

*REEL THEOLOGY - 3) "A Single Man"*  
(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

**Scripture Lessons:-** Isaiah 61: 1 - 7; John 11: 17 - 36

// At his news conference in Trenton on Wednesday afternoon, Chief of Defense Staff General Walter Natynczyk was asked how he felt when he learned that Colonel Russell Williams had been arrested and charged with murder.

"It felt like a body blow," he answered. "I felt wounded..." //

Every person gathered here today knows what that feels like.

At one time or another we have picked up the phone and heard the voice on the other end say  
"I'm afraid I have some very difficult news for you..."

And as the news is shared - the death of someone we love, the frightening diagnosis, the relationship terminated, the loss of a job - we find ourselves staring into space, barely holding onto the phone, forcing one word responses past the lump swelling in the throat.

We know what General Natynczyk means when he talks about such news being a body blow...

In Tom Ford's poignant, artistic film "A Single Man", George (brilliantly played by Colin Firth) picks up the phone, and hears his lover's cousin's voice uttering those devastating words,

"I'm afraid I have some bad news..."

He then goes on to say that his cousin Jim, George's partner of 16 years, had been killed when his car tumbled off an Indiana highway in a snowstorm.

For many agonizing moments Colin Firth's face fills the screen as the terrifying news begins to sink in.

"I guess I'd better see if I can get a flight," he says to Jim's cousin.

"The service is just for family," the cousin replies, indicating that in spite of their 16 year relationship, George is not regarded as family, thereby leaving him completely isolated from an opportunity to say "goodbye" to the love of his life.

He gasps as if he has just received a body blow... which he has...

"A Single Man" is set in Los Angeles in 1962.

The film takes us through a the day with George, a gay middle-aged literature professor, grieving for Jim. It is eight months after the accident, and George has decided that this will be the last day of his life - that the gun in his drawer is the only answer to his grief.

His day is a curious mix of his regular routine, and putting his affairs in order.

He chats casually with his housekeeper, and his university colleagues;

he meets his classes, and accepts an invitation to dinner from Charley, his longtime best friend and sole confidante.

He also cleans out his office, and empties his safety deposit box.

He carefully places farewell notes on his desk, and lays out the suit he wants to be buried in, even leaving instructions that he wants his tie in a Windsor knot.

His day is flavoured with encounters with other people.

He has a conversation with the charming, innocent young girl from the “all American” family next door. As he comes out of the liquor store, he is propositioned by a handsome young hustler from Madrid. As they both notice the stunning flamingo-coloured sunset, the young man says, “The colour is because of the smog, you know.

Sometimes terrible things have their own kind of beauty.”

This, I think, becomes a commentary on how this film is being presented to us. The terrible trauma of death, and grief, and depression, and plans for suicide are wrapped in a beautiful film, exquisitely presented to us by fashion designer-turned-movie-producer Tom Ford.

Sometimes terrible things have their own kind of beauty...

Later in the day, after failing to find the appropriate way of pulling the trigger, George does spend the evening at Charley’s – dining with her, and dancing, and laughing.

And even later in the evening, one of his students – Kenny – a fresh-faced young man who seems enamored with his professor, follows George to a neighbourhood bar.

It is clear that Kenny is giving in to his curiosity about and attraction to George.

They have a drink. They share conversation, and then Kenny suggests that they should do something crazy, like go swimming.

Without any hesitation George agrees, and they run to the beach, strip off their clothes, and frolic in the waves.

Afterwards, back at George’s house, although there is chemistry between them, they do not become physically intimate with each other.

All through the ebb and flow of this day, George experiences small reminders – flashbacks of Jim, emphasizing how difficult it is for him to continue to live a life without love, without meaning.

From Jim’s family’s cold indication that George never was part of their family, to his best friend Charley’s drunken comment that she always saw George and Jim’s relationship as no more than “a substitute for the real thing,” George seems to be bombarded with the message that he has never really lived, nor loved, nor belonged.

“For the past eight months,” he says, “waking up has literally hurt... For the first time in my life, I can’t see my future.”

Although the film on the surface is about a gay relationship, I think the theme of the movie is grief – universal, devastating grief that is defined not by one’s sexuality, but by love.

It is about the kind of grief we have all experienced – the kind of grief that sees moving aimlessly through the day without noticing where we are, or who we are with, leaving us empty, and weak, and wondering...

Why does grief hurt so much?

When we love deeply, that kind of heart-wrenching grief always feels like a body blow.

If we did not love so much, if we did not care, we would not mourn so deeply.

But we all know that we mourn more than just the loss of those we love.

