

Sermon † March 14, 2021

Frank H. Maxwell

Filmed in 1971, the movie, *The Last Picture Show*, follows a group of high schooler's in the 1950's as they come of age in a bleak, isolated, atrophied West Texas town that is slowly dying, both economically and culturally.

This proactive and sexually explicit movie chronicles the week-long events in this one-street town. The economy had gone bad and the town had run out of money. The local theater was going broke and they were getting ready to run the very last picture show.

Filmed in black and white, the movie has a stark, sad feeling. The buildings have a weathered look. Paint peeling . . . shutters knocking in the wind . . . leaves, dust, a few pieces of trash blowing across the screen. The movie looked like that town felt.

And the main characters, well they're a sorry lot. There was *Sonny*, the high-school boy, strong, strapping, lean, who played guard on the football team and got involved with his coach's wife.

There was *Ruth Pepper*, the coach's wife, a thin, plain-faced woman whose life was as exciting as an empty bag until Sonny came along.

There was *Jaci*, the rich girl, who owned the town's only convertible and wanted to be the center of attention and who was willing to show anything and do anything to get that attention. Scene after scene, people wanting love, and looking for it in all the wrong places including the back row of the last picture show in town. The movie is a sad commentary on the human condition. People saying, "*Love me*," but not really knowing what love is or where to find it.

The writer of the Gospel of John would not be surprised by the world depicted in *The Last Picture Show* or by any of the oppression, alienation, or pain of the world. To John, the world is a sad, dreary, unlovely place.

Jesus says, "*I am the light of the world*," precisely because the world is dark. Jesus says, "*My peace I give to you*," precisely because the world is violent. Jesus says, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life*," precisely because the world is lost, full of lies, and dying.

And why is the world this way? According to John it is because the world believes the devil and lives without conscious awareness of God. Now, I imagine that few of us think the world is quite as grim a place as John did.

And not everyone believes that there is a "devil" out there somewhere, putting the wrong programs on the software of life. But we do often have the sense that something is wrong.

Sometimes this world is not a very lovely place, and sometimes we are not very lovely people. A couple of stories to illustrate the point:

- *Noted physician, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is most remembered for her work on death and dying. But in the early 80's she gave considerable attention to the victims of AIDS.*

She was been deeply moved by the plight of babies who were born with AIDS and who were often rejected by the communities in which they were born and sometimes by their own families. In response to the need of these babies, she planned to convert a farm into a hospice where babies born with AIDS could live in an atmosphere of love, acceptance, and support.

But, almost as soon as her plans were announced, neighbors mobilized to prevent the such a hospice from being established.

- *A number of years ago, Mary and I took a large group of young people on a mission trip where we stayed and worked in downtown Pittsburgh . . . the North end.*

In the mornings our kids led a vacation Bible school for children in an all black Lutheran church. During the afternoons we volunteered at various food pantries, homeless shelters and halfway houses.

One evening, after a particularly long and hot day it was our "turn" to serve dinner for the residents of a halfway house for heroin addicts. Most of the residents were still shooting methadone to assist with their withdrawal.

We cooked and served dinner, visited with the residents and then washed and dried all of the dishes in a steaming, hot kitchen. About 10:00 p.m., our church youth worker said that she would take care of the rest of the chores and then get our kids back to the church . . . so Mary and I headed back to the place where we were staying.

We were just about to get into bed when the phone rang. It was our youth worker, Jessica. She needed us to come back to the church. Right after we left the halfway house, the kids heard a blood-curdling scream coming from across the street. A man was despondent because his girl friend told him to take a hike, so he got himself good and drunk, and then shoved his arm through the plate glass window of the neighborhood pizza parlor. He stumbled toward the halfway house with blood gushing from his arm. Fortunately, Jessica, had a medical background and immediately applied a tourniquet to his arm. And she told the man that it was important for him to keep his arm raised . . . above his heart . . . to limit the flow of blood.

But when the police arrived, they recognized this repeat trouble-maker, so they grabbed his hands and forced them behind his back as the handcuffs were applied. Jessica pleaded with the police to keep his arm raised . . . but they ignored her and carted the man off in the squad car.

The entire incident lasted but a few minutes, but our kids, witnessing all of this with wide-eyes, were obviously upset. So we spent the next hours "processing" what had happened. And the kids wondered, "Where's the love?"

Sometimes the world is not a lovely place. And sometimes we are not very lovely people.

Back to the Gospel of John. And here is the message of the text: God *so loves* the world, the hateful, broken, dark, lying world with the death-rