

2022 03 20 – The Power of the Dog

Luke 13:1-9 (The Inclusive Bible)

Today is the third Sunday in Lent and for us that means it is also the third Sunday of this year's Lenten Movie Series. All of the movies in our series have been nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards, but this week's film has received a total of twelve Oscar nominations, more than any other movie in 2021. It is called *The Power of the Dog*.

The Power of the Dog is a western set in Montana in the 1920's. It is the story of Phil Burbank. Phil is a dirty, rude, macho cowboy who holds power over those around him through fear and awe. He and his brother George own a successful ranch. *(next slide)* It is obvious that they care for each other but Phil insists on calling his brother Fatso and belittling him at every opportunity.

During a cattle drive, Phil and George meet Rose Gordon. She is a recent widow and runs the restaurant in a nearby town. George falls in love with Rose and they eventually marry. Phil dislikes his new sister-in-law and assumes she has married George for his money. He does everything he can to make her life at the ranch miserable. So miserable, in fact, that she turns to alcohol for comfort.

And there is one other key character in this story. Rose has a teenage son named Peter. *(next slide)* Peter enjoys creating beautiful things like paper flowers. He is also studying to be a doctor like his deceased father. Phil takes an instant dislike to Peter, whom he sees as weak and effeminate. During a break

from school, Peter comes to stay at the ranch and Phil treats him with disdain and even cruelty. He calls him, "Miss Nancy." (*next slide*)

Phil is a typical bully. He comes across as strong and powerful. He gains power by hurting others with words and actions. It is easy to compare him to bullies that we have known in our own lives and bullies that we are aware of in our world. To give one obvious example, it is certainly true that Vladimir Putin has many of the characteristics of a bully. As Melanie has already pointed out, it's easy for us to identify a bully, but it's not so easy figuring out how to respond.

In today's scripture reading, Jesus is speaking to a crowd when some of the people tell him about a group of Galileans who have been killed by Pilate. They ask, "Do you think these Galileans were the greatest sinners in Galilee because they suffered like this?" In response, Jesus makes it clear that a person's fate is not necessarily connected to their sins. He explains that if someone's life comes to a cruel and violent end, it is not an indication that they are any more sinful than you or I. And then Jesus tells a parable.

The parable begins with a fig tree growing in a vineyard. The problem is that the fig tree has no fruit. It hasn't had fruit for three years. The owner has decided that the tree is useless, it's just cluttering up his vineyard, so he tells the gardener to cut it down.

Phil Burbank is like that fig tree. You take a quick look and you see a solid trunk and lots of green leaves. You see that he's wealthy, he's powerful and he's a

skilled rancher. His life seems to be going just the way he wants. But when you look a little closer you realize there isn't any fruit on that tree. At least, not the kind of fruit that Jesus is talking about. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he writes, "the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23 NRSV). Phil's tree is certainly not producing any of those figs.

As the movie progresses we realize that Phil leads a very lonely life. With George's marriage to Rose he has become estranged from the one person that was close to him. We learn that Phil had a secret gay lover at one point in his life and that he is still grieving that deep loss. We also find out that he was educated at Yale in the classics, plays a mean banjo and has beautiful penmanship. Phil is an intelligent, talented, complicated man whose life is a lie and whose persona is a mask that he wears for survival. By the end of two hours, I certainly didn't grow to like him, but I did begin to understand Phil's toxic behaviour.

In Jesus' parable, the gardener pleaded with the owner saying, "Please leave it one more year while I hoe around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine; if not, then let it be cut down."

I wonder what Phil's life would have been like if someone had given him the fertilizer that he needed to flourish and be fruitful. What would his life have been like if someone had demonstrated to him that true masculinity is not defined by physical strength and power over others? What would his life have been like if it had been safe for him to love who he loved and to grieve his loss in public?

What would his life have been like if someone had given him permission to be the man he was meant to be?

The Power of the Dog is a movie that turns the traditional concepts of power and masculinity upside down. I'm not going to tell you the ending. If you haven't seen the movie, I don't want to take away the surprise. But I will tell you that the movie doesn't attempt to answer my questions. All it does is highlight the issues.

Jane Campion, the writer and director, explains the title of the movie in this way: "As the title stands, it's a kind of warning. The power of the dog is all those urges, all those deep, uncontrollable urges that can come and destroy us, you know?" She used Donald Trump as an example: "Like, when things didn't go well for him, he melted. He couldn't even say the words 'I lost.' He created this massive fiction. Even to say the word 'failure' is just not an option for someone like him, for these kinds of men." <https://www.hitc.com/en-gb/2021/12/01/the-power-of-the-dog-meaning/>

I believe that our society creates unrealistic expectations for men and is partly to blame for the creation of unhealthy individuals like Phil Burbank, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. They are the result of both internal and external influences. Just like every husband who abuses his wife or takes out his anger on his children. Just like every gay man or transgender person who, in despair, has taken their own life.

What *The Power of the Dog* illustrates for me is the need for the fruits of the spirit in our lives and in the world. We need more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. First, we need to share the fruit with ourselves. This movie calls us to love ourselves just as we are and to allow the Holy Mystery to love us into our fullness of being. And then we need to share the fruit with others. *The Power of the Dog* calls us to provide the fertilizer for others that they may know God's love through us and that they may grow to healthy, whole human beings.

May it be so. Amen.