

Pentecost 20
25 October 2020

Love One Another

In 2000 I discovered one of my favorite movies of all time. Maybe you've not, shame on you. Fear not, we will be seeking the Lord's absolution for our sins in a few minutes and you can deal with it then.

It's called "Best in Show." It's from the same folks who brought you Spinal Tap and Waiting for Guffman, and it follows the formula of a mockumentary, fully improvised by the actors. No script. It's hilarious and just a wonder.

The plot is very simple. It's the run-up to the Mayflower Kennel Club Dog Show in Philadelphia, and the film follows the 5 sets of owners whose dogs are competing in the show. There's Gerry and Cookie Fleck, owner of Yorkshire Terrier named Winkie. Cookie is kind of a bombshell who keeps running into ex-boyfriends as they drive across country. And there's a lot of them. Gerry is a kind of nebishy guy with big horned-rimmed glasses and, literally... two left feet. This is not a metaphor, the camera pans down and the man has... two left feet.

There's Meg and Hamilton Swan, the yuppie owners of a weimeraner in therapy, though its clear it's the owners who are needing the psychological help. They have one of my favorite lines in the movie: "We were so lucky to have been brought up amongst catalogues."

There's also Harlan Pepper of Pine Nut, North Carolina, who spends a good 8 minutes of running time naming all the nuts he can think of while Hubert the bloodhound sits in the RV with him.

There are challenges met, the thrill of victory and agony of defeat. Two left feet in Gerry's case. And there are other owners and dogs, and they have their quirks and funny moments. And you may have noticed that... I haven't mentioned the dogs very much. The film is basically a character study of these odd, if occasionally lovable, characters. No one is a villain per se, but you do find yourself rooting for one in particular.

In his review of the film, Roger Ebert writes as follows: I am a dog lover, but I am not a dog fancier. I can understand people who dote on their dogs, but I cannot understand dog shows, which make dogs miserable while bringing out the worst traits of their owners. Dogs were not put on earth to pose, prance, sit, point and have their coats shampooed. They were created to

chew shoes, bark at cars, have accidents on the rug and get their tummies scratched. That's why I approve of "Best in Show."

I want to gently suggest that Roger has put his finger on a distinction that we are faced with in today's readings. Roger makes the distinction between the idea of fancy and true love. Fancy dotes, sees the other in the relationship as an empty vessel for their own affections, and reflects a view of the other person as transactional: the goal is to get something out of the relationship. For the dog owners of Best in Show, and, generally, fanciers of all things, it's that trophy or ribbon. But when fancy gets projected onto other people... Well, how's the Vol fandom doing these days?

On the other hand, love sees the value in the other person simply existing; joy in the creation of the human being as a human being, made in the image of God, doing what it is that God has created them to do and be, not expecting anything in return. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves in today's gospel, Our Lord is not giving us a difficult assignment; it is to simply live and exist in a manner that says: "This person is an individual, this person is created by God, and I cannot merely fancy... I must love."

The problem we face as 21st century americans is that very few of us know what that love looks like. We don't know how to love, because, frankly, we have never been taught how to love. We've been taught to fancy, or settle for an ersatz version of love, but never true love. We prefer the simulation of love, the simulation of an intimacy that makes us *feel* loved... usually at another person's expense. Think back, a few years ago, to one of those gum commercials... It's a guy or girl, athletic, usually shirtless if they're a guy or in just a top and leggings if they're a girl, and they go into some kind of chamber and experience 'what it's like' to chew that gum... The one I saw was for a gum entitled Rain... So the guy goes in, lays down on a giant table of metal bearings, inches deep, and the controllers in the booth turn up the volume and bass speakers real loud, and the entire apparatus shakes... bearings, guy, and gum, to simulate being outside in the rain. The Gum isn't like being in the rain, it's a simulation of a simulation of rain. But, as we all know, standing in the rain is not the same as laying on a table covered with ball bearings, no matter how much gum you chew. But consumerism has taught us to prefer the simulation to the real. Because the ersatz is always easier than the real.

But this is what we've been taught. So when we encounter true, Jesus-shaped love, it stands out, it leaps out, like one of those laser pointers getting in our eyes, and grabs us by the scruff of the neck and shakes us around. When we encounter Jesus-shaped love, we *know it.* It's unmistakable.

