

2025 03 32 – *Nickel Boys*

Scripture: 1 Cor 10:1-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)
Psalm 63:1-8 (*VU p. 781*)

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. During Lent we take time to theologically explore some of the movies nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards. Today, we will be talking about a movie called *Nickel Boys*. This movie was not an easy one to watch for several reasons including: the sometimes violent subject matter; the fact that the camera angle is from the point of view of actor, and that there are time shifts in the movie that take you back and forth between the 1960's and closer to present day. How many of you actually watched the movie? How many enjoyed it?

Nickel Boys is the story of two African-American teenagers, Elwood and Turner, who are sent to an abusive reform school in 1960's Florida. The story is fictional, but it was inspired by the conditions experienced at the very real, Dozier School for Boys. A school that was fully investigated and finally closed in 2011.

Elwood is a talented 14 year old boy who has been raised by a doting grandmother. He seems to be destined for great things and is accepted into a tuition-free study program at a Black College. He has no means of transportation and no money for a bus ticket, so Elwood starts hitchhiking to campus and is picked up by a man driving a stolen car. After they are stopped by the police, Elwood is wrongly convicted of being an accomplice and is sent to Nickel Academy.

On his arrival, it is obvious that the Black students at the school are treated very differently than white students. The black students are housed in shabby facilities and little attempt is made to educate them. They are initially told that they can be released for good behaviour, but it becomes clear that they will not leave until they age-out at eighteen. The school actually makes money by hiring them out as “convict labour.”

Very soon after he arrives, Elwood attempts to stop a bully who is hitting a smaller child and Elwood ends up getting hurt. Instead of praising him, the school administration proceeds to savagely beat all three students. Elwood ends up in the infirmary and when his grandmother comes to visit, she is not allowed to see him.

This is, of course, an incredibly difficult time for Elwood, a time of pain and suffering. It is not unlike the kind of suffering that Paul refers to in his letter to the church in Corinth. In Paul’s letter he talks about their Hebrew ancestors, the Israelites, who travelled for years through the wilderness as they made their way from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. We know that the Israelites were often hungry and thirsty and that they lived on manna (bread from heaven) and water that literally flowed from a rock. We also know, as Paul points out, that in the midst of their suffering they grumbled to their leader, Moses. At other times, the Israelites melted down their gold to create idols and had sexual relationships with women from other nations. Paul argues that these transgressions were somehow related to the plagues and snake bites that killed many in their number. He warns the members of the church in Corinth to be careful “lest they fall!”

In challenging times it's easy to lose hope in our leaders, in our faith, in the path that we have chosen and to look for the easy way out, the quick fix. It's easy to turn to the numbing comfort of alcohol, drugs, social media, food or sex. When we are hurting, it's easy to turn our back on love and move toward hate instead. It's easy to start searching for someone to blame, a scapegoat, instead of looking for the best way forward. Paul was right, we do need to "watch out lest [we] fall!" But what is it that will keep us from falling? What is it that will keep us on the right path?

In the movie, we watch as Elwood struggles to keep his sense of faith and justice in the midst of his own suffering. Elwood knows about the injustice of the world; both of his parents abandoned him when he was small child. But he has been brought up by a grandmother who loves him deeply and who instilled in him her own strong belief in a God of love and peace and justice. Her faith is made obvious in the movie through the gospel music that plays in the background when she is on screen. Elwood's grandmother also introduced him to the words and the non-violent action of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In this movie we hear Elwood clearly stating his own belief in the goodness of God's creation and the possibility of justice. Elwood has made a friend at Nickel Academy, another student named Turner. After Elwood's beating, Turner makes himself ill so he can come and visit Elwood in the infirmary. Turner cares about Elwood, but this is his second time at Nickel Academy and he has already given up on the possibility of love and justice for himself. Turner tells Elwood that he needs to keep his head down and ignore what is happening around him. But

Elwood says, “If everybody looks the other way, then everybody's in on it. If I look the other way, I'm as implicated as the rest. It's not how it's supposed to be.”

Later we find out that Elwood is keeping a notebook detailing all the corruption and injustice that he is experiencing and witnessing at Nickel Academy. By now he is aware of more than just the beatings. He knows of food that is stolen and sold for profit, rumours of sexual abuse and even a hidden graveyard. Elwood truly believes that if he is able to bring all this corruption to light, then change will happen. Despite being locked up in a reform school, despite enduring physical and emotional brutality, Elwood has not lost hope in the possibility of God's reign of peace and justice here on earth.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians is also one of hope in the power of Divine love. The people of Corinth are obviously struggling with hard times, just as their ancestors struggled in the wilderness. Paul writes, “No test has overtaken you but what is common to all people. You can be confident that God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your means.”

That belief in God's faithfulness, God's unconditional love, God's amazing grace is what has brought many of us through times of trial and temptation. It is my hope that it will bring us through our current challenges whatever they may be. Lent is a time of introspection, a time when we allow ourselves to acknowledge the pain and suffering within us, within our families, within our communities, within our world. It is a time when we give thanks for those people, places and practices in our lives that keep us deeply connected with the Divine love that is

both in us and around us. The season of Lent is a time when we challenge ourselves to face reality and to take action that reflects our own faith and understanding.

Elwood refused to let go of his faith in the power of Love and in God's reign of peace and justice. The Apostle Paul encouraged his followers to keep their faith. May we also rest deeply in the love of the Holy Mystery and experience the strength and the safety of God's embrace. In the words of the ancient psalmist:

As I lie, I remember you, O God,
I think of you all night long,
For you are my constant help.
In the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
I cling to you, your hand keeps me safe.

May it be so. Amen.