

“Same God”

February 23, 2020

Faith in Film series – “The Best of Enemies” – Transfiguration Sunday

When we started this series, I sent out a question to the Facebook world about films. *What film has changed how you see yourself and/or how you see others?* The answers were many and varied. One of our members named *Hidden Figures* because it showed the struggle of African-American women that she hadn't seen before. Others named *Wonder*, *Inside Out*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *It's a Wonderful Life* with the quote “No man is a failure who has friends.”

My cousin wrote, “I always found much to use from *Men of Honor* when I ran the local YouthBuild program. It helped inspire change and showed that the change may take some time and dedication.” Two people cited *Bruce Almighty* (one of them included a long reflection about prayer) and *Les Miserables*. Another friend cited the speech at the end of *Rocky IV*, which I looked up. Rocky Balboa says, “If I can change, and you can change, then everybody can change.” Someone said *E.T.* shows that love overcomes all differences. Perhaps love helps us appreciate differences, too.

The Best of Enemies shows that love can overcome differences, love can help us appreciate each other, and love can truly transform us down to our very core. This is a powerful story because it's true. Author Osha Gray Davidson wrote about race and redemption (**SHOW SLIDE Book cover**). And now the story has come to film.

The year is 1971. School segregation is a reality in Durham, North Carolina. The divide based on skin color is clear. Ann Atwater is a civil rights activist who is working for equal housing for many who are living at the mercy of slumlords. C.P. Ellis is a leader in the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. When the local school where most African-American children attend has a fire and the local council decides to maintain segregation in the schools, the NAACP gets involved to push for school integration and a safe place for the children.

A man named Bill Riddick is invited to organize a charrette (shuh-ret), which is a community summit, centered around school integration. Riddick invites blacks and whites to come together, but he needs two co-chairpersons. So he invites Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis to fill those roles.

SHOW SLIDE Bill Riddick (mediator) with Ellis and Atwater

They are an odd couple put together to chair this summit, which was dubbed "S.O.S." for "Save Our Schools."

Part of the set up for this summit is that people spend time together intentionally - meaning that they sit with people they don't know. Atwater and Ellis share a table at every mealtime. Eventually, they find things that they have in common. Both had hard lives, including struggling with poverty and a feeling of powerlessness. In C.P. Ellis' own words, he said, "We began to talk about what was on our heart, and both of us wept."

Riddick said that the two were able to have honest conversation, and it changed the game for both of them. Their relationship and connection changed them, made history, and changed their whole community. Atwater and Ellis even went around the country after this experience to share it. And they remained friends long after. At the end of the film, there's a note that Atwater gave the eulogy at Ellis' funeral in 2005. In her own words: "God had a plan for both of us, for us to get together."

So the challenge before us is to see where we try to separate ourselves from each other. We do it all the time based on race, status, and many other categories. But when we do, we deny ourselves the opportunity to see God's grace in others and God's love for the whole world. We reject God's call to create a more beloved community.

And it's clear that Atwater especially leaned on her faith in this process, even as she struggles. There's a poignant scene in the film when she holds up her small Bible and says, "This here does the talking for me." And she reminds Ellis, "Same God made you, made me."

How does our faith in Jesus Christ transform how we see one another? Certainly faith calls us to see ourselves differently in light of God's love for us. But what about the next step? What about how we view others?

For the people in Durham, they became a part of a story of transformation. I believe God had a hand in bringing them together. That kind of work can't happen without God's Spirit guiding leaders. And that transformation came because they took time to sit together, to get to know each other, to go beyond the assumptions, prejudices, and biases they held. And the result was a powerful witness to the world.

We still have a lot of work to do. Listening to students in Saline, Michigan talk about the reality of racism in their school, watching them link arms, and knowing that they are not alone - the reality that people in our community experience racism on a daily basis should help us all take notice.

Seeing public displays of racism is sickening, and even more distressing is that some speak their hatred and vitriol in the name of God. That is not truth. That is not true. 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.

Tajari P. Henson, who portrays Ann Atwater in the film, said, "When we talk about love, we talk about God's love. It's unconditional and love is the search for understanding. So even the person you hate, if you want change, you can't match it with hate or else nothing's going to change. Someone has to rise above and tap into love. And that's when Atwater was able to get change."

For as much as we want to believe that racism doesn't exist in us or around us, we're wrong. Racism exists in our schools, our churches, and in so many other places. Racism is alive and well in us, too. And let me be clear for myself and for all of us – racism is sin. It is an evil force in our midst that separates us from God and causes us to prejudge and judge others without knowing them. It's a lie perpetuated simply based on the different amounts of melanin in our bodies.

Racism is sin. Racism says that the amount of pigment in one's skin determines status and worth. That is not from God; that is a human construction. Racism dehumanizes. It destroys. It separates us. And it's not what God intends for us. It's not who we're supposed to be or how we're supposed to be. It's not what Jesus calls us to. It's not love.

