

I think it was Karl Barth the famous Protestant theologian who said that the job of a preacher is to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, the word and the world and to be double listeners to both. Well, I'm adapting that model a little bit with last week's sermon and again today's sermon by having the Bible in one hand and Hollywood in the other, the word and the movies, the sacred scriptures and the silver screen.

After my sermon last week where I bemoaned the conflation of violence and religion in the blockbuster movie *The Book of Eli*, I was sitting in my office when Beth Anne Sytsma said "the movie you've GOT to see is "A Single Man"". And so given that the next day was my day off and miserably rainy, Tracy went to the Roxy on Beth Anne's recommendation. And I just have to say that it was a terrible... no, I'm just kidding. I emailed Beth Anne afterwards and thanked her for the suggestion because it totally redeemed (so to speak) my movie-going experience after suffering through the *Book of Eli*. *A Single Man* is really a beautiful film that I want to talk a bit about this morning but I promise I won't keep on seeing movies and preaching on them after this.

It's basically about a gay man in the 1950's, a professor of English in LA, who loses the love of his life in a car accident. And the whole movie takes place in a single day's time, which is no less than the day that he decides his grief is too much to bear and he's preparing for it to be his last day, to end it all. The way the movie is done is just beautiful in that as you watch you realize that the color of the movie itself is mostly drained out, very pale and cold colors. I think it happened a couple times before I caught it but throughout the day there are these brief moments when the color floods back into set and becomes bright, warm and vibrant again. Like this one scene where the color is all washed out and he's walking in a daze to his car after getting all his valuables from the bank deposit box and he's about to get into his car when a woman gets in to her car beside him and rolls down the window to let her dog who is in the back seat put his head out. He notices the dog and it's the same kind that his partner had, the same kind that died in the car accident along with his partner. He reaches out to the dog and the woman smiles and he steps closer to her car and leans down and with his hand under the dogs chin he brings his face down to the dogs head closes his eyes and just smells the dog in a

gentle and loving way. And as he smells the dog and remembers, the color floods back into the screen and becomes warm and orange as he stands there for a moment with that sweet dog. He says to the woman who is looking at him curiously, “these type of dogs all smell alike.” She gives him a warm smile starts her car and drives off and as he turns back to his own car the color again drains from the scene as he heads home.

These moments happen for him throughout the day in little odd and unexpected ways and the color returns and then fades away again. It is a powerful effect. He says something towards the end of the movie about how these moments come and go unbidden in our lives. He doesn’t call it grace but that’s the language that I would put to it, these moments in our days and in our lives of the pure warmth of grace that come unexpected, unbidden as gift to just remind us, assure us, of the beauty that is streaked through this life even in the midst of terrible and difficult circumstances. I don’t know about you, but I, for one, want to be able to control them. I want to be able to meditate enough or pray enough or practice peace enough so that I can make such moments of beauty and soul-stirring happiness happen because there is nothing more delicious and wonderful. And when it comes out of the blue and for some unknown reason, I want to be able to hold on to it, make it last, to capture that warmth and color in myself and make it happen more frequently and yet such moments are elusive and depart just as unexpectedly as they come. It is the nature of grace. It comes as pure gift and the only thing you can do is notice, soak in the color, bask in the warmth, be fully present to it before it passes. What have been those little moments of grace in your life lately where the faded color or all your busy-ness and bustle and mundane tasks have suddenly fallen away in just a pure moment of warm and soul-stirring joy and present-ness? How few and far between have they been for you lately, these moments of the light of grace suddenly seeping into your life, moments that make sense of the words “bless the Lord my soul, O most holy one, let all that is within me bless God’s holy name!” Grace.

And yet, while we can’t control – exactly - the gifts that grace brings us, while we can’t make them happen, it does seem that we can work on being available to them. Interestingly enough, while the main character in *A Single Man* experienced these moments of unexpected beauty and life in his day’s time and while the color from them would drain away again as his grief and depression regained a foot-hold, the sense that

the viewer got was that a significant reason why he was as open as he was to these moments, the reason he was available to them was because he had decided that this would be his last day. Now while its kind of a grim thing to suggest his decision to commit suicide, made him available to grace, I do think that there was something about his seeing everything as though for the last time created more of an openness in his heart. He finally let go of all thoughts of the future, of how he was going to make it through another week and month much less the rest of his life without his beloved and it was this letting go, it seems, of his plans or lack of plans, his fears and whatever else, that then opened him to the beauty that was all over him and all around him, the color that was glowing within and around everything that he had stopped seeing once his beloved died.

And there it seem might be our work. How often do our plans for the future, our fears and concerns of what is to come or what might not come, blind us to moments of amazing grace and so drain the very color out of our present moment, the reds and blues and yellows and greens?

I imagine that it's not a bad light to see Jesus in as well. He must have known that his time here was limited. He must have had a sense that with his unrelenting commitment to love and truth, his devotion to living a life filled with God, that he would not last long in a world unfamiliar with such love. And I wonder if that very knowledge of his short life did not help him live more fully the moment he was in. Jesus was a man so full of passion, passionate love for friends and outcasts alike, passionate against any form of judgment and bigotry towards God's children and especially in the name of religion, and he died a most passionate death as well. And yet Jesus' passion was so immense that death itself could not contain so great a passion, we say. But I imagine that he would not have been able to let go into such passion had he not let go of thoughts and plans and fears of the future. He never would have said to the people gathered in the synagogue that day what he did about the prophets going to people outside of Israel and Israel rejecting God's way if he was more focused upon saving his neck in the future than he was about God's truth in the present! He must have had an astounding ability to be present to the moment and not fearing or planning for the future in order to love the people he loved, challenge the people he challenged, and live and fully as he lived. It must be why he would often go out to the hills to be by himself in prayer, to be quiet and

silent so that he could maintain his present-ness of mind to the moment so that he could allow grace to flow freely through and around him and so that he could recognize grace wherever he saw it whether his religion told him it could be in a Samaritan or a tax collector or prostitute or not. He must have had a remarkable capacity to be present and available to what is. And as a result through him color flooded back into people's lives whose sight had long ago become dull and drab. Even his death, the color draining out of his own body became an occasion for the world around him to filled bright with the color of God!

I won't tell you what happens at the end of the movie "A Single Man" nor can I tell you how the great story of the Bible ends, because it has not ended even to this day but the power of Christ, the power of grace continues to make its mark upon this world, upon our lives, and the story continues through us even: the Charlotte Congregational Church, United Church of Christ.

Bless the Lord oh my soul and bless God's holy name!