

“REEL THEOLOGY – THE FAREWELL”

Rev. Victor Kim

Psalm 139:1-18; 1 Corinthians 15:12-22, 50-57

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This morning we return to our series on Oscar nominated movies, except that the movie I've chosen for today isn't actually nominated for any Academy Awards. That's too bad because it is really a good movie and it features some fine actors, including Awkwafina, who won a Golden Globe award for Best Actress in a Musical or Comedy. I thought she would be a shoe in for an Oscar nomination but hey, what do I know? I also predicted that there was absolutely no chance that Donald Trump would be elected President. In any event, the Farewell is a fine movie which explores an important theme, a theme which was particularly prominent this past week.

How do we say goodbye?

That's basically the central theme of The Farewell. How do we deal with losing someone we love, with the reality of death? In The Farewell, Awkwafina plays Billi, a 30 year old Chinese American who lives in New York City after having immigrated to the U.S. as a child with her parents. She's a struggling writer who has just received notice that she's been turned down for a Guggenheim Fellowship. To make matters worse, her family receives news that Billi's grandmother, Nai Nai, has just been diagnosed with terminal lung cancer back in China and only has a few months to live. Billi is very close to her Nai Nai, having fond memories of her time growing up in China and keeping in touch with her over the years. But her parents don't want Billi to go with them to China because they fear that she is too emotionally attached to Nai Nai and the rest of the family has agreed not to tell Nai Nai of her diagnosis.

Billi is shocked by this refusal to tell Nai Nai of her cancer diagnosis. Why wouldn't they tell her, she asks. Because, her mother replies, Chinese people have a saying, when people get cancer, they die. What she means is that people who are told they have cancer shut down and stop living.

Of course, we know that's not true. We know many people who live with cancer, who bravely fight the disease and sometimes even find remission from the disease for many years. But in some cultures, it's still a practice that's followed, although less frequently.

I have a personal story that's exactly the same as the one in the movie. Many years ago when I was a university student, I was asked by my father to accompany him to a doctor's appointment for an elder in my father's church. Elder Bin was an older man and spoke very little English and my father wasn't much better with the language. So he wanted me to come along to make sure that I understood what the doctor said. The diagnosis was cancer and I told my father who made me promise that I wouldn't tell Elder Bin. I asked why not, and was told the same thing that Billi's mother tells her about her Nai Nai. I didn't understand then and I'm not sure that as a person pretty much raised in Canada that I would understand now. When my father was diagnosed with cancer recently, we told him straight up. Four years into his diagnosis, he's still playing golf and living independently with my mother.

Billi's family concocts a sham wedding of one of Billi's cousins as an excuse for the whole family to gather with Nai Nai one last time. Billi shows up unexpectedly, deciding that she can't stay away. The rest of the movie deals with the lengths the family goes to in trying to keep the news from Nai Nai.

Let's take a look at the trailer. Click here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RofpAiqwMa8>

How do we say goodbye?

This has been a week where goodbyes have been very much on our minds, whether collectively or more personally. This past Monday marked Holocaust Remembrance Day, which coincides with the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp where over a million people were murdered. Last Sunday we heard the tragic news of the death of basketball star Kobe Bryant, his daughter and 7 other people in a helicopter crash in California. Bryant was 41 years old, his daughter, only 13. The lead story all around the world throughout this week has been the spread of the novel coronavirus. The rapid spread of the virus, not only in China, but now around the world, has many countries and people extremely worried. To date there have been over 300 deaths that have been reported, and there will be many more to come. And much closer to home, we received news that our friend and brother in Christ, the Rev. Larry Jackson, went to be home with his Lord this week.

Death is all around us.

How do we say goodbye?

It seems to me that we don't really do a good job of saying goodbye, whether here in the West or in the East. In the West, in places like Canada, we often try to sanitize death. We have places like hospitals, hospices, places which are specially designed to deal with death, **in some ways to keep death apart from the day to day activities of living.**

Did you know that in the Muslim faith, the dead are brought into the mosques where a team of people from the congregation actually wash the body to prepare it for burial? When I toured the mosque on 5 Road, I was shown the area where the washing takes place. It looked a lot like our kitchen, stainless steel countertops and sinks. I couldn't imagine our Care and Fellowship team washing the bodies of our dead!

In our culture we often think of death as almost unnatural, we try to extend life as long as possible, either by our choices around healthy living or by technology. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. We do a great job at extending life as much as possible, often to good effect, but sometimes to an extent that seems rather extreme.

In other places around the world, death is less sanitized. More people die at home than in places like a hospital. When you live in a war zone or live in poverty where disease can run unchecked, life isn't always treated with the sacredness that we in the West accord it. According to the World Health Organization of the top 10 causes of death in low-income countries in 2016, 7 of the top 10 were from causes that were communicable, meaning they can be spread from person to person. These include respiratory infections like pneumonia or influenza, diarrhoeal diseases caused by lack of safe drinking water, HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis. In high income countries like Canada, only one of the top ten causes of death is from a communicable illness. The most common cause of death for us in the West are things like heart disease, stroke, COPD, diabetes and cancer.

My point is that whether we live in places like Canada where our leading causes of death aren't from things that you can catch from someone else, or you live in a place

where you're much more at risk of dying from something contagious, **we all live to some extent in fear of death.**

Billi's family don't want to tell Nai Nai that she's dying because they fear what it might do to her, **that she might stop living even before she dies.** Billi's perspective is our Western one, in which such diagnoses often lead to an all-out effort to try to delay death as long as possible. **Both responses are rooted in our fear,** the fear of losing someone we love, the fear of dying, the fear of not knowing what comes next.

