

January At The Movies, II... **Gran Torino**
Stereotyping

I will never forget a moment that took place almost 20 years ago... I was a young pastor (not in this church) and we had a request from another church in our community to use our sanctuary for a funeral service. I can't remember why they asked – it might have been that they were renovating, or just didn't have the seating capacity they thought they would need. It didn't matter, of course, I said, "Yes" to that request.

It happened that this other church was an African/ American congregation – just up the street from us – something which to me, was a non issue, other than thinking that this would be a good, positive statement for the community as a whole. Thinking, "We're already too divided, here's something we can do to come together."

The congregation came in, had their service; we opened our Fellowship Hall to them as well for a luncheon afterward, and refused their offer of financial compensation. I was feeling pretty good about the whole exchange.

Well, later on, that same day, one of my church leaders happened to be in the building with me. This was someone that I respected, and truly considered a leader in that congregation. We were talking, and I mentioned the service that had taken place there earlier that day. And I remember this plainly: she stood up very straight, and sniffed, and she said, "*Funny, I can usually smell when black people have been here... you know, they have a certain odor.*"

Did you ever have one of those moments when you know you need to say something, but you just can't find the words? I've thought about that conversation many times since then... I've thought of ways that I could have challenged her, responses ranging from gentle to harsh... I've wished that I just hadn't let that moment pass... but honestly, I was so shocked that even in the 1990's someone – a person of faith – could so casually brand people... people who in this case were 'brothers and sisters' in Christ... I just said nothing.

But I became aware that stereotyping, racism, was a more deeply ingrained issue than I ever imagined. Having grown up in a racially integrated high school, and seeing (particularly through music) that we really *can* get along, I came into the church with an unwarranted idealism.

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I thought, surely, *here* is the place where this was going to end. This is a place where the world can be different. But numerous moments like that encounter with this church leader started to chip away at that idealism. In my first church, in another small South Jersey town, as you entered the town from the North, there was a street on the left hand side. It was named after some a family in that church (and I won't say the name here). But – again, a church member – took me aside and told me what the locals called that street.

It was “_____ Lane” (with a racial slur). Named as such because not long before that time, this is where all non-whites were to turn off. They were not welcome in that community. And then a pastor friend of mine showed me a dedication marker built into a corner of a stained glass window in his church, another church in deep South Jersey. It said “KKK”, meaning just what you think it meant. No one wanted it removed. He put tape over it, and got into trouble.

I'm sharing that – and leaving a lot out – because I don't think my experience is terribly different from most of yours. Especially if you are my age or older, if your eyes are open you see it. Our country has been called a 'melting pot' for the world – and it *is* – but the less starry eyed version of that image recognizes that the 'melting' has taken place very slowly, and has required a lot of heat in the process. It seems to me that each people group, once assimilated, has found their own group to hate, to look down on. I'm thinking now that 'This is human nature...it's part of our sinfulness.' But it dishonors God.

That's my context for watching the 2008 Film that was written, directed by, and starring Clint Eastwood – Gran Torino. I've had a number of people tell me that Eastwood's character (Walt Kowloski) reminds them of people they've known and grown up with: parents, uncles, neighbors... even themselves. It's a powerful film on many levels.

This film comes with my warning – the language is harsh. If that is going to offend you, don't watch the film. But the language was, sadly, also realistic – not just representing Walt (and all he stood for), but as a representation of life itself in a changing world that has little hope. A world

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that is angry, and aimless, a world in which people are constantly on the defensive against – everyone – and particularly people different than themselves.

Walt Kowalski, as I said, is the main character in “Gran Torino.” Walt’s a tobacco chewing, chain-smoking Korean War vet and a no-nonsense kind of guy. His pride and joy is a green 1972 Ford Gran Torino. He doesn’t do well with change, including the changes his neighborhood is going through. What used to be a white suburban Michigan neighborhood is now one filled with multi-racial gang wars and a predominantly Asian community. But Walt is too stubborn to move, and now that his wife is gone, it’s just him and his dog Daisy, left to sit on the porch, drink beer, and grumble under his breath about his neighbors.

