

12 Pentecost
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“Salvation and Forgiveness”

Last week I listened to someone at the next table telling their friends that they thought “Independence Day was the best movie ever made. It had me immediately thinking of my favorite movies. Finding just three is a long process of elimination.

The rule of thumb for me in the process is” “Will I watch the movie over and over and truly never be bored with it? Does it have a happy ending?”

Scanning movies in your mind over a fifty year period is a great exercise in sharpening your memory. I have probably seen many thousands of movies, because our generation grew up in a movie culture. When it came to picking but three I realized that all my really favorite movies had a common theme. They were all about salvation and forgiveness.

Even the movies that did not make the last ten were so often about salvation. They included great movies such as Gregory Peck in the “*Big Country*” where a naval captain conquers the might of the American Plains or “*A man For All Seasons*”. Thomas More stands alone against the excesses of Henry the Eight. It is about one man unwilling to save himself at the price of truth.

Salvation and forgiveness abound in Robert Redford’s “*Ordinary People*” where Timothy Hutton is the young son who is unforgiven because he survived the boat accident in which his older brother drowned.

He is unforgiven by himself, till he learns: “There is no sin in hanging on.”

Great movies, but they don’t make the top three. So what does?
 The 1978 movie “*The Deerhunter*” did. It truly is about salvation.

The first movie that addressed how we thought of the war nobody talked about “Vietnam.” It examined the impact on the lives of very ordinary working people in a small steel town in the mid west.

The “*Deerhunter*” took the pain of Vietnam and made it personal. The movie was about doing what was right and then living with the loss and the need for healing. It was a movie that told us all “it’s okay to cry, for what we have lost and despite it all it’s okay to love your country.”

We rarely experience that collective forgiveness as a nation. We become so used to being kicked in the teeth by everyone else with a grudge, that often we forget what is great about America. What is great about America is its ability to reinvent itself and to recover from the worst of times.

We all get to do that in our lives too, church, faith, and fellowship help us to do it. It is a gospel message and one that allows us to triumph, despite the odds.

“*Forest Gump*” is probably one of many people’s favorite movies. Is it because the little guy succeeds when no one expects him too?

But right alongside him is the figure of Jenny, who abuse and mistreated allows her life to spiral out of control.

The movie is all about making do with what you have and playing the cards you have been given. It is not unlike our own lives where we too have to deal with pain, death, and losing the ones we love.

Forest Gump has the capacity not only to love deeply but to forgive. A lesson we could well emulate.

So what comes in at number one? “*Casablanca*” made in 1942 starring Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, how could it fail? Yet the movie was shot in three months and with a small budget.

Cranky ex patriot Rick runs a nightclub in a French North African port. Disillusioned, bitter and apolitical he runs into ex-girlfriend Bergman looking for help escaping with her husband from the Nazi’s.

“*Casablanca*” has more mis-quoted lines than any other movie including the famous: “Play it again Sam” and “You’ve gotta get on that plane.”

“*Casablanca*” is about a man rediscovering his true self. Like us, it is about brokenness, refuge and forgiveness. In “*Casablanca*”, Rick has no future because he cannot let go of the past.

Even Forest Gump escapes the pain of lost love by running across the entire country from East coast to west. In our own lives, there are things we do run away from, but we know that we just can’t.

There has to be an answer for our need for forgiveness from the past; and our need to escape the pain of failure, disappointment, conflict and loss.

Life teaches us that it is not all our fault. We cannot prevent those that we love from dying. We cannot walk in the shoes of our children or prevent them taking a path that is ill advised. We are relatively helpless when they choose to live their lives with others and close us out.

Christian salvation works a little like that. Christ through the cross gives us a future. “*Casablanca*” reminds me of the Episcopal Church a whole lot. It is the place where the outcasts, outlaws and practically every desperado head for. That is as it should be for Jesus repeats time after time that he has come to find the lost sheep, he has come to raise up the poor and even set the prisoner free.

What we need is salvation-salvation from ourselves. and sometimes from others. Salvation is what Jesus comes selling. The price is cheap. “Follow me.”

He offers it to not so good fishermen, to a tax collector hated by his neighbors, to a woman called Mary Magdalene and to many others. No one appreciates the salvation Jesus brings, quite like Paul. The other apostles had spent three precious years with Jesus, but Paul has not.

Besides, Paul had blood on his hands. It was the blood of Stephen and the first Christians whom he persecuted. Paul was in need of forgiveness not just from God but from himself also. We all have things that we need to be set free from in our lives.

In the letter to the Ephesians today the author reminds us that once you accept that you are a part of god's creation, and then you must also accept that you are a part of a universal struggle, between the forces of good and the forces of evil.

We see that struggle played out in our daily lives. Bill Maher and his friend would like to deny that that struggle even exists. Christians are people, who not only acknowledge the struggle, but throw themselves into the fight.

Two young parents came to ask me to baptize their infant child recently. Why would we ever think of refusing? Baptism is a movement towards God. Baptism is to arm yourself against the forces of darkness and see the protection of all that is good.

Ephesian says: "With all of these take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench the arrows, of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. Yet Christians want to do more, they want to go on the offensive. We do it with prayer. We do it with ministry. We refuse to lie down in the face of sickness and disease. We will not let death have the final say or the last victory. We will not stand y in the face of poverty or child abuse, inequality or injustice.

It is really only in Marlon Brando movies that you don't have a hero, but an anti-hero. We know that they are not perfect and that at times they blur the edges between good and bad but we root for them anyway.

We as Christians, have no such problems. We know who our hero is. We know the path that he has taken. We know that he is our model and someone to emulate. What we need do, today's Gospel tells us, it is believe.

It is what Jesus asks of all his followers. Yet the great Martin Luther warns us in his writings, that there is believing and believing.

Be careful of those who say they believe but truly do nothing. Rather seek out those who demonstrate how much they believe by what they do. We have no problem finding salvation. Christ offers it freely and in abundance. Our problem lies in fully accepting salvation because the moment that we do, we become involved, we become tied up, with this man Jesus Christ, such that his plan becomes our plan, his concern becomes our concern, his fight becomes our fight.

In the 1998 movie *"Tombstone"* Virgil Earp has just signed on as town marshal to rid the town of the bad guys. "When did we ever agree to this?" says his brother Wyatt. "When did we get involved with saving the world?"

"We got involved when you brought us here." bites back Virgil. "We got involved when we decided to make money off the backs of these good people."

Well, as Christians we have to acknowledge the same. We got involved with the struggle between good and evil when Jesus brought us here. We got involved when we realized that the words: "Come follow me" were referring to us and not just the apostles.

Understand that. And the food pantry is not *THE* food pantry, it is *OUR* food pantry, and the Child Care is not *THE* child Care, it is *OUR* Child Care and we become determined to do all in our power to help them.

Understand that we are here because of Jesus and the church becomes our church and ministry becomes our way of believing.

"Don't tell me that you believe," says Jesus, "Show me that you believe. Feed my lambs, feed my sheep."

Then with Peter in today's Gospel we too can say: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know you are the holy one of God."

Amen+