What Christians celebrate about Martin Luther King, jr., should not merely be that his advocacy for non-violence and racial justice; what we should see in Dr. King is the Jesus-shaped love of someone willing to suffer to achieve salvation *for the other person.* Dr. King wasn't just interested in changing the law, he was interested in saving souls. He believed that non-violence meant receiving violence to spur others to repentance. If a deputy was ordered to attack a marcher, maybe a teenager, maybe a woman, maybe an old man... The deputy would find themselves in a moral vice grip: do I follow this evil order to attack a child of God, or do I repent? Do I sin, or do I refuse to sin? To love the deputy meant not striking back, but being willing to see the deputy as a fellow child of God, yearning for his own salvation. To strike back in violence would be to simply "fancy" the deputy, to see him as a means to an end. The love of God was shed on Bull Connor and Orval Faubus and Lester Maddox and George Wallace not just at Calvary, but at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and every strike of night stick, every bite of the dog, every drop of shed blood on the pavement in Birmingham and Montgomery and Neshoba county.

This is Jesus-shaped love. This is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. Our reading from Exodus puts this in stark terms: God's people are the poor. God's people are the aliens in our lands. God's people are the widows. God's people are the orphans. We dare not exploit them, we dare not treat them with disrespect. We dare not tell them to pull themselves up by

their bootstraps or get over it, time to move on, or make life harder for them because they are poor or aliens or widows or orphans. We talk a big game about the promises of scripture and the promises of God, so let's meditate on this one: abuse his people, and God promises our death and destruction. God promises his wrath. God promises his sword against those who simply "fancy" his people rather than love them. And make no mistake: this is a non-negotiable. If you cannot love your neighbor, if you choose to continue to favor ersatz love over Jesus-Shaped love do not present yourself to this Table, for you are eating and drinking yourself into damnation.

So let's make this hard as if it wasn't already. Which one of us is willing to love our political enemies with real, Jesus-shaped love? If you're MAGA, are you willing to die for Joe Biden? Or antifa? If you're on the other side... Did you pray for the President when he was ill? Would you be willing to die so a ProudBoy could live?

Let's make this really hard: last night, as I was typign this up, Reuters reported that separatist gunmen in Cameroon seized a rural school building and murdered school children. Reuters reported it this way: Armed with guns and machetes, the attackers killed at least eight students at school in city of Kumba, Southwest Region. One photo verified by the Reuters news agency showed the inside of a classroom, where a pile of dried blood had pooled on the floor near

some scattered flip-flops. Isabel Dione ran into the school to search for her 12-year-old daughter when she heard about the shooting. She found her on the floor of a classroom, bleeding from the stomach. “She was helpless and she was shouting ‘mum please help me’, and I told her ‘only your God can save you now’,” Dione told Reuters. The girl was rushed to hospital where she is undergoing treatment for a gunshot wound. Local education officials confirmed six deaths of children aged between 12 and 14 and added that another eight had been taken to hospital.

Can we love the attackers? Can we look them in the eye and say, “Despite everything that you have done, you are a child of God and you are loved by God and I love you because God loved me first.” I don’t know. I do know, though, we cannot expect God’s justice on them if we do not expect God’s justice on us as well. We cannot expect God’s love on us if we do not show God’s love on them. It will always be easier to fake loving our neighbor, to offer the simulation of love than to live and share real love. We dare not exchange love for fancy, the real for the simulation, no matter how easy, no matter how much it costs us. Because it cost him everything.

And that is the Gospel. The hard truth is that we will *always* fail to love our neighbors. We will *always* never fail to abuse the poor, or the immigrant or the widow or the orphan. It's built into us as sin. We are all, on this week before halloween, vampires, seeking the false promise of something other than Jesus' love for us.

And yet, Jesus forgives us anyway. He invites us to his table anyway. Our arriving at the table with faith in Jesus Christ, faith in the promise of our resurrection with him, along side the poor, the immigrant, the widow, with the orphan, with Dr. King, and yes, even with Wallace, who famously repented. Love God. Draw near to him with faith. Depart with him to love.

Amen.