Things change, though, when Walt catches someone trying to steal that Gran Torino. That someone is his next-door neighbor Thao, a teenage boy who’s being initiated into a gang (against his will, as it turns out). It’s through this incident that Walt finally connects with those in his neighborhood – really connects. Through a series of circumstances Walt starts to care for Thao, and he takes it upon himself to keep him out of the gang and out of trouble. An unlikely friendship begins to develop between Thao (and his family) and Walt.

From that friendship comes this film, which chronicles a man realizing the mistakes he’s made in his life and finding his way to come to terms with them and accept forgiveness. It is a film with a number of themes. [take a look at this clip]

One of the central themes of this film is racism – and it is not just Walt’s, either. In some ways Walt is a caricature. I suppose there are people like Walt in our world today, but for the most part his character was an over the top portrayal of an ‘equal opportunity hater’. What becomes clear is that Walt’s anger, and his language is the way that Walt keeps others at arms length. But like all of us – there is a lot more to Walt than meets the eye.

He is an angry guy, and we discover that he is pretty clear himself as to the source of his inner rage – but he has no idea how to deal with it, or atone for it. Its easier for him to simply insult people, to categorize them, to expect them to ‘keep to their own kind’ – because anything else

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forces him to look at the narrow, small box of a world that he's created for himself. It forces him to look at people not in broad strokes, but as human beings, as individuals. And that is hard for him to do – especially in this film with his Hmong neighbors, because the deepest source of pain for Walt lies in the terrible memories that he carries stemming from the Korean War where he saw extensive action.

Just a couple more comments about this film – there's a dialogue that continues throughout the film regarding faith. Walt's wife – whose funeral is where the film begins – was a woman of faith. And the priest from her church – a very young looking, idealistic man – makes a promise to her on her deathbed that he would do everything he could to convince Walt to go to confession. This is a promise that this young priest takes very seriously. As a member of the clergy, I have to say that I was pleasantly surprised at the way the priest was depicted in the film. He was an honorable man - courageous, sincere, and intelligent – a welcome change from the usual depiction of clergy in the media.

...I find myself in a dilemma here, as it is bad form to talk about a film and reveal the ending... and yet if I don't talk about the ending, we are going to miss the point of the whole thing. So let me stay kind of cryptic here and say this: that the film's ending is very moving, it is wrought with Christian symbolism, and it is a surprising demonstration of some things that Jesus taught very clearly. (And if you don't want to see the movie, but want to know what I'm talking about, just ask me – or send me an email, and I'll fill you in!)

Whether intentionally, or unintentionally – in spite of the rough language, and the hard as nails character represented in Walt Kolowski, the direction of the film's movement, particularly with regard to Walt's heart opening up to his neighbors, but also to God (through his relationship with the Priest (Father Janovich), who he comes to call his friend', there is in this film an affirmation of some pretty basic values that are taught in the Scriptures.

The main area here that I want to touch on is in regard to racism. The unflinching position of Christian teaching – drawn from deep in the well of our Scriptures, is that every one of us is in the 'same boat' before God. On the one hand you can say that there are no 'privileged positions'

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before God, we come equally, but maybe a better way to put that is to say that we're *all* living in privileged positions before God – because God is a God of love and grace.

In Genesis 1: 26 – 27 we read the most important verses in the Bible with regard to this subject:

Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

*So God created human beings in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

Whatever literalness you apply to the ancient writings of the Book of Genesis, if there is any meaning at all in those words, we *know* that every human being bears the stamp of God on their lives. It is on their soul. Every human being, then, has tremendous *value* to God. The subsequent division of races and people groups, which ended up in some cases in the servitude of one over another, is a direct result of the Fall. It is not God's plan, and there is no Scriptural justification for the rejection of *any* person by another based on their nationality, race, language, or any other external characteristic. We all need grace, we are all offered grace in Christ.

Now, we come to the New Testament and this is not only affirmed, but we see the *extent* of God's love for these people – these human beings – that God has created in his image. A love that is longer, deeper, wider, higher than anything we can imagine, limited, fallen creatures that we are. “While we were *still sinners*... Christ died for us.”

