

Sermon: Easter 6

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Year A
Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-18
1 Peter 3:13-22
John 14:15-21

Sometimes... art imitates life... and sometimes... life imitates art... sometimes art expresses questionable theology... and sometimes it's spot on... and so I'm thinking about a movie... that's about the redeeming power of love... and I've seen it three... or maybe four times...

In it... the only two children of a doctor and his art dealer wife... are killed in an automobile accident... a few years later... while he was trying to provide medical aid to the victims of another accident... the father is killed too... his wife... beset and overwhelmed with crushing grief... dies by suicide...

The storyline starts with... some theology that's now at odds with historical teaching... theology that's at odds what many theologians and clergy believe... theology that is at odds with a God who loves beyond measure... that if you die by suicide... you go to the place of gnashing teeth... for eternity... but in this story... the doctor... who's in Heaven... asks for help... so he can travel to Hell... to try and rescue his wife... and reunite their family...

He is warned about the dangers and the risks... about losing his way and not being able to return... about losing his mind... forgetting not only who his wife is... but who he is... and having to remain there with her anyway... which kind of defeats the point of it all... but he's willing to risk all that... out of his love for her... just to be with her... and in real life... Robin Williams... who played the father in this 1998 movie... What Dreams May Come... ended his own life... died by suicide... almost three years ago...

There's another movie out on Netflix right now... called 13 Reasons Why... I sent out an email about it on May 1... I haven't yet seen it... but from what I've read and all the chatter I've heard... it sensationalizes suicide as a solution to one's problems... and implies... that suicide is an effective way to carry out revenge fantasies on one's oppressors... to get back at them... to make them feel sorry for what they did to you... that made you do... what you did to yourself... this is not the kind of art... we want life to imitate...

Because we know... that at least for a time... suicide ends relationship... suicide makes it that much more difficult to effect healing and reconciliation... a priest once told me that Hell was simply the absence of all relationships... but even this pain... even this division... can be healed and overcome...

Professor Jayson Byassee wrote... in the Epistle... Peter goes on to detail Jesus' post-mortem preaching career... *He was put to death in the flesh... but made alive in the Spirit... in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison...* the word prison here... means Hell... and apparently... he preached up a revival... the church speaks of him "harrowing" hell... he plowed the place up... now... whoever is there... is there by choice... the lock is broken... the gate is permanently open... there are no depths God will not go to save... in What Dreams May Come... that's just what doctor Chris Nielsen willingly does... where he willingly goes... out of love... into that prison... to save his wife...

It's easy for us to do many things... for our partner or spouse... out of love... it's easy for us to do many things... for our children or parents... out of love... because we are essentially equals... but sometimes our human love has limits... sometimes our love is conditional... and sometimes those conditions turn our love from covenant into contract... from being transformational into just a transaction...

Today is Rogation Sunday... which points us to the three days before Ascension Day... the word "rogation" is from the Latin *rogare*... which means to ask... it's the day when the Church has traditionally offered prayer and asked God's blessing on the labors of those who produce our food... on the crops... and for a bountiful harvest...

But modern people... not so closely tied to the earth... rarely spend much time praying... or even thinking... about the harvest... or the miracle that the food we need comes from tiny seeds... and today... we ask God to protect the harvest we take from this place today... and to bless what is planted anew next Sunday...

If you love me... you will follow my commandments... and if you follow my commandments... then you love me... if you love each other... stand up for justice... contend with those who do not yet know how much I love them... let my love for you be reflected in the laws which govern you... and in the ways you speak... let the ways you love each other... be modeled after the way I love you...

But Nigerian-American Enuma Okoro wrote... this *Gospel* relationship is different... because it's not between equals... here again... we cannot do what Jesus does... ask the Father to give us another Advocate... the Spirit of truth... it is not in our power... without Christ as our intermediary... to ask God to give of God's self to be with us forever... nor can we love with the urgent... fully-sacrificial love that Christ shows us... not without the power of the Spirit...

Jesus says he will ask something too... *And I will ask the Father... and he will give you another Advocate... another Helper... to be with you forever...* Jesus identifies his request to God... as the origin of God's gift of the Advocate... yet... in the other passages about the Advocate... the relationship between God and Jesus is nuanced differently...

In today's Gospel... and in John 14:26... Jesus says that he will ask the Father to send the Advocate... but in John 15:26 and John 16:7... Jesus says that it is he who will send the Advocate... and this reciprocity between the roles of God and Jesus... in the description of the Advocate's origins... is not a theological inconsistency in the discourse... but is instead a further demonstration of the theological truth that undergirds this Gospel... that Jesus and God are fully united... and share in the work that they do... that there are no divisions... and there is no place where God cannot... or will not go... and there are no boundaries that God cannot or will not cross... and there are no conditions that God will place... on God's love for us...

Usually... when we humans take love... we make it conditional... and we end up with water and oil... they just don't mix... but Jesus took love... and applied it unconditionally... and he turned water into wine... I pray that in this place... we remain in relationship... and with God's grace... heal whatever needs to be healed... and that like Jesus... we too learn to turn water into wine... and rescue those we love... from any dark place...

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