. And none of those

things were done with the expectation of what they would get in return, but man if grace doesn't stir our hearts to say, how can I put this back in the world, or at least hopefully it does. Grace is not something to take for granted, but to let fill us up and dare to ask, who needs to feel this way today? Because we all know how grace feels! It feels immaculate, incredible, freeing, pressure-lifting and why wouldn't we want our siblings to feel the same way?

We all know that life is a journey, and let's be real, it's not easy, most of the time, it's hard. It's the kind of hard that makes you want to cross your arms and say no thank you, no more. Most of the time...it is only by the grace of others that we get through the hard, that we get loved through the messy, that we get pieced back together when we feel broken. It is the love of others that takes our pieces and knits them back together and says you weren't perfect to begin with and now you're perfectly imperfect, your cracks filled in with love. Y'all we need to be that grace to one another. We need to see the gifts we have been given and in turn go use them in the world, use them to welcome someone in, to say, here come stay with me, eat at my table, be amongst friends, be accepted and be loved. The only way we do this is with each other, not alone by the banks of the river. Open your arms to grace, let it in, and let it run amok, let it run a marathon. **AMEN!!!**