“For God love *the world* so much... that he gave his one and only Son, so that *whoever* believes in him would not perish, but have everlasting life.”

In the passage we read this morning from Paul's letter to the Colossian church, (chapter 3) we read these important words:

¹*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.* ²*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.* ³*For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.*

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Again, verse 3: *For you died, and your life is now **hidden** with Christ in God.* Paul emphasizes here – as he does elsewhere as well – that even more profoundly than our blood connection as human beings, *in Christ* **all** barriers consisting of external things have come down. Our lives are hidden in Christ – together with all the believers, ‘whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.’ We are one body in Christ.

It is because of that heritage, that the Christian church of all people, should be leading the charge in preserving people’s dignity by opposing hatred in any form; particularly hatred that judges a man or a woman on the basis of something other than their own words or works. We, of all people should be the ones in our society who have the desire, the commitment, to care for our neighbors, to learn about them – to view people not as a ‘blur’, not as cartoon characters that we’ve created because of our past role models, or because of a bad experience we’ve had with some individuals, but understanding that all people have been created by God the same as all of us, as people who are in need of grace and love – the same as us; as people who do smart things, and stupid things, who make good choices, and bad choices... the same as us.

We should be the people who are more like the Walt Kowloski’s at the *end* of the film than the Walt Kowloski’s of the beginning of the film.

From God’s word to Samuel in the Old Testament (1 Sam 16:7) “...*Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*” to Jesus’ word in John 7:24 “*Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly*” we realize that it is our obligation to see *people* not symbols. People that are loved by God and who are called (as those whose lives are hidden in God) to also love others. The best we can.

But, like anything difficult, we have to *want* this to happen, we have to have a vision of unity that is bigger than where we are now. And we have to act on that vision. Or everything will simply remain the same. An African American church leader (*Ed Gilbreath*) tells this story describing the difficulty of racial reconciliation:

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“It was my third year with the ministry. I got a call from a prominent white Christian leader, asking me to go to lunch with him. As we're sitting down to eat, all of a sudden this guy starts crying.... He explained that God had blessed him—his children were healthy, he was known throughout the country. But, he said, “I've had a hard time sleeping throughout the night.” And I was thinking to myself, *Why is he telling me this? I'm not a therapist.*

“I just came back from an annual conference on the other side of the country,” the man told me. “A bunch of us got together to discuss reconciliation and cross-cultural ministry. Usually, when black leaders come into the meeting, we make them feel right at home and let them be part of the decision-making process. But to be honest with you, the decisions are made before your leaders ever get there. I'm used to hearing the jokes and the use of the N-word. But this time, when the jokes were going on and people were saying things, it didn't sound right to me.”

“How can I get over this?” the leader asked me, sobbing. “How can we be friends?”

I was silent for a moment, then asked him, “Do you like football?” He seemed a little puzzled, but said yes. “I do, too,” I told him. “I used to coach high school and college ball, and I have a lot of friends who play pro. I love a good game, and I love to cook out. So here's what we do: I need to get to know you, and you need to get to know me. Why don't you come over to my house?” I was the only black in my suburban neighborhood at the time. I said: “Bring your wife and meet my wife, and we'll just sit and talk and get to know each other. I'll barbecue some steaks, and let's start there.”

He was taken aback. He said, “You want me to come to your house?”

“Yes,” I said. “If you want me to sit here and clear your conscience for all the crap you did, I can't do that. Friendship is not cheap. It takes time and commitment.” I gave him my home phone number and told him to give me a call.

I never heard from him again.¹

And there it is... opportunities are out there... like for Walt Kolowski, who finally responded, mostly through the persistence of people who saw more in him than he saw in himself. It's up to the viewer of the film to decide whether or not he 'found out; too late... but for us – this isn't a movie. It's *never* too late.

1 John 4: 20 – 21

“If anyone boasts, “I love God,” and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.”

¹ Ed Gilbreath, "Exit Interviews," Christianity Today (February 2007), p. 104-107