



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

# Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"To all God's beloved, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

I increasingly sense that the world has passed me by, that I seem to be becoming more and more a Neanderthal man. One of the places where this realization is most apparent is when I make the proverbial trek to the movies. Even those movies which are heralded with the "two thumbs up" by many of the critics end up being "two thumbs down" for me. Let be elaborate.

What particularly disturbs me about much of modern media is the propensity, indeed even the necessity, to consistently "go over-the-top." By over the top I mean that the movie makers do not believe that a credible story is enough, instead the movie usually needs some kind of shock, some kind of sensationalism, some kind of extreme trauma if it is to be real. Hollywood seems to love movies which are over the top, and clearly rewards such movies.

Just about everything in Hollywood seems to go over the edge. I remember watching a very good movie some years ago, Dead Poet's Society, but then near the end there is a tragic suicide. It was completely unnecessary, but it gave shock and awe. Another movie of yesterday, Patch Adams, was a humorous movie about a doctor who made people laugh, so into the middle they threw a brutal murder.

Even the Passion of the Christ, in my own humble opinion, went over the top. There was absolutely no need to include that level of violence. But this is standard fare for Mel Gibson, he admits he loves to take movies over the top, remember Braveheart. (Ironically, the Passion of the Christ is one over the top movie that Hollywood has not embraced. Wonder why?)

But hope springs eternal. So Jackie and I decided to try one more time to find a movie to enjoy, and the reviews were strong for Million Dollar Baby. Right before attending we had seen that some of

the key players had won major awards and the movie was gaining a lot of positive press. We went in the afternoon when the prices were reduced, so we wouldn't risk too much, but it was still risky.

At the beginning, we had to sit through three of the most violent, disturbing, shocking and just plain sick previews of upcoming attractions (detractions?). With the volume turned up to ear-splitting noise, all of the 20 or so people in the theater were covering their eyes or ears or both as we were being visually and auditorily assaulted. This experience alone made us vow that it would be a long time before we would enter a theater again. Let us rent the movie and adjust our own volume, fast-forward through the previews and press the stop button if the movie is tanking.

But then the movie itself. We should have known that a Clint Eastwood would be violent, he has had a career fixation on violence. Watch any of his old movies on TV and he can dispatch a whole town full of bad guys, while his hat and cigar and sneer never waver. "Make my day," is his preamble to death.

Of course we knew that boxing is by its very nature violent. But for Eastwood and Hollywood, ordinary violence is never quite sufficient, every punch needs to be amplified, glorified, prolonged. By using sound effects each blow echoes with smashing finality, the flesh is ripped apart in full Technicolor. There are no little cuts in such a movie, blood must spurt everywhere, adding to the realism and the horror. For anyone who abhors violence, as we do, should stay away from this movie, and, for that matter, most Hollywood movies today.

But of course what is causing the most heated debate today about this movie is what happens near the end, caused, in effect, by the mayhem and violence. (If you haven't seen the movie and plan to go, don't read any further, this will take away the

surprise.) But the young woman boxer suffers a spinal cord injury and can only breathe on a ventilator. She eventually will ask Eastwood, her manager, to help her end her life

Naturally the movie goes over the top. Most boxers do not end up on life support, most fights are not filled with over-the-top heroes and villains, but you cannot have an award winning movie without something shocking, something brutally infuriating. And a part of this over-the-topness is the moral dilemma of assisted suicide.

Knowing Hollywood and its values, what do you think its answer to this moral issue might be? Surprise! More over-the-top. First of all, the woman's family is a caricature of the worst of "poor white trash." No doubt this bizarre family is shown so that it will make it easier to justify the suicide. In essence, the message that is given by the film is that assisted suicide is far preferable than living with a disability.

Eastwood is shown struggling with the issue, but in the end it is abundantly clear that the only heroic and loving thing to do is to help put her out of her misery. Any person who truly loves another will assist them in leaving their suffering behind. The church, not surprisingly, is portrayed as rigid and insensitive, even the obstacle to love and compassion.

Paul Wojda, a theology professor from St. Thomas University in St. Paul says that disability advocates are scared to death—literally, by this movie. They see the writing on the wall, when a loved one is in intensive care, or terminally ill, the response easily can be, 'let's just get this over with.'" It is a cultural convention to think the way to end suffering is to end the sufferer.

Advocates for the disabled have called for moviegoers to boycott the movie on the grounds that it is insensitive to the physically impaired and tacitly encourages acceptance of euthanasia as a morally justifiable act. "Any movie that sends a message that having a spinal cord injury is a fate worse than death is a movie that concerns us tremendously," says the CEO of the National Spinal Cord Injury

Association. "I'm saddened but not surprised that Eastwood uses the power of fame and film to perpetuate his view that the lives of people with disabilities are not worth living."

Another advocate for the disabled comments "If this was a movie about any other category or minority, you would have rioting in the streets." Quite predictably, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which regularly reviews movies, branded the movie with its harshest rating, "morally objectionable." I have not seen many similar critiques from other Christian groups.

Controversy, of course, is wonderful for movie receipts. The higher the volume of protest, the more free publicity a movie enjoys. Remember the Passion of the Christ was given enormous momentum over the flap whether it was anti-semitic. Now Eastwood and his movie are the buzz everywhere and this controversy will cause many more people to flock to the theater. Even my writing about this is probably counter-productive, it might encourage someone to go to the movie.

So I continue to be a throwback to another era, when movies entertained and often amused and we were not embarrassed or shocked or visually or auditorily damaged. Jackie and I have discovered three old movies which we have purchased and continue to show when we have guests. If you want pure fun, find any of these three.

The Awful Truth, starring Cary Grant and Irene Dunn.

The New Leaf, starring Walter Matthau and Elaine May

Love Among the Ruins, with Lawrence Olivier and Katherine Hepburn.

Most likely at home popcorn will cost less than \$4.00 and soft drinks less than \$3.00. Enjoy.