

August 30, 2009

Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski

“Faith @ the Movies – Doubt”

Mark 9.14-27

How many of you have seen this week’s Faith@TheMovies selection Doubt? Okay, for those of you who have seen it, who thinks Father Flynn is guilty? Who thinks he is innocent?

This is an audience participation movie if ever there was one. In what is the audience asked to participate? DOUBT.

This screenplay was written by John Patrick Shanley who also directed the film.

So often movies tie up all the loose ends for you nicely. This is not one of those movies. The script is written so the audience cannot know whether Father Flynn is guilty or not. For every element in the film that might suggest one possibility, there are two other possible interpretations. For most of the movie, we are simply left with ambiguity and uncertainty.

The Director Shanley said, “What was always important to me is that the sense of doubt belongs to the audience. I’m not going to tell them what’s right and wrong. I wanted to simply make them think and feel something, and dare to explore their own beliefs as to why they think and feel that way, rather than to tell them what to think and feel.

For those who haven’t seen the film, it features Meryl Streep as Sister Aloysius, the principal of St. Nicholas in the Bronx; a priest, Father Flynn, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, and an angelic and slightly naïve teacher named Sister James played by Amy Adams.

The film is set in 1964. Father Flynn's character represents the growing restlessness and change within organized religion in the 1960's.

Sister Aloysius represents the determined efforts to continue to live in a world of certainty and maintain an old school approach to religion. Right away these two characters are clearly antagonistic toward each other.

At the same time, Sister Aloysius informs the sisters under her charge that she is concerned about Father Flynn and she encourages them to report anything they observe as unusual or suspicious.

The lovely and naïve Sister James follows her Superiors' orders faithfully and when Father Flynn calls a young man, the school's first African American student, out of her class and over to the rectory she has some doubts about the appropriateness of that action and informs Sister Aloysius. Before she has any evidence at all, Sister Aloysius has an overwhelming sense of certainty that there must be something wrong. She understands her lack of evidence, but she is absolutely certain that she is right, and her faith in that certainty is enough for her.

What begins as the pursuit of truth ends in a dark and soul crushing crusade by Sister Aloysius to remove Father Flynn from his position.

Again, the audience is never told whether Father Flynn is guilty or innocent. The Director John Patrick Shanley said, "I'm not going to tell the audience what is right and wrong. I'm not going to tell them what to think and feel. I want them to wrestle with what they think and why and how they feel." Shanley was quoted as saying the film is about something as simple, yet powerful as the presence of doubt in a world of certainty.

My intent in this message series is not to be a film critic but to invite us to explore a little more deeply issues of our faith. There are many themes in this movie but the theme I want us to wrestle with is the theme of Doubt and suggest doubt is not the opposite of faith but an important ingredient in the journey of faith.

Today, you get two sermons for the price of one as here is Father Flynn's sermon at the beginning of the movie. Here you will see the portrayal of two very different worldviews. One that dares to live in a world of uncertainty and doubt. Another bound by a set of rules and expectations that every one must adhere to. [VIDEO]

“Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty.” I'm a huge Garrison Keillor fan. Keillor sat in a pew one Easter feeling miserable because he was struggling with questions around the Easter story. When, all of a sudden, he realized he wasn't alone in his doubts and questions. He was in good company.

Jesus himself doubted – when in the garden, he asked God to rescue him, and from the cross, he cried out, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’”

The disciples themselves must have doubted, must have been less than absolutely certain when one betrayed him, another denied him, and they all fled, abandoning Jesus.

Keillor went on to reflect that doubt and those questions that reside in the darkness of the soul...those questions you are afraid won't be welcomed in the light...perhaps ought not to be repressed. He wrote, “Doubt is an antidote to smugness and self-righteousness. And there's plenty of that in the current purveyors of religion. Jesus,” Keillor observed, “was rougher on the self-righteous than he was on adulterers and prostitutes.”

“So I will sit in the doubter’s chair for a while and see what is to be learned there.”

My hunch is that Keillor is not alone sitting in the doubter’s chair and I hope to assure you today that doubt is an important companion on this journey of faith.

I love today’s Gospel story:

One day a desperate father brought his son to Jesus. From what the writer Mark says about the boy, we would conclude that his condition is epilepsy, a condition that in the ancient world was terrifying and generally believed to be the result of demon possession.

One moment this boy is running and jumping and playing and the next moment, without warning, his face contorts, his eyes roll back, he almost stops breathing, becomes rigid. He falls down and goes into a seizure.

I can picture this father on his knees holding his little boy tightly in his arms until the seizure ends. When it is over, he gently strokes his face and hair, wiping his mouth, speaking softly to him that it’s going to be okay.

But, inside, he feels completely and utterly powerless and helpless. His heart is broken. He’s afraid. He’s desperate. He heard about this teacher and healer from Nazareth named Jesus. He gathers up his son and walks miles to the place he heard Jesus was.

He says to Jesus, “If you are able to do anything, have compassion and help us.”

Notice this father is not at all sure about this, not at all sure Jesus can help, “IF you are able.” There’s uncertainty and doubt in that “if”.

Jesus said, “All things are possible.”

The man says, “I believe” but then he adds the most amazingly honest confession I suspect we could all speak, ‘Help my unbelief. I believe; help my unbelief.’”

We get that don’t we? My guess most of us live somewhere in the space between belief and unbelief.

This may be the most important verse in the Bible for people of faith living in today’s challenging, postmodern world...”I believe; help my unbelief.”

The father in this story doesn’t bring a lot of faith to Jesus. He’s not sure what he believes. Maybe there are some days he does and other days he doesn’t. He doesn’t bring with him a lot of religious credentials or theological knowledge.

What he does bring to Jesus is the deepest, most profound thing in his life: his love for his son...his breaking heart...his fear. What he brings to Jesus is his own deep need...his brutal honesty. What he does is act, in spite of his own uncertainty, and it is enough. The little boy is healed.

I often wonder when religious faith came to mean intellectual certainty. Many of us were raised to believe faith to be understanding without question certain ideas about God and Jesus. And if you question or doubt those ideas, the whole structure collapses and you’re no longer a person of faith and you start heading for the church door.

I not only think this definition of faith is wrong but acts as a deterrent to faith.

Father Richard Rohr said, “So what if you believe there is a God! It is possible to believe and still not be transformed into a more loving and whole person. When did the Gospel become a giant college entrance exam? Making faith merely about belief systems largely creates defensive and offensive people trying to prove my God is bigger than your God and my beliefs are better than your beliefs.”

I believe one of the greatest challenges to the mainline church struggling with declining numbers is moving away from defining of faith as insisting on believing certain ideas about God and Jesus toward redefining faith as daring to trust in a God of love and following Jesus in the way of love, even when you’re struggling with the ideas themselves. Doubters don’t have to quit!

If you happen to sit with Garrison Keillor in the doubter’s chair – know you have a lot of company and you are always welcome here. You are not only welcome but your questions and doubts are welcome and important to our journey together.

The man in our story today gives us a new definition of faith. Faith, for the father in this story today, meant taking a risk, being willing to trust in the power and hope of God’s love, even while not at all intellectually certain of it.

Jesus didn’t ask his followers to agree on anything. He didn’t say, “Here are 10 good ideas about God you must adhere to.” There was no test. There was no theological entrance exam. He said simply, ‘Follow me. Follow my Way. Follow the way of my love.’”

“Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”