

March 12, 2017 – Moonlight

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Today is the second Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the second Sunday of this year's "Lenten Movie Series." This pilgrimage through popular cinema is an opportunity to theologically and spiritually explore some of the movies that were nominated for Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards.

Today we will be talking about Moonlight, the film that won the Oscar on February 26th. I know this film has not yet arrived here in Swift Current, so many of you have not had a chance to see it; therefore I'm going to tell you a little bit about it.

Moonlight is the story of Chiron, a young, gay, black boy growing up in poverty in Miami in the 1980's. Chiron is small for his age, bullied by his classmates and living with a drug-addicted mother who often leaves him to fend for himself. As the movie opens, Chiron is living a life of abuse and neglect with no one to care for him, no one to love him.

Some of us may connect with Chiron's loveless childhood. Some of us may have even suffered various forms of abuse: emotional, physical, psychological or even sexual. When life deals us hard blows in childhood it is often difficult to open ourselves to healthy, loving relationships at adults. Sometimes it is hard to believe that we are worthy of the love and acceptance of another human being.

Sometimes our hurt and our anger at the world is so great that we are unable to let anyone in... not even God.

Even those of us who come from a relatively normal childhood have scars that make trust and vulnerability difficult. We may believe that love and acceptance comes from following the rules, from doing what is expected of us, from fitting into society's norms. So we try to earn the love and respect of others through our skills, our accomplishments, or even our morals. We keep ourselves busy doing, because it is difficult for us to accept that we are worthy of love just because of our being. Even in our spiritual life we are convinced that God's love is conditional on how we live or pray or serve.

The early church in the city of Rome was obviously dealing with a similar issue. They were trying to decide if you had to be an Israelite and a follower of the Jewish law in order for God to accept and love and forgive you. They were asking if it was possible for God to love even those who didn't follow all their rules: weren't circumcised, didn't wear the right clothes, ate forbidden foods, and therefore were obviously unclean by the standards of Jewish law. Could these outsiders, these Gentiles be justified, be saved, be accepted, loved and forgiven by God?

In response to these questions, Paul wrote this letter to the Romans and talked about the ancestors of all Jews: Abraham and, his wife, Sarah. He said, "Certainly if they were justified by their deeds they had grounds for boasting – but

not in God's view." You see Abraham and Sarah did many acts that demonstrated their love and faithfulness to God. In fact, at the age of 75, Abraham gathered all his belongings, left his homeland and travelled to a distant country in order to follow God's call. Abraham left everything he knew for God. But Paul argued that God didn't love and forgive Abraham because of his actions. Instead, he wrote "everything depends on faith; everything is grace." Paul told the church in Rome that Abraham and Sarah received God's love because they believed and had faith that the Ground of their Being, their God, would love them unconditionally. God's love is not conditional on what rules we follow, how we act or even how we are perceived by our neighbours. God's grace is available to anyone who trusts, who believes enough to fall into the Holy Spirit's waiting arms

One day, while hiding from his bullies in an abandoned shack, Chiron is found by a large black man named Juan. Juan, the local drug dealer, takes Chiron home to his girlfriend; they feed the hungry frightened boy and let him stay with them until the next morning. This couple demonstrates a kindness that Chiron has not experienced before and their home becomes the only place where Chiron can find acceptance, safety and security.

The most beautiful scene in the film, at least for me, is one where Juan takes Chiron to the beach and teaches him how to swim. *(next slide)* We see this large black man tenderly holding Chiron's small fragile body and encouraging him to relax and trust in the strength of his arms and in the buoyancy of the

water. As we all know, it is only when we relax and allow the water to hold us that we are able to float and swim. In this scene we see Chiron learn to trust and accept that someone else, something else was there to hold him and, in that moment, he was not alone.

As the movie continues we watch Chiron grow into a teenager (*next slide*), we learn that Juan has died a violent death and we see that Chiron's mother has turned to prostitution to support her addiction. Chiron continues to be bullied by his classmates and struggles with his sexual orientation. At the end of that second act, it seems as if his life is spiraling out of control.

Then, in the third act of the movie, Chiron returns as an adult. It is obvious that the shy, frightened boy and the struggling teenager are still there behind a more mature and stoic façade. He is surviving in the only way he knows how. Chiron starts getting frequent calls from his mother, who asks him to come see her at the drug treatment center where she now lives. Chiron decides to visit her. When his mother apologizes for the way she treated him, Chiron demonstrates incredible grace by hugging her and accepting her apology.

This is the first sign that Chiron, the adult, may still have within him a spark of the love and the acceptance that he received from Juan. This is the first sign that he may have the ability to eventually know the beauty of a truly loving and accepting relationship. It is the first sign of hope for this deeply wounded young man.

What I find amazing about this movie is that Juan, Chiron's savior, the one who, loves and accepts him unconditionally, is such a deeply flawed character himself. It gives me hope that each one of us, no matter how flawed we may be, no matter how many mistakes we have made, can also be used by the Holy Mystery, to bring grace and hope into the world around us.

This movie gives me hope:

- that each of us may experience the joy and the vulnerability of being held by someone who loves and accepts us just as we are;
- that we may allow ourselves to rest in the arms of a God who loves and forgives each one of us unconditionally;
- that we may experience and know the peace that comes from grace.