

“Be an Encourager”

February 17, 2019

Faith in Film series – Season of Epiphany – *Green Book*

Sometimes films challenge us, convict us, and even make us uncomfortable. I was excited to see *Green Book*, but it's become a film that has challenged and convicted me - and even made me uncomfortable. If I'm honest, it's because it deals with a “hot topic” - racism. There's more to it than one issue, but it's inspired by a true story.

Dr. Don Shirley is an accomplished pianist, and Tony Vallelonga is a bouncer Dr. Shirley hires to travel with him and his trio on a tour of the Deep South in the early 1960's. The two men travel in the era of segregation and Jim Crow laws and encounter prejudice in many places among the people who welcome Dr. Shirley as a musician.

I said last week that the films we'll focus on have a common theme of encouragement. And music is also a big part of them. In *Green Book*, it's music that speaks a universal language, but even so, there's the reality that Dr. Shirley experiences discrimination among those who welcome his gifts and music. He can play for them, but can't use their restroom.

The film has already won numerous awards, but there's some controversy about the point view of the film itself. Some say it's told more from Tony Vallelonga's perspective as a white man rather than from Dr. Shirley's perspective as an African-American. There's some question about if these two men became friends - or just were connected by the fact that Shirley hired Vallelonga, and they traveled together as employer and employee.

In film, we encounter confession, yearning, lament, and celebration - all part of our human experience. “Movies are our way of telling God what we think about this world and our place in it.” And *Green Book* certainly does that with issues of identity and connections.

Despite the controversy, the film challenged me to consider the importance of relationships that change our thinking and expectations. Both Shirley and Vallelonga deal with assumptions about the other based on race and social status. They have to be honest and work through that, and it takes time and a building of trust between them. It's important to note that the actual tour lasted more than a year, even though the film makes it to be a couple of months.

Healthy relationships aren't easy - whether it's a friendship, marriage, or anything else. They require vulnerability from us, and sometimes that's messy. Loving one another isn't easy. It takes intentionality and hard work.

The relationship between Shirley and Vallelonga made me think of many of our faith ancestors, but I settled on Paul and Barnabas in the Book of Acts. Barnabas is named multiple times - first when he sells a field and gives the money to the apostles in the early church. We're told that his name means “son of encouragement.”

Barnabas shows up again when Paul comes back to Jerusalem after his conversion experience on the Road to Damascus. Remember that Paul has been a persecutor of Christians and now wants to connect with the Christians in Jerusalem. They are afraid, but it's Barnabas who shares Paul's story and stands by him. Barnabas believes in the power of God to transform, and he sees that Paul has changed.

Shirley and Vallelonga become encouragers to each other. They aren't best friends, but they help each other to see things differently. Shirley needs encouragement to claim his gifts even as he is treated unfairly because of his skin color. Vallelonga needs encouragement to get past assumptions and see that Shirley is potentially changing people's minds - even one person at a time.

I had never heard of Dr. Don Shirley before this film, but his story is interesting. He was born in Florida to parents who were Jamaican immigrants – an Episcopal priest and a teacher. He was a musical prodigy from childhood who dabbled in psychology and later returned to music. I've found myself listening to his music, which is easy to find. Video footage is more difficult to find, but here's an example of him playing Gershwin: **SHOW VIDEO**

Dr. Shirley's trio went on tour throughout the U.S. with the knowledge that racism was alive and well, especially in the Deep South, although they encounter "sundown towns" all over. These were places where African-Americans weren't supposed to be outside after sundown.

I didn't even know what a Green Book was until I saw this film, but that was one of the most eye-opening and convicting parts for me. It was Victor H. Green, a postal employee, who wrote the Green Book, a travel guide for African-Americans that included safe places to sleep and eat.

It was first published in 1936 and continued to be published annually for 30 years - until the mid-1960s. They were available at gas stations and sold as many as 15,000 copies per year. On the cover of some was the reminder "Carry your Green Book with you; you may need it." I invite you to take a look at the copy we have.

As sad as it is that such a book existed, it shouldn't be a shock to any of us that from 1936-1966, it was a need. And it's naive to say that racism doesn't exist still. As a white woman born in this country, I do not and cannot pretend to understand the experiences of persons of skin colors that are different than mine. Experiencing racism isn't something I can tell you about personally, but I know it's a reality.

What I have come to understand and to struggle with more deeply is the reality of privilege. That doesn't mean that persons haven't struggled; persons of every race struggle with poverty and food insecurity. Privilege also doesn't mean that someone's accomplishments aren't earned or legitimate. One writer says, "Privilege should be viewed as a built-in advantage, separate from one's level of income or effort." Privilege means that my skin color as a white woman comes with a built-in advantage. I've never

had to worry about being followed through a store or watched more closely because of my skin color, but that's a reality for many people.

During our "Hot Topics" last summer, I borrowed from Rev. Jim Wallis who calls racism "America's original sin." Even with progress, racism is a reality for many people, along with xenophobia (fear of people from other countries) and other forms of discrimination. When fear is the language we speak, love is absent. First John makes that clear: **PROJECT**

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

There's a line in the film that speaks to First John well: "You can't pray and then hate." We are called to examine our hearts and be honest about our actions or inactions that separate us from God and each other. That's what sin is. Racism is sin, and we must be honest about it. We must repent of it and seek to turn to God.

To be honest about our own prejudices, biases, and privilege - and to be honest that racism still exists in our lives and in our larger systems - matters. One commentator said that *Green Book* "is worth seeing because nothing has changed." As actor Mahershala Ali, who plays Dr. Shirley said in an interview about the film, "Discrimination is much more intelligent now."

I hope that makes all of us stop and consider where we might be missing the reality of discrimination and commit to seeking God's will and way to work against it. It should never be palatable for followers of Jesus Christ to be OK with words or actions that seek to dehumanize or deny human rights to others. And yet, we know that still happens.

I told you last week that my question to the Facebook world was "What film gives you hope?" How does *Green Book* offer hope? Frankly, it tells the story of two people who might never have been in the same place coming to understand each other better. That gives me hope and encouragement, and there's another line from one of the other musicians about Dr. Shirley, "Genius is not enough. It takes courage to change people's hearts." Our hearts change when we spend time and seek to understand one another. Our hearts change when we seek to view one another as beloved by God.

If there's something we might do in response to this film, I see a fairly easy response and a more difficult one. The easy response is to write a note (a text or an E-mail) or even call or talk to someone who has encouraged you in your life or your work - someone who has affirmed you and given you courage to be who God calls you to be.

I can think of lists of people who have encouraged, supported, and affirmed me over 43 years of living. But one who has been on my mind is a woman who served as a

dean when I was a student at GVSU. I worked in her office during my undergrad years and was blessed by her example of a woman in leadership. She continued to stay connected to me after I graduated and always encouraged me in my life and work. I'm grateful.

The response that takes some intentional work is to be in conversation with someone whose life experience is drastically different than yours. Maybe you have a family member, friend, or co-worker whom you could talk to about their experience of prejudice or discrimination. One of the lessons from the film is the importance of seeing beyond the outward appearance. God looks at the heart and calls us to do the same, but it requires trust, vulnerability, and a safe space where we can be honest.

Will we be courageous - even take the risk - to learn more about others so that we might truly seek to love instead of succumbing to fear?

Will we be encouragers - looking at the gifts of others, affirming them as God's good gifts, and celebrating diversity as a gift of God?

To encourage means to give courage to someone else, and it's a powerful thing to do. May God help us to encourage one another and love one another better.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE