



HOLLYWOOD
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CROSSFLIX SERIES – “THE TOWN”

July 10, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Romans 12: 9-21

This morning we continue our Crossflix sermon series in which we look at faith in film. Today we are focusing on *The Town*. How many of you have seen it? I'm very excited to have our own David Crockett leading the talkback on the Town in Grant Hall today. So grab some coffee and a cookie and spend 30 minutes discussing this terrific film following worship.

The other day I told Jane Crockett, David's spouse, that I had finally watched the film.....it took me a while because in general I don't do well with guns and violence. And if you remember the ads with the "bad guys" dressed in nun outfits armed with assault rifles, you understand! But beyond the violence that was appropriate to the storyline, I really liked this film.

It's a story about about redemption. About grace. About how to turn our lives around even when we are faced with extraordinarily tough situations.

It also is a very Wesleyan film. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, heavily emphasized grace and holiness. For Wesley, there were three main types of grace. First, the prevenient grace of God, the grace that comes even before we are consciously aware of God's presence. That is the grace that empowers us to baptize babies, as they don't need to be aware of God to be recipients of God's abundant love and grace. The second, justification, or justifying grace, comes when we as humans need to turn our lives around. That some parts of our lives aren't in line with what God wants. And it's only when we acknowledge that reality and begin to make changes that we can claim God's grace.

After justifying grace comes sanctification, or sanctifying grace, which is when a person makes a conscious decision not to sin. Entire sanctification would occur when a person was completely sinless, completely aware of their desire to follow God, moving on to absolute perfection. But Wesley knew that sanctification here on earth, in this life, we could never reach perfection. That would be impossible because we are humans, flawed and prone to sin. Instead, Wesley's last step in grace is that we are all on the road to Christian perfection, and must work towards it and seek God's grace anew each day.¹

In *The Town*, we see the protagonist struggling with that process of grace, and what it means long term for him, his family, and those he has grown up with. Doug, played by Ben Affleck, is

the son of a local Boston convict who will spend the rest of his life in prison because he refused to give testimony against those with whom he'd committed crimes. Doug is in tight with a few childhood friends, as well as with The Florist, an area crime boss, Now having grown up in the bank robbery capital of America, Dougis also the mastermind behind the bank robberies that his team is assigned by The Florist.²

In one bank robbery the group commits, they take the assistant manager Claire as a hostage; and then release her but keep her ID. When they realize she lives in the same neighborhood as they do, Doug volunteers to do some reconnaissance to see if she recognized any of them. At this point in his life, Doug is already beginning to struggle with the realization that this life of crime is really not what he wants for the long term. In this first clip, we see Doug attend a support group of people from "the town" who have gathered in a local church and share their struggles as to how they have made different choices for life than he has. We also see Doug begin to internalize how the bank robbery affected Claire; in so doing, he continues to ponder if this is the life he is meant to lead.

Today's passage from Paul's letter to the church at Rome gives us a context for understanding the internal conflict Doug is dealing with, of wondering if goodness is truly stronger than evil, if he will be able to overcome all that surrounds him in order to seek redemption, to seek grace. One thing he is sure of: he won't be able to withstand the pressure of leaving without outside support.

One of the emphases of Paul to the Romans is that they, too, needed outside support; a community in order to deal with the pressures they faced. The second part of chapter 12 gave the Roman Christians a checklist, of sorts, of how they were to build themselves up as Christians even while surrounded by forces that would tear them down.. Listen to a portion:

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection.
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.."*

In this second clip, we come to realize the power of evil in "the Town" – the community in which Doug was born and expected to live, and to die. Doug goes to visit his Dad in the state penitentiary and is confronted by what is supposed to be his destiny. Rather than receive support and comfort, the struggles Doug would face in leaving were magnified so that they seemed nearly impossible to overcome.

The Roman church to which the Apostle Paul wrote was also struggling with highly magnified problems. They were divided between Jewish and Gentile Christians. They were trying to figure out how to live out their faith within the church – and to complicate matters, they were also under siege from forces outside the church, from the Roman society and their customs. Here's what Paul told these early Christians – and tells us today: We must stand up to those powers and principalities which would seek to direct us in ways that would hurt others, that would cause us to value evil over good news; that would call us to ways that God would not bless or sanction – AND we must do so with integrity and with love.

Paul says: don't use their tactics. Instead consistently take the high road. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Practically speaking, what does that mean?

One of our members, Pauley Perrette, believes so profoundly that we should not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good, and live a life of integrity and love -- that she had the verse number – Romans 12:21 -- tattooed on her ring finger. This is not that picture, which I couldn't find, but it's someone else with a tattoo – a permanent reminder that in our lives, and our lives to come, ultimately evil does not triumph – goodness, God's goodness, does IF we seek God in our daily lives.

Remember the words of the 5th century monk, Pelagius: "The enemy has overcome you when he makes you act like himself".

The final breaking point for Doug came when he realized the new, sanctified person he could be, wanted to be, in a life with Claire far, far away in Florida. When called upon to execute the robbery of the century, Doug realized that his life would be the same as that of his father unless he got out. In this final clip he confesses to Claire, who, while she does not approve of his actions, supports him in getting away to begin a new life.

The sunny days comment refers to Doug's desire to build a new life in Florida, free from the crime and evil that has dominated his life to this point. And Doug leaves Claire a tangerine as a sign of the new life he has gone to claim.

Brothers and sisters, what is our new life that we claim this day? How indeed is God urging us to change? How do we need grace? What do we need to leave behind so that we can follow in the ways of Jesus Christ?

Let me suggest a couple of things. First, Doug walked away from everything in order to find new life. He walked away from a life of crime, sure. But he also walked away from love; from family; from the neighborhood that he knew like the back of his hand. Doug walked away from everything that he knew, for better or worse, in order to find new life. How many of us would be willing to do the same? I know many of us here – who moved across country in search of a better life, a better job, the chance at making it in Hollywood, but without the need to discard the past. What Doug did was to fundamentally change who he was.

And in his letter to the Romans, that's exactly what Paul calls us to do. We are no longer to acquiesce to what society, or the forces of our neighborhood – good or bad, call us to do and be. We are to be responsive to God, and to God alone. As followers of Jesus, we are to reject that which is evil, that which calls us away from God's plan and purpose, or puts us at odds with the teachings of Jesus; we are to live as Jesus commands, not as the world we were born into dictates.

Our lives, you see, are not that different from Doug's. He was born into a hellish town where his destiny was thought to be foretold. We, you and me, my brothers and sisters, are born into a secular world in which our destiny as people caring only for ourselves is thought to be a given. Not so. If we believe in the saving power of Jesus Christ; if we believe in the grace that comes from Christ alone; then we will also believe in the power of God's love to transform us no matter our circumstances, no matter our birth origin. In Jesus we are made new people, who pledge to resist evil and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. Not perfect but sanctified and on Wesley's road to Christian perfection.

It took courage for Doug to not allow himself to be overcome by evil, to take actions to change; to become a better person day by day. It will take courage for us to overcome evil with good; for us to take actions to change; to become a better person day by day. But through the grace of God – prevenient, justifying, sanctifying grace – anything is possible.

Amen.

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¹ Jacob Sahms, *On This Side or the Other*, movie review, <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/dvdDetail.cfm?i=7845D78B-C1EF-1CB7-C063AA3FB0A36D50&ia=49076306-A01D-E6C2-0009D65F934B3CC5&pageNumber=2>

² Sahms.S