

“REEL THEOLOGY – THE IRISHMAN”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Ephesians 2:1-10

(01-12-20)

This morning I want to begin our series of sermons on what I hope to be Academy Award nominated movies. The actual nominations don't come out until tomorrow, but all of these movies will be nominated in some capacity and I think are worth spending some time with.

This morning I will be preaching on the themes from the movie, The Irishman. Next week the movie will be Marriage Story, both on Netflix by the way, then on the 26th Rev. Amanda Currie, the Moderator of the General Assembly, will be our guest. On February 2, I will be preaching on The Farewell, and finally, on the Sunday that the Academy Awards are presented, February 9, I will preach on the movie Parasite. That last movie is Korean and Young Tae and I will have a bit of a dialogue during the sermon as we consider the themes explored in that movie. You don't have to see the movies to understand the sermons, but I think that all of the movies are worth watching.

Great movies use compelling stories to capture our imagination, to move us to emotional heights and depths, to lead us to reflect on our lives, our stories and our culture. Sure, some of the movies out there are sheer escapism, but there are plenty of movies that speak to our hearts and minds in profound ways. As Christians we should take them seriously, but even more seriously, we need to take our story, our scripture, the story of God's love for all creation and God's

desire to redeem all God has created, and we need to be able to share that story, to let that story live in us, through us, to go deep with God so that God will lead us in how we engage with others, how we go wide with the world. In our series, we will always tie the themes from the movies we consider to the themes found in God's word, knowing that ultimately for those who follow Jesus, it's the story told in scripture that is the greatest story ever told.

So, the Irishman.

It's a movie directed by Martin Scorsese and it stars Robert DeNiro, Joe Pesci and Al Pacino. You really can't get a higher profile than that, it's cinema royalty, all Academy Award winners. The movie is long, 3 ½ hours, and it's about a guy named Frank Sheeran, the Irishman of the title. Frank is a truck driver with the Teamsters union who becomes close to a mob boss in Philadelphia, a guy named Russell Bufalino. Frank becomes one of his most trusted associates and ultimately, he is introduced to Jimmy Hoffa, played by Pacino, the head of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and becomes his travelling bodyguard. The movie, based on a book called, "I Heard You Paint Houses," claims that Sheeran is the one who killed Hoffa, which has been a longstanding unsolved mystery.

Let's watch the trailer.

Even though the trailer would have you believe that this movie is all about Sheeran's life as a house painter, which is what they called hit men because the blood from their victims would splatter against the wall, it's really not the heart of the movie.

As a movie, *The Irishman* is similar in vein to Scorsese's earlier movies like *Goodfellas* or *Casino*, and the stories around the criminal activity with the mafia are entertaining as cinema. But at the heart of this movie is Frank's relationship with one of his children, his daughter Peggy, from whom he is estranged. The movie starts with Frank as an old man, living in a nursing home. He's alone; no one visits except a priest. We see Frank's story through flashbacks as he recalls it, but we also come to realize that in living his life as he did, he has alienated his family, he barely has a relationship with any of his children and he has none with Peggy.

Peggy has watched her father react with incredible violence anytime a problem arises and it scars her. When she's young, she doesn't know exactly what's going on, but as she grows up, she has her suspicions. Peggy becomes close to Jimmy Hoffa when her dad becomes associated with him. Hoffa treats her very kindly and spoils her. Near the end of the movie, after Frank has killed Hoffa, Frank returns home after a few days. The news is reporting that Hoffa has been missing for days and no one knows what's happened to him. Frank says that he should call Hoffa's wife Jo and Peggy wonders why her father, who has been so close to Hoffa, hasn't called his wife Jo when Hoffa's been missing for days. Peggy knows in her heart that her father is involved in Hoffa's disappearance, and she stops talking to her father that day.

As the movie comes to an end, all of Frank's associates end up dead, either by natural causes, or in most cases, by unnatural ones. Frank is left alone.

His wife has died, his children rarely visit, and his daughter Peggy refuses to talk to him or meet him. He's old, he's alone, and now at the end of his life, he seeks something, maybe some sort of redemption, he wants reconciliation with his daughter, maybe he's looking for forgiveness for the life he lived and the consequences he now faces. When his old boss Russell Bufalino, played by Joe Pesci, is in prison with him, there's a scene when Pesci is being wheeled in his chair in the prison yard. Frank stops him and asks Russell where he's going. I'm going to church, says Russell. Church? asks Frank. **Don't laugh, says Russell, you'll see, you'll see.**

It's a foreshadowing of what will happen to Frank, that these aging mobsters, as they face the end of their mortal lives, they know that there's a reckoning coming. They've always been the ones in control, taking lives, shaping events, but now they realize that at the end of it all, they're just as mortal as anyone and their eternal destinies lie outside of their ability to control. Some turn to God for forgiveness, for absolution, for some sort of restoration. But it's out of their control.