Sometimes what we are mourning is the loss of love itself.

// I was reminded this week that even this day defined by hearts and flowers and cupids and

chocolates can be very difficult and sad.

We grieve for kids who get no valentines, when everyone else is counting how many they get. Even on a Valentine's Day, we need to acknowledge the pain that emerges when love is denied, or ignored, when it feels as if no one cares. //

We know many these days who are mourning the loss of a job – a seismic shift in one's career.

When we go through the crisis of mid-life, we are mourning the loss of the dreams we had for ourselves when we were young and idealistic – the regret of opportunities not taken, or dreams not pursued.

Sometimes we are deep in grief about the choices we have made -- things we have done that we wish we could undo. Ask Adam Giambrone what that feels like!

What about the grief of innocent people sent to prison, or the tragedy of children trapped in poverty...

What of the grief of injustice and corruption in places like Haiti, and Nicaragua, and the Congo...

We also grieve for those we have never met – a luge Olympian from Georgia whose death sobered the extravagance of the Opening Ceremonies;  
or the victims of violence in Tweed...

We mourn because we do not like what we experience, because we want things to be better.

We yearn for the dream that is in Isaiah's heart:- "good news to the poor, liberty to the captive, building up the ruins, wearing a garland instead of ashes.

Even Jesus experiences grief.

The snapshot offered to us in this morning's gospel is the story of Lazarus's death – one of our most intimate, personal, and emotional glimpses of Jesus.

We rub shoulders with him as he stands among the mourners.

"When [he] saw Mary weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit..." writes John.

Because he cared deeply for them, "Jesus wept". His heart was broken...

So what is it that helps us move through "the valley of the shadow" so we can begin to love in spite of death, to care in spite of loss, to dream in spite of disappointment, to hope in spite of despair.

For George in "A Single Man", I think it might have something to do with the people who keep coming into his life on what he thought was going to be his last day:- the neighbour's little girl, the handsome hustler at the liquor store,

chain-smoking Charlie enticing him to dance,

young Kenny flirting with him, drinking with him, enticing him to go swimming at midnight – each of them in their own way saying "You matter to me... I care about you..."

Perhaps moving through the grief and surviving has something to do with being open to and accepting the caring concern of others. Sorrow survivors will tell you that it is not a matter of getting over grief and moving on. Sometimes it simply means learning in time to live with the ache, and not letting the grief define who we are...

For some of us, faith – even if it is just the size of a tiny mustard seed – helps us survive when others cannot cope at all.

// Do you know what helped me cope after those planes swooped out of the blue September 11<sup>th</sup> sky and crashed into the Pentagon and World Trade Centre? The prayer/songs of Taize.  
 When I could not focus, I would get in my car, and drive out into the country, and play tapes of Taize music – each song expressing and strengthening in me some small affirmation of faith. //

Sometimes we can be so weighed down by the darkness, that all we can do is let the faith of others carry us. That was Henri Nouwen's experience.

// Many of you will know that Dr. Nouwen enjoyed a meaningful career as a highly respected professor of theology, teaching at Yale, and Notre Dame, and Harvard.  
 He is known the world over for his writing – 38 books in all.  
 And for the last 10 years of his life he was part of the L'Arche/Daybreak community for special needs adults in Richmond Hill, just a few miles up Yonge St.  
 Henri Nouwen also endured deep bouts of depression. He would experience long periods of time when everything seemed so dark and so heavy, that he wondered how he was going to survive, and why God was so distant.  
 The year he lived with Jean Vanier in the L'Arche community at Trosly, France, was one of those bleak periods. Some days Henri had no energy even to believe. This man of prayer could not pray. "Every day I would go to L'Oratoire," he wrote, "and often I would just sit in silence before the altar. Even when my faith was very thin, and I could not pray myself, I would go to the chapel every day so that I could at least breathe air that was rich with prayer..." (*The Road to Daybreak* p. 23) //

When the valley is shadowed, and the way is difficult, and our faith is thin, perhaps all we can do is let the faith of others enfold us, the presence of others carry and care for us...  
 Perhaps all we can do is slip into this holy space when no one is here, so we can breathe this air that is full of prayer...

Interesting, isn't it, how a movie can stimulate all sorts of thoughts about some of the significant issues of life. I found that to be so with "A Single Man".

// In the words of reviewer Todd Bouldin, "This is a film about what it means to lose love, to experience grief, and to find beauty in it all." (Todd Bouldin, *Meat and Three Café*) //

I also found it to be so...

Perhaps it is true, that even terrible things sometimes have their own kind of beauty...  
 Amen.