

FAITH AND FILM: V – “CHOCOLAT”
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Ephesians 4:25-32

Luke 10:25-37

It hasn't happened in a while, but for a while, every so often there would be something in the news about people wanting to have the Ten Commandments posted in public places – or actually, the stories would likely be about fighting to keep them in public places when they were under threat of being taken down. And while I know those commandments from God are important, indeed they are guiding principles for our lives, I wish right about now that some of Paul's words in today's lesson from Ephesians were posted in public for everyone to see.

Words like “be kind,” “speak truth,” “forgive,” “build up instead of tearing down.” Or, maybe better than all of them, just these – “May your words give grace to those who hear.”

Boy, do we need that today. Words of grace.

Every day that passes I'm more and more astonished by the way people are acting these days, the things they're saying, posting and tweeting, the way they're treating one another. I actually was watching an interview with Tom Brokaw the other day and he was trying to make the point that all of us need to take a step back these days and not be so reactionary. A public official had said something pretty insensitive, and everybody jumped all over it, with theories and criticisms and accusations – and Brokaw said we need to stop doing that. Stop thinking the worst of people. Stop blowing everything out of proportion. Stop only thinking of oneself and how to gain an advantage over someone you don't like. He was simply calling for us to get some perspective and regain civility.

And I swear to you, before he could take a breath, the person who was interviewing him, jumped right in, and started talking about the comment by the public official and how horrible it was. It was like she hadn't heard a word he said!

Too often, I think that's where we are today as a society at large. No one wants to give anyone else a break. No one lets people make a mistake without jumping all over them. No one stops to listen to another point of view. It's a dog eat dog world, us vs. them, “I have to be the one that's right” world.

Where, oh where, has civility gone? Where has kindness gone, and where, oh where, has grace gone?

Today's Gospel lesson – the parable of the Good Samaritan – is a tale old as time, and a tale with which we are very familiar – maybe too familiar. It doesn't get to us as much as it should, I'm afraid – because it is so familiar.

But think about it. A man is on this road going from Jerusalem to Jericho and he gets beat up and left to die. A priest walks by, sees him, and keeps on walking. Now, there would have been all sorts of reasons for that – he might have been on his way to do religious services – who knows – all we know is that this person who, because he had given his life to follow the Lord, we would have expected to stop and care for the injured man – didn't. He passed by and went on his way.

So another guy comes by – this time it's a Levite, a man of the law. He sees the injured man, but, like the priest, does nothing to help. He passes by on the other side of the road and goes on his merry way. Now, I suspect that were we able to ask him why, he would tell us chapter and verse of the law and how he was not allowed to touch the man, because he was unclean – and that was against God's law. So he was right – technically – but failed when it came to love and grace.

Now, Jesus says as he tells the parable, a third man comes by, and he's a Samaritan. Well, when he says those words to his listeners, they know what Jesus will say next. That scumbag – because that's what they thought of Samaritans – those foreigners – that scumbag surely did the same thing – ignored the injured man. Imagine their shock when Jesus said he was the one who took care of the man. He was the one who threw aside so many things – like the fact that he was not one of his own, and the fact that he was unclean, the fact that he should have known better to walk on that dangerous road, the fact that it would stop him from going where he was going, and the fact that it would cost him. Well, the list goes on and on of all the reasons he could have chosen to walk on by – but he didn't. He stopped and cared for the man, and not just in that moment, but took him to a place where he could receive care, and then paid for that care.

The other two just walked on by, but he stopped and saved a man's life – it was the right thing to do, the moral thing to do, the grace-filled thing to do.

I wonder how often that happens these days – how often people choose to get involved, choose to stop and help, choose to be people of grace.

You know, I don't know if you happened to see something that was posted on social media this week by Burger King. It was a video they produced of an experiment, of sorts, that they carried out. They hired some young people to be actors for a video on "bullying."

Here's how it went. There were two different scenarios going on at the same time in a Burger King restaurant. One was where a Burger King employee actually smashed a burger before wrapping it up to be sold to a customer – they nicknamed it for the video “bullying a burger.” The other scenario was a bunch of youth sitting together at a table in the restaurant, with two or three boys bullying another boy – pretty loudly and viciously. It was done in such a way that anyone in the restaurant could see it and hear it happening.

And here's the startling part of the video. Wait until you hear this! Fully 95% of the people who received a smashed “bullied burger” took it back to the counter and complained about it, demanding a new one, questioning how it happened. And incredibly sadly, only 12% of the people paid one bit of attention to the young man being bullied right before their eyes. I mean, they didn't even just go and tell the manager – they did nothing – nothing.

They, in the words of the parable, “passed by the other side.” Where, oh where, is kindness and civility and care? Where, oh where, is grace?