The movie, in the end, is about regret and lament. It's about Frank's regret for a life that has led to his daughter breaking off all contact with him. It's about a lament in him that he can't really put into words because for all his life he hasn't had to deal with the truth about who he is and what he does. As he grows old alone in that nursing home, his only regular visitor other than the nurses or the FBI, still trying to figure out what happened to Hoffa, is a priest. The priest tries to get Frank to admit to his sins and Frank mouths the words, but it's hard to

know whether he's sincere, whether he truly believes what he says. He's a complicated character, someone who knows that what he's done isn't right, but someone who also doesn't know exactly how to fix what's gone wrong, those things that are beyond his ability to solve with money or a gun. He's scared to die, he's afraid of the finality of it all. There's a scene where Frank is shopping for his own casket and then for a place where his body can be placed after death. Even though he's not a religious man, he does confess that there's got to be something after you die. People smarter than me haven't figured it out, says Frank, that's why he doesn't want to be cremated, because it's so final. He chooses a crypt above ground because, as he says, when they put you in a crypt it's above the ground, in a building, and when they put you there, even though you die, it's not that final.

In a scene near the end of the movie Frank says a Hail Mary prayer with the priest and says, that wasn't too bad, haven't done that for a while. He says that it's the intention that matters, but he still doesn't feel anything for what he's done, he still can't confess the remorse for what he's done, water under the dam, he says. He prays with the priest again for forgiveness, that he would be able see himself as God sees him. The last scene of the movie has Frank being visited by the priest at Christmas. With no one visiting him, Frank loses track of time, he doesn't even know that it's Christmas. As the priest gets up to leave after praying with Frank, Frank asks that the door to his room be left slightly open. Father, do me a favour, don't shut the door all the way, I don't like that, just leave it open a little bit. That's the end of the movie. Let's take a look at that scene.

Don't shut the door all the way, just leave it open a little bit.

It's the last scene of the movie and I think the most important one. I don't know whether Scorsese planned it because he wanted to try to portray a man who is afraid of what's coming next and needs some possibility of hope, or whether this is his own statement of an artist who is coming to the end of his time and wants to leave us with a statement about what he believes. **Regret, lament, fear, powerlessness to do anything about what's happening to us. If we're going to be judged on our own merit alone, the door might as well be closed tight. But the hope of our lives and maybe the hope that The Irishman leaves us with is that the door is never closed tight with God.**

The truth is that we are all complicated and complex creations of God. None of us are perfect. Even the best of us know our fallenness. **All of us know what it is to experience regret and lament.** There are things we know we just can't correct, things we know we shouldn't have done, things we regret not doing when we could have, and there comes a time when there's nothing we can do about it. People like Mother Teresa have confessed in their private memoirs a deep unsettledness about their faith, what they truly believe. The author and political critic Alexander Solzhenitsyn, after ten years of imprisonment and internal exile, then twenty years of banishment to Europe and Vermont after he was stripped of his citizenship for exposing the Soviet penal system in his three-volume *Gulag Archipelago*, concluded,

“When I lay there on rotting prison straw...it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—

but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.

This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains...an un-uprooted small corner of evil.”¹

The struggle between good and evil, between right and wrong, light and darkness, lives on in each of us, all of us. If even the best of us confess their failings, what hope is there for just plain old you and me?

The Apostle Paul understands our condition. Paul gets that like Frank Sheeran, well perhaps not to his degree, but in nature, we, all of us, are dead through our trespasses and sins...we **were** by nature children of wrath.

But did you hear that one word?

Were. We **were** by nature, **it’s in the past tense.** So, before we can get all caught up in despair or self-pity around our despondent state, Paul goes on to tell us, But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us **even when we were dead through our trespasses**, made us alive together with Christ... You see, we once were by nature children of wrath, but now by grace, we are made alive in Christ. For by grace you have been saved through faith, **and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...**

¹ Dan Clendenin, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20060320JJ.shtml>

Like Frank Sheeran, our lives can sometimes be ambiguous about our faithfulness. But is there a God who will care for someone like Frank, who will forgive someone like Frank when his own daughter won't? Is there someone who will care for us and forgive us when others won't, when we ourselves find it hard to do?

The answer, thank God, is yes.

We haven't done anything to deserve it, it's not our works that result in God's favour, it's strictly a matter of grace. We know what our need is, and Paul tells us what the answer is. Grace alone will save us and all we need is the faith to accept that grace, to say yes to God's grace. It's a door that is left just a little open.

We may have lived a life full of regret, we may lament the things we did and the things we didn't that we should have done. We may regret the relationships that were fractured and unhappy. **But the way we lived our lives, though our actions have consequences, the way we've lived our lives isn't the final arbiter of our destinies.**

The door is left just a little bit open so that hope and possibility of our repentance remains. Maybe this is the most subversive part of the whole movie, that Scorsese would end a movie of immense violence with an open door, allowing for the possibility of grace and hope, even in a life like Frank Sheeran's.

But the possibility of grace that Scorsese paints pales in comparison to the grace that scripture tells us God desires for us. Paul tells the Ephesians that we receive this hope, this grace, by faith alone, apart from any human merit, extending toward God what Luther described as "the beggar's empty hand" to receive his gift. **The hope is that we might accept that we are accepted, just as we are and**

where we are, by Him whose love far exceeds human failure.² I don't know how each of you have lived your lives, you are the best judge of that, I'm sure that there isn't anyone in our midst who has done anything close to what Frank Sheeran has done, **but it doesn't mean that we are without regret, lament, or fear.** But just as it is for Frank, I can tell you that for all of us, the door is left just a little bit open.

In God's grace the door is never closed shut.

God longs to breathe life into the dead and shine light into our darkness.

It's unclear whether the movie wants to leave us with the possibility of Frank's redemption, **but scripture is clear that God does.**

Thanks be to God.

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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² *ibid*