

“THE GOSPEL IN GREAT MOVIES, ACT II:

I - ‘An Unfinished Life’”

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Matthew 18:15-22

If you’re anything like me, you get a lot of junk mail - both snail mail and email. I’m not sure exactly how it happens, and if I wanted to, I could probably get rid of it, but every morning when I get on my computer, the vast majority of new messages posted are junk mail - you know, like “want a low mortgage rate?” or “grow new hair” or “there’s a sale at your favorite store.” Well, this past week’s morning messages had a lot to do with New Year’s resolutions.

Did you make any New Year’s resolutions this year? It’s interesting. You know, they used to say that New Year’s resolutions didn’t make any difference, because by about the fifth of January you’ve most likely broken them already. But recently, I’ve read that New Year’s resolutions are a good thing, because at least you’re trying to do something about the issues with which you’re struggling.

Now, I don’t know all the issues with which all of you are struggling, but I do know that sometimes struggling with those issues makes us feel almost trapped. We seem to be in a constant battle with ourselves - whether we’re trapped by an inclination to gossip, or drink too much, or eat too much, or not exercise enough; or we’ve let hatred, bitterness, jealousy, fear or unforgiveness have their way; or we’ve sold our soul in the the pursuit of career, money, possessions or aspirations. Each one of us has, no doubt, at one time or another, felt trapped by something in our life which we know we ought not be doing. And no doubt, many here feel trapped this very moment by something.

In this morning’s Gospel lesson, Jesus talks to those who may be trapped by unforgiveness. He seems to know how very easy it is for us to get stuck there and stay stuck there. He seems to know that sometimes we get trapped there, and the lesson is all about how to deal with it instead.

This morning’s movie, which begins this round of “The Gospel in Great Movies” sermons, is all about a person who is trapped there.. Let me tell you about it. It’s entitled “An Unfinished Life” and it stars Robert Redford as a rancher named Einar; Morgan Freeman as his closest friend Mitch; and Jennifer Lopez as Einar’s daughter-in-law Jean.

Here's the plot of the movie. A number of years earlier, Einar's beloved son Griffin was killed in a car accident, an accident in which his wife Jean was driving the car. From that moment on, Einar was filled with anger and bitterness and deep grief for his son. It affected everything he said and did. At one point in the movie someone was talking about a lion that died, and what was Einar's reaction? "Lucky lion." There was an edge to everything in Einar's life because of the anger and bitterness in which he was trapped.

But then something interesting happens. Jean returns to the ranch and with her comes Griff, Jean and Griffin's little girl.

And with her, with Griff, comes the key to change for Einar; with her, comes love.

Oh, it most assuredly didn't happen quickly, but little by little, through Einar's relationship with his granddaughter, love came in, and opened up that place in his heart he had closed up tight. Little by little, he began to let go of the blame and bitterness and anger. Little by little, love came in and in the end, it was a new beginning for all of them.

There's one more part of the movie that's also important to know about. The character played by Morgan Freeman, Mitch, was years earlier, mauled nearly to death by a bear. Now, weighed down by severe, severe pain, Mitch lives on the ranch in a small house and Einar is his caregiver. Mitch is a man at peace with himself and his world, and if he's trapped by anything it's the pain that wracks his body and that bear.

Well, at one point in the movie he finds out that the bear has been captured and caged, and he's upset by it, because he knows that the bear only attacked him because he was where he shouldn't have been. He tells Einar that the bear needs to be set free.

So Einar and his granddaughter set about to do just that. They almost accomplish it, until by accident, she causes her grandfather to be hurt, and the bear able to escape. We'll turn now to see a few scenes from the movie. The first takes place in the hospital where Einar is being treated for his wounds, and the second on the ranch for Mitch's moment of truth.

Scene from the movie - - -

I think Mitch staring down that bear, and the bear being set free is a symbol of all who were set free in that movie - set free of anger, bitterness, the grip of grief, hopelessness, and guilt.

So to bring it back to you and me, I guess the question of the day is “What is the bear in your life that has you trapped, and are you ready to be free of it?” “What is weighing you down and keeping you from being the person God created you to be, and living the full and abundant life He offers you?” “What is the bear in your life?”

As you are thinking about it, let me say that if staring down and taking on that bear seems too much for you, remember what happened in that movie - love came into Einar’s life in the form a child. And then remember that not so many days ago, we celebrated the same thing happening to us - love came into our lives in the form of a child - Jesus.

And with Jesus, all things are possible. To paraphrase the words of scripture, “We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.”

So today, I invite you to come to the table of our Lord and offer to God the “bears” in your life that have you trapped and ask Jesus to help you send them away that you might be free. May this be a day of new beginnings for us all.

Amen.