

“Journeying Together”

February 4, 2018

Faith in Film series – *The Way*

It seems that one of the films we focus on in our *Faith in Film* series has death and grief at the center. This is only the second year, but last year, *Collateral Beauty* was a powerful film about the reality and difficulty of death - and the need for support in the midst of personal grief. And today our focus is *The Way* - not a new film because it was released in 2010; however, grief and loss are at the center of the story.

Tom, an ophthalmologist, has a son named Daniel. They don't see eye-to-eye on many things. Daniel is ready to pack up and see the world, and Tom is a bit annoyed by his son's nonchalant attitude. Daniel travels to Europe to walk the El Camino de Santiago - the Way of St. James - a true-to-life spiritual pilgrimage in Spain.

Tragically, Daniel dies in a storm while on the pilgrimage. Tom goes to identify and claim Daniel's body and finds himself walking this pilgrimage as a tribute to Daniel and (it would seem) as a way to grieve his tragic loss. He carries Daniel's ashes and scatters them along El Camino.

Along the way he meets other pilgrims, too, but three join him on the pilgrimage. Joost is a Dutchman, Sarah is a Canadian, and Jack is Irish. We learn that all of them are grieving and trying to find their way through a difficult time of grief - whether a failed marriage, surviving domestic abuse, or trying to figure out how to save a career.

The film came as a result of Martin Sheen's own experience walking El Camino with his grandson. Sheen asked his son, Emilio Estevez, to write a script. Estevez wrote and directed the film and likened it to *The Wizard of Oz*. Estevez said, Tom “finds himself in Spain alone; and he wants to be alone. Unlike Dorothy who invites the other three to come along, Tom doesn't want to have anything to do with them. They invite themselves; and isn't it true that sometimes people come into our lives who we don't want to have anything to do with, ultimately teach us the greatest lessons.”

Estevez likens Tom's three companions to the characters in *Oz* we know well. Joost is like the cowardly lion who's fearful about life and what's next for him. Sarah's heart is broken like the Tin Man. And Jack's like the scarecrow - feeling like he's lost his ability to write. And Tom finds a way to be honest about his loss and his pain, and there's a very honest look at grief, even Tom literally seeing Daniel along the way.

The Way is a journey story, which has great connections for Scripture. For our ancestors in faith, walking with God, journeying to a new place, running away, and coming home are all a part of how humans connect with God. Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and more knew that the journey through life was a journey with God.

The disciples' journey with Jesus was only about three years, and yet we know that in that time, they were ultimately transformed into witnesses who carried Jesus' message to all the world. We know the reality of life as a journey, too.

I know some of your journeys, and you know some of mine, but not everything. I can only imagine our stories - the ups and downs, the celebrations and tragedies, the highs and lows, the days we've said, "It can't get any better than this!" and the times we've said, "Why is this happening to me?" or "I didn't sign up for this."

Sometimes it's a welcome journey when we want to go. Other times we want to turn around and run. Certainly the journey of grief is one that we dread, and yet it's the most common one we share. We will all experience death and loss. Many of us have experienced it recently.

We heard two Scriptures today - one from Proverbs 3 with a line that might be familiar. I like the translation we read: *Always let the Lord lead you, and he will clear the road for you to follow.* You might have heard it this way: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he'll make your paths straight.*

The other passage comes from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus gives instructions on being a disciple – the roadmap for following him. Jesus' teaching is a powerful word against our tendency to let worry lead us instead of letting God lead us. Keep in mind that Jesus didn't speak this word about worry to people who had things all figured out, but to peasant farmers who lived at the mercy of the rains, to citizens of an occupied country at the mercy of the Romans, to rich and poor equally susceptible to disease. Jesus spoke to people who had every reason to worry.

Worry is related to a shortage of hope and trust. Someone put it this way: worrying is the opposite of trusting. That's tough for us if we see ourselves as worriers (I do!). A phrase has stuck with me over many years: "If you pray, don't worry. And if you worry, don't pray." There's reliable research that shows the benefits of meditation and prayer for improved health and helping us to give up our worries, or at least lessen their power.

