



HOLLYWOOD
United Methodist Church
the **heart** of hollywood

CROSSFLIX: THE GREAT DEBATERS

Sunday, August 17, 2008

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Romans 12: 1-8

As we put together the films for our Crossflix sermon series, we tried to be inclusive in many ways. Obviously, in terms of genre – one documentary, one animated film, comedy, drama; but we also included two movies because of their connection to HUMC. One was Sister Act, filmed here; the other is The Great Debaters, for one of our church families was involved in its production. And, the focus of the film – Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, is a United Methodist-related historic black college. It was the first black college founded west of the Mississippi, and is a school supported today by our apportionment giving.

The film is based on the extraordinary 1935 debate team at Wiley; their coach, Melvin Tolson, and two of the team members. It is not a historical representation, but a fictionalized account based on real people and events, set in the Jim Crow South. In the two clips we will see this morning, the language of that time is used. My intention and hope is that it will not offend, but instead inspire us to work harder for the elimination of inappropriate words and characterizations in our present and our future. And it was the power of words to bring forth social change that Professor Tolson understood well. At the beginning of the film Mr. Tolson, a Methodist PK, invokes the great poets and leaders of the Harlem Renaissance to inspire his rhetoric class. He picks four students – including one woman and one 14 year old prodigy – to be the Wiley debate team. Undefeated against all black colleges, including Fisk, Tolson sends out letters of inquiry to “Anglo-Saxon” colleges. The first interracial debate takes place against Oklahoma City College; Wiley wins that one and their reputation continues to grow. Tolson continues to seek debate opportunities with predominantly white schools, including SMU, USC and Harvard.

While this is happening, there is a back story with Professor Tolson. In the evenings he is a volunteer organizer for the Southern Tenant Farmer Union, with the charge to organize tenant farmers, or sharecroppers, of both races, into a union so that they can demand better wages and working conditions. His work becomes known throughout the town, and is not always appreciated. One of the members of the debate team is forced by his parents to resign from the winning team because of the “communist” leanings of Tolson.

The stories run parallel. The more the debating team excels, the closer the town authorities come to arresting Mr. Tolson for his "agitating" and organizing whites and blacks together into a force for justice. In this clip, Mr. Tolson is arrested and ultimately released when the authorities are pressured by the father of the 14 year old prodigy and Wiley religion professor Dr. James Farmer Sr., portrayed by Forrest Whittaker.

--FILM CLIP--

As the story continues, the reality of being black in Texas in the 1930s is presented to the team as they witness a lynching while travelling the backroads to a competition. The debaters begin to see more clearly the divergence between the ideas and concepts they are debating and the racism that pervades the society in which they live. This becomes even clearer when news of Tolson's arrest is printed in the newspapers. All the debate offers from white colleges are withdrawn.....with one exception. Harvard. Because he is out on bail, Tolson is prevented from travelling with the team to Boston, but sends them on ready to compete. At least, he thought so. When the team arrives in Boston they are informed that the debate topic they had prepared for had changed. They must rewrite their affirmative that civil disobedience is an appropriate response to injustice. In this clip, the finale of the movie, the team is debating at Harvard – and offers us all a sermon within a sermon. And you might notice Tolson slipping in to silently support his team. Let's watch.

-- FILM CLIP--

That 14 year old prodigy, Mr. James Farmer Jr., grew up to be a leader in the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

The theme that tied these two clips together; that tied the two stories of the film together, was St. Augustine's quote: *an unjust law is no law at all.*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used this quote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, written to and published by *The Atlantic Monthly* as a response to eight white religious leaders who had publicly pronounced their concern about "demonstrations and agitations."

Dr. King wrote:

Now, what is the difference between the two? ... A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God... To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality ...

There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.

...Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience... It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire...

Before Dr. King; before Professor Tolson; before St. Augustine; St. Paul wrote to the emerging church at Rome: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Paul knew that simply following the law – either the Roman law or the Hebrew codes – wasn't enough. That would be conforming to human law, which is always broken; that would be confirming to the world's understanding of who God is. And God is so much bigger than we can ever begin to imagine. Instead we must allow the spirit to renew our minds so that we can consider the realities of this world and be agents of transformation -- so that the world moves from a place of injustice and pain into God's kingdom – a place where love and justice and mercy are always considered more important than the enforcement of any statute.

This November we have a watershed opportunity to be agents of transformation through the power of our vote. I hope all of you have signed up to work on the "No on Prop 8" campaign. Johan Baumeister is heading up our HUMC volunteer efforts, and he needs all of us to be active. You can see him in the welcome booth after worship for more information on how to get involved. Last Friday, in commenting on this film in an email, Johan wrote:

I can identify personally with "legal" forms of discrimination, with the tacit permission for hate-based violence that they imply, and with exactly what it takes (and what it costs) to stand up to the sort of evil that these young people faced. The reality is that today, I am still a second-class citizen in the nation of my birth, and it doesn't have to be that way. This movie is one of those that inspires me to work and hope and pray for change.

And just as did Melvin Tolson, we must work on several levels at once. One at the structural level – confronting those powers and principalities such as Prop 8 which would deny equal access, opportunity and protection to anyone in our society. But we can't only work in that arena. We must also work at the personal level – building relationships with folks who, on issues of social justice – disagree with us. Equally as important will be building relationships with folks who just aren't informed or engaged in the issues. To be agents of transformation, we must take the ideas and the words of justice and incarnate them; make them real for others to see – just as Tolson did with his sharecropper organizing.

Finally, and most profoundly, we must work at the spiritual level.

In last night's faith forum, one of the Presidential candidates, when asked, said America's greatest moral failure is its insufficient help to those in need. He quoted from the book of Matthew, where Jesus says *"whatever you do for the least of my brothers [and sisters], you do for me."* And said we need to apply that in the areas of poverty, sexism and racism.

To do that most effectively, we must remember what Jim Wallis has said: it's not enough to change people's minds about an issue. You have to change people's hearts. And the only way to change hearts is to share yours, and tell others how the love of Jesus and the grace of God has brought you to this time and place. Only then will the power of our words and our actions, like those of Melvin Tolson and the Great Debaters, bring forth justice for all God's children.

Amen.

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