The film clip I've chosen to show this morning is from a movie called “Chocolat,” produced a number of years ago. Let me tell you the back story to the clip. There's a town in France, a very religious town, ruled by a very strong and very pious mayor. He is the rule keeper in the town, and he is the morality policeman, if you will. He is such a control freak, that he actually writes the sermons for the town's priest so he can make sure he's saying what he should be saying. In other words, this mayor is a controlling, rule-obsessed man.

Well, into this tightly controlled town, comes a free-spirited woman named Vianne who opens up a chocolate shop. Trouble is, she opens it up during Lent, and of course, Lent is a time of self-denial and the mayor thinks it is scandalous for her to do such a thing, so he does everything possible to shut her down, and even worse, to call her very character into question.

But no matter what he does, she is determined to go through with opening her shop, and plans on having a grand celebration Easter weekend. Well, by that time the mayor is absolutely furious, and during the night, he breaks into the shop, goes to the front window display which is filled with lovely chocolate sculptures and an abundant display of beautiful chocolates, and he takes a knife to it all – tearing it completely apart, destroying it.

But, in the midst of that rampage, a bit of chocolate splashes on his lips, and it's like the world stops, for he discovers how wonderful it is, and before he knows it, he gorging on it, until he finally falls asleep right there in the shop window in a chocolate coma, if you will.

Well, daybreak comes, and the priest is walking through the village when he passes by the shop and sees the mayor laying in the middle of a pile of chocolate dead asleep. The next thing you see on the screen is Vianne touching the mayor's shoulder to awaken him – and here's the grace note – not screaming at him for the horrible things he has done, almost ruining her – instead offering him bicarbonate of soda to settle his stomach. Not a word of condemnation, but an act of sheer grace. She didn't try to humiliate him, she just cared for him.

Which brings us to the scene we're about to see. It's the church service that follows. Because of his rampage, the mayor hasn't been able to write the priest's sermon for him, so the priest preaches off the cuff, if you will. So take a look and see what happens.

(Film clip of priest preaching Easter sermon.)

After witnessing that wonderful act of grace that morning, Pere Henri wanted people to remember Jesus' humanity, how he lived his life here on earth – his tolerance, his kindness, his inclusiveness. He wanted them to focus on the positive, and measure their goodness by what they embraced, what they created, and who they included.

What would happen if we did that these days? What if we remembered Jesus' humanity, how he lived his life here on earth, and tried to be more like him? What if we did more embracing, and creating and including instead of being so quick to stand our ground, lashing out in an instant when someone says or does something we don't like?

You know, sometimes I think the problems in our society are overwhelming and I can't see how they can get better, but maybe that's not how we should look at it. Maybe we should just do what we can where we can.

The Good Samaritan didn't change life for everyone that day on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, but he changed one life. And when Jesus told the story, maybe other hearts were touched in such a way that they began to live grace-filled lives too.

Surely when Vianne forgave the mayor by not beating him up over what he had done, she changed him and, it seems, changed the attitude of the whole town – to one no longer of fear, but of joy.

Friends, as followers of the Christ, we have the opportunity to, with our words and actions, pour his grace upon this hardened world of ours. The Good News is that because he loved us, we can love others. We may not be able to change the whole world, but we can change our little part of it.

You know, this weekend we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther led a revolution, of sorts, to bring change to the church – a change from a privatized religion where priests and priests alone led the church, where the mass was spoken in a language no one understood but the priests, where no one could read the scriptures but the priests, where the prevailing notion was that to get to heaven you had to earn your way there, even if it meant buying your way in. He ushered in the era of “the priesthood of all believers,” not just the ordained. He translated the scriptures into language people understood, and he preached “salvation by faith alone, by the grace of God poured out in Jesus Christ.”

Because of what Luther did, the church changed and protestant denominations were formed with these guiding principles, and among the denominations that followed was Methodism. We are all people whose faith is built upon God’s grace.

Yet, one person in a speech, said some time ago, “The great failure of the church in America is our failure to offer an alternative vision of living to our nation. There is not a measurable difference in the way church folk and secular people live. We do not inspire people toward Christ.” (On-line, “Blessed are the Peacemakers,” Rev. Paul Perdue, Belmont UMC, Nashville TN)

Quite an indictment, isn’t it? But is it true? Do we show by the things we do, the words we say, the way we care for others, the grace that God has shown to us? Are we any different than anyone else in our society today?

That is our challenge. We can join with all of the rest and enter the fray of mean-spiritedness, having to have our own way, and being uncaring – we can, if you will, pass by on the other side – or we can be, like the Good Samaritan, those who live another way – the way of Christ.

Maybe we can’t change the whole world, but we can change our little part of it. So today, as it says in Ephesians, go forth and be kind, speak truth, forgive, and build up. And, “may your words give grace to those who hear.” May it be so.

Amen.