When we place our life in God's hands, we can live with the assurance that God is at work in our lives. Jesus is ultimately talking about the call to strive for the Kingdom of God – work for the Kingdom of God – as we live every day.

Seeking God first means that we realize God's care for us. Of course food, water, and clothing are important. They are the basics of life. We want everyone to have them. Jesus isn't denying their importance, but rather asking us to consider in whom we trust to provide them for us. It's about perspective. When we focus on God's love and care for us and live in response to it, then our personal needs will be met. We will have what we need – maybe not our wants – but our needs.

Martin Sheen said of the journey, "Each step is a prayer when you're out there. You generally start out with a lot of stuff because you want to be prepared for whatever

happens.” Does anyone here over pack? Sheen says, “As you go, you begin to have confidence and you begin to realize you over packed, and you begin to disperse all the stuff.”

Journeys - whether welcome or not - can bring us to deeper insight into God’s love for us and for others, and that’s one theme that was clear in this film. Estevez even says, "The theme is that it's OK to be exactly who you are, that God loves you no matter how broken, no matter how imperfect you are." We all carry baggage - the stuff that we need, but also the stuff that weighs us down.

The Way is a personal journey for all pilgrims, but it’s also about finding community with others. Tom, Joost, Sarah, and Jack became a community for one another as they travel. They eat together, help each other (they even bail Tom out of jail!), and ultimately come to the end of their journey on El Camino with a deeper sense of God’s love for them. Maybe they didn’t identify it as such, but there’s a powerful scene when they arrived at the cathedral. All of them showed a sense of awe at the presence of God.

Our overall theme for this series on Faith in Film is rooted in John 10:10 where Jesus speaks about why he came to be with us and among us. He says, *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* Put another way by Eugene Peterson: *I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.*

Jesus offers us abundant life, each of us, and we accept that gift for ourselves, but it’s lived out in community with others. We might never be together except for the fact that Jesus calls us together as the church - the Body of Christ. I think about that in every place where I’ve served.

I’d imagine that there are relationships that have developed here that would never have happened if not for this community of faith. In community, we learn more about God and God’s love for us than we ever could alone, and we build trust in God who loves us just as we are.

And think of all the people who have traveled with you. I think of family who has loved me always, close friends with whom I share a deep bond, church family - many people in home church, camp, campus ministry, all the congregations I’ve been a part of, and colleagues in ministry. It’s amazing to think about what we’ve experienced together. I wouldn’t know what I know about God’s love and grace if it wasn’t for the community of faith - the Body of Christ.

So that’s a neat and tidy thought about this film and our faith, but that’s not where we end. I’m grateful for those who have walked me with, but I know that I’ve walked with others, too. And friends, there are those we know – you know them and I do, too – those who are seeking faith, wondering what to do next, where to go, how to move forward, how to keep on living when grief is deep. There are people who aren’t sure about God and faith. There are people who want to know if God loves them no matter what. There are people we know who want to know if God can be trusted. So

what will we do? How will we show our faith and trust in God who loves and saves so that those who see us will move toward faith?

SHOW SLIDE - Today you received a scallop shell. On El Camino de Santiago, shells serve as a marker along the journey and an important symbol of the journey itself. I'd invite you to keep the shell where you can see it and give thanks for God's grace on your journey and all who walk with you. Give thanks for those you walk with – and pray for those who are seeking companions for the journey of faith.

It's all in the way we travel the journey. And in the words of the film, "Buen camino," which means "good walk" or "have a good walk." AMEN.

One way that we're formed into community is through sharing the meal of Holy Communion that Christ offers us. Let us pray...

SILENT PRAYER OF CONFESSION & WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Journeying Together/The Way:

- "A single conversation across the table with a wise man is worth a month's study of books." Chinese Proverb
- "The world does not know how much it owes to common kindnesses which so abound everywhere." J.R. Miller
- "Wherever you are, it is your own friends who make your world." William James
- Proverbs 16:9 (The Message): We plan the way we want to live, but only God makes us able to live it.