

Zion's UCC of Taborton
March 11, 2018
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Everlasting Life
Ephesians 2: 1-10
John 3:16-21

I saw an excellent movie this week, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri*. Frances McDormand won the best actress academy award for her role in the movie. Sam Rockwell won best supporting actor and the picture itself was up for best movie. It was beautifully filmed and obviously well acted, but I hesitate to call it entertaining. It was one of those movies that grabs your guts and holds on for dear life.

Do you remember last week when Pat was talking about how your emotions, especially anger, will come out

sideways if you can't or won't deal with them straight on? Well, this movie was the visual and spoken depiction of sideways emotions erupting in all sorts of ways. Whether it was a mother consumed by grief and guilt over the rape and murder of her teen-aged daughter, or the sheriff who is dying of cancer, or the deputy, so tied up in prejudice and self doubt that he can hardly function, or even the town midget, bullied and ridiculed for his condition, everyone in this film struggles to keep their emotions hidden, jamming them deep within themselves, only to see them re-emerge in sad and frightening ways. The mother cannot see how her obsession about her dead

daughter is ruining the life of her other child, as well as dividing her community. The sheriff's cannot see how his decisions will devastate his wife and young daughters.. Everyone is in pain and they don't know how to end it, because they either can't or won't recognize the real source of it.

The inability of past generations to deal with their emotions has helped create the pain of this generation, and, this generation, in turn, is passing that pain on to the next generation. If we're honest, we can see many similarities to our own lives in that multigenerational struggle, can't we? Not pleasant to think about, but we need to face our

ancestors, as well as ourselves, to find the solutions we seek.

What's missing in the movie is a spiritual dimension. The only mention of faith or religion is one scene where the local Catholic priest visits the mother to try and get her to take down the billboards. The priest seems more interested in his own status with his parishioners than he is in dealing with the pain of the situation. The screenwriters obviously had no time for faith. Either because they, themselves, aren't people of faith, or because a good member of the clergy might actually have understood what needed to be done, and the writers were much more interested in developing the

emptiness and hopelessness of each of the characters, than in creating solutions.

Empty and hopeless is what we feel when our spirits are lost. There is no path for us to follow. We become consumed by our grief and anger. We recognize that we will eventually die and we can no longer summon the will to live. Our many failings make us unwilling to even try to be better. We abuse and are abused because we feel unworthy of goodness. I think that self abuse is maybe the worst sin we regularly commit. It insults us and it insults the God who created us in the divine image.

To avoid that struggle for self understanding, we self medicate instead. We numb ourselves with alcohol and drugs. We engage in risky social behaviors that often become self fulfilling prophecies. We bully others and become unapproachable. We behave badly because we think we are bad, so we might just as well live up to our reputations. Our rallying cry becomes: “I don’t deserve any better than this”.

That is, of course, nothing but hooey. You do deserve better. You can be better. In fact, you are better than you think you are already. Even the movie

shows it. The angry mother finds an insect struggling on its back on a window sill. Instead of squashing it, she turns it over and sends it on its way. The loud and foul-mouthed sheriff lovingly quotes Shakespeare to his wife. The midget lies to save one of the other characters.

But their goodness is locked up inside a hard crust of anger and other emotions. They can't seem to let it out. We, fortunately, have the means to break through that hardness and let our goodness into the world.

The people who live in the movie version of Ebbing Missouri are very

much like the people Paul was talking about in his letter to the Church at Ephesus that we heard part of earlier. They are like dead people and they follow destructive spirits. They have a revenge-based morality. Their logic is: I've been hurt and I will cause pain in return. Nothing more than the old "eye for an eye" system. But, to quote Gandhi; "an eye for an eye makes the world blind." There is much blindness in Ebbing, Missouri.

I prefer a different quote, one by an early church leader named Irenaeus. He said: "The glory of God is the human person fully alive". That opens up a whole new perspective, doesn't it? Paul

is talking about that when he writes that God, without any reference to us deserving or earning our divine relationship, has gifted us with that new life. We try to live as God would have us live as a grateful response to that gift.

Our Gospel reading from John today is a very small portion of the conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. But, Jesus is making some key points here. First of all, God loved us before we loved God. And because God loves us, God wants us to be human beings fully alive, as Irenaeus wrote. So God became incarnate in the person of Jesus, not to be a sacrifice, not to be a payment for sin, but to show

us how to live. Jesus lived in the light, teaching us to be fully alive even when we face death.

What Jesus also says, quite clearly, is that the choice is ours. We can live in the darkness or we can come into the light. You can turn away from God and submit to anger, hatred, and all the other negative emotions that momentarily satisfy us, or you can begin to live as Jesus did; choosing God's ways over human ones.

A few weeks ago we heard about Jesus' time of testing in the desert. Evil offered him all the human lures of power, riches, fame and self-indulgence. Jesus

rejected them. But if you remember, Evil did not surrender, but went away, planning for another day. That's a warning to us all. Each day of our lives is a time of decision-making. In small and large ways we either choose for or against God.

We can only choose wisely if we have access to all the facts. We need to be exposed to the divine as we are exposed to the negative. That's where a vibrant and caring faith community is so important. Here we are taught how to make wise decisions and become fully alive.

Do we always make those decisions correctly? No, we do not. We often fall

down. But, we get back up and keep moving forward. We learn and improve and grow and evolve because we walk together. That is something that the characters in *Three Billboards* did not have. They were trapped in their respective individual darkneses,, striking out at those around them because they had no faith or hope. We don't need to live in Ebbing, Missouri. We live here and we can do life differently. Amen.