How do we say goodbye?

Well, I suppose how we say goodbye really depends on what we believe about the context in which we live. Other traditions have their beliefs about life and death as well, but ours as Christians are particularly hopeful. You might accuse me of being biased and I wouldn't disagree. In the Psalm reading, which we share with our Jewish friends, we read that God knows us completely, that there is no place we can go from God's Spirit or flee from God's presence. **But this is not a lament about our inability to hide from God, but rather a confession of praise that God has created us, formed us, knit us together in our mothers' wombs.** It's a Psalm of praise to God for the fact that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, that nothing was hidden from God in our creation. In your book, says the psalmist, were written **all the days** that were formed for me, when **none of them** as yet existed.

The psalmist understands that we exist **because of God,** because God **gives life,** wonderfully, intricately, and that when we come to the end, **we are still with God.** We cannot hide, we cannot flee, **but why would we want to from a God who gives us life and loves us so!**

When we understand where we come from, **that this life is a gift** and that each of us have a **unique number of days** that have been written for us, but that even at the end of those days, we can still be with the one who gave us the gift in the first place, **well maybe the fear of death isn't as threatening as it might have been.**

Then Paul, writes to the church at Corinth, that motley crew of misbehaving, misguided Christians, **and reminds them of their hope, and ours.** Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins... **if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.**

But Paul knows that Christ has been raised and we too will be raised with him. **And so our understanding of death is not that it's the final word, but that it's just a transition, from the perishable to the imperishable.** For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

If death has no sting, if death cannot claim victory, why would we fear it?

Yes, we mourn, yes, we grieve. We do so because we also love. It would be inhuman not to grieve the loss of someone we have dearly loved, of someone who was tragically taken too early in life. It would not be human to not worry about those we love getting sick and getting out of those places where illness and disease are running rampant. **But we cannot fear death. Our goodbyes cannot be rooted in the fear of death.**

We don't fear because we know the context of our lives, that they are a gift from God and must be returned to God. Our death rate has been constant ever since humans were first created, 1 per person. No one is exempt, no one is immune. But as Christians we also know that death isn't the end of life. Resurrection will not allow death to have the last word, will not grant death its sting or its victory. **Resurrection gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

And so the question of how we say goodbye is inextricably tied to what we believe. How we say goodbye as people of faith **is with hope, gratitude and even joy.** Yes, there are untimely deaths and horrible deaths caused by unspeakable evil in some people. The only thing that can redeem those deaths is our hope in God, **that even the most horrific deaths do not grant death victory.** And maybe even more important than how we say goodbye, what we believe about death shapes **how we live, even more than how we die.**

The movie doesn't really address which is better, the Western way or the Eastern way. The family succeeds in keeping the diagnosis of cancer from Nai Nai, but the end of the movie shifts from how we face dying to how we need to live. As Billi prepares to leave for home, she shares with Nai Nai that she didn't get the Guggenheim fellowship she

was hoping for. Nai Nai tells Billi that she will be fine, that she will encounter difficulties in life, but that life isn't just about what you do, but it's more about how you do it. Let's take a look at that clip. Click here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePJmBprCLU>

Maybe how we say goodbye is shaped by how we've lived our lives before. And how we live has to be shaped by what we believe. If we believe that once we die, that's it, where's the motivation to live well, to live with a purpose and a passion? What does it matter in the end if it's all just meaningless? But if we believe that life, this wonderful gift we know for a time here on earth, doesn't just come to an end, but that there is a giver whose gift must be honoured, and that this giver has so much more in store for us, **then how we live this life cannot be controlled or shaped by fear.**

Recently, the Rev. Joyce Davis died unexpectedly because of a stroke. Her husband, the Rev. Dr. Glen Davis, in writing her obituary stated that Joyce used to say, I don't understand why Christians don't look forward to the joy of finding out what God has prepared for them in the Kingdom. She actually anticipated that day of joy and victory. She went into her "graduation" with absolutely no fear. No fear because she lived her life knowing what was coming, no matter when the end would take place.

No fear because she lived her life knowing what God had in store for her.

How do we say goodbye?

Perhaps the best death I've ever known was the death of a man named Eric.

Eric was a medical doctor and an elder at my previous church. He loved caring for his patients and in his practice specialized in caring for veterans. But he himself was a terrible patient. He always said that he hoped he would never have to be a patient in

hospital. He had long retired as an elder and became an elder statesman in the church, a wise and generous man with his time and wisdom. He stepped back from many duties as he grew older. But there was one thing he loved and that was singing in the church choir. Nothing gave him as much joy as singing in the choir. One day after choir practice Eric was late coming home. His wife was concerned and she contacted her daughter who lived nearby. Eric's daughter found her father in his car, in the church parking lot, dead. He died doing what he loved. People said to me, it's a shame that he didn't get a chance to say goodbye.

I responded, the way he lived, the way he loved, without fear, there's nothing that his family didn't know, nothing that had not been said, nothing that wasn't communicated to them about his love for them because he lived it each and every day.

How do we say goodbye?

As a people who live and believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, as those who know that in him death has been swallowed up in victory, as people who will one day exchange our perishable bodies for imperishable ones, our mortal bodies for immortal ones, **it's how we live that prepares us for how we will say goodbye. And the good news is that as people who live with the conviction that in Jesus Christ death has been swallowed up in victory, we can say goodbye without fear, but with hope, with gratitude and with joy.**

Thanks be to God, Amen.

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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