We have powerful words in First John, and we have more in Galatians: **SHOW SLIDE** Galatians 3: 26-29 (NIV)²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. Certainly we can celebrate beauty in our diversity, but we can also stand on our unity as children of God.

Getting rid of racism requires hard, intentional work on our part. Yes, we can pray about it - and we should. Yes, we can talk about it - and we should. But we also must fight against it. We must read and hear the stories of those who have experienced it. We must work to rid ourselves of it and seek justice in our community. We have to do the work of cultivating relationships and seeking understanding rather than assuming that everything is fine.

What voices do we need to hear more clearly - particularly voices of those who have experienced racism? Whom might you reach out to and ask to know more and understand more? How can we appreciate differences, find common ground, and celebrate God's grace in our lives?

I say all of this as a person whose skin is lighter and who has never experienced the reality of racism in my life. Privilege is a real thing, and it's something we have to face. That doesn't mean that persons haven't struggled; persons of every race struggle with poverty, food insecurity, and other problems.

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, watched more closely because of my skin color, or called a name, but that's a reality for many people.

This Wednesday, we enter into the season of Lent, so this Sunday is what we call Transfiguration Sunday. On the Christian calendar, we remember when Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up to a mountain, and they see him transfigured before them. It's an amazing experience. They hear a voice from heaven telling them to listen to Jesus.

And it's such an awesome experience that they want to stay on the mountain – except they can't. Jesus takes them back down into the real world. And that's where we are, too. How do we engage? What will we do about it? How will we be more intentional about confessing our sin and making real space and time to sit with one another and understand each other?

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. We enter into this season of Lent, which should be a time of self-examination. Maybe it's a time when you give up something or take on something. But what might we do this year around issues of race and class and justice that are still so pressing and prevalent? I invite you to look for the opportunities that we'll have here at church to address them. I invite you into a season of prayer, knowing that God is always calling us to love one another.

The Best of Enemies isn't a faith-based film, except it has a lot that comes to bear on our faith because it shows the power of love to transform us. Taraji P. Henson describes the story as "a living testimony of love winning." This is a picture of Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis many years after they first came together.

SHOW SLIDE Ellis and Atwater

Theirs is a witness to what God can do in us and with us and through us. What will our witness be?

Thanks be to God. Let us pray...

Dear God, Heavenly Father of us all, you brought us to life by your Word of truth. We are made in your image, sons and daughters of all colors, and yet the sin of racism has caused your children to suffer.

Prejudice, discrimination, and hatred have led to brokenness, violence, and even death. We confess that we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have allowed the sin of racism to divide us in what we have done and what we have not done; what we have said and what we have not said. Purify our hearts and tame our tongues. Give us courage to repent, to fight for righteousness, and to love and embrace one another. In the name of Jesus, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE and the LORD'S PRAYER

A Look Within: Here's something that no one wants to hear

Despite our differences, we have more in common than we think.

We talk a lot about the things that make us different. Race and religion and cultural experience. Income and politics and what we believe is right and true and just. We are miles apart on all that, of course.

We think a lot about what we stand for, and what we are willing to stand without making a peep. We talk about what we will fight for, and who we have to fight to get to it. We think of all the things we deserve, and sometimes we even think of what others might deserve from us. Sometimes.

We talk a lot – I know I do – about the ways in which we are different. But we still have more in common than we don't.

We all want freedom, though we may use it in different ways. We want safe schools for our children, if we have children, that will help prepare them for success. We want jobs that let us feed ourselves and our families, and we dream of one that is a personal mission, that fuels us and fulfills us and makes us feel better about ourselves and our place in the world.

We want respect. We want to be seen for who we are, recognized for what we do. We want to be taken seriously. We want people to treat us like we matter, if only to prove to our darkest doubts that we do. We want to feel important, that the world would be poorer without us in it.

We want to laugh. We want to have fun and to be fun, in the million different ways that can be true. We want to find a way and dream of a day when we won't have to worry. About money or health or pain or loss or failure. We want to think we are pretty good folks.

We want to be remembered. With a smile or a tear or just a little fondness. We'd like to have the things we want. We'd hope to want the things we have. We want someone to want us.

Yes, we have a lot in common even if we don't always want the same things or have the same opportunities to get them.

We all want to open the fridge and find something satisfying inside. We want the house to stay dry when the rains fall, and the faucet to run clean and wet when we turn the knob. We want a blanket when it's cold and a cool breeze when it's hot. We want to believe – foolishly, perhaps – that we understand our purpose in the universe.

We want to be liked, no matter how much we say we don't care, and we want to be loved. We want people to know we are tough, and strong, and smart, and brave. Especially in the moments we fear we are not. We want to hide those things about ourselves that show weaknesses or faults, which are not always the same thing.

We want a fair shake. We want to be happy, though we seldom fully appreciate the times we are. We want to be confident, even if we have to fake confidence long enough to find it.

We want to be treated by others the way others would hope to be treated by us. We don't, often, fulfill our end of that bargain.

We have a lot in common, for good or ill. The hard part, these days, is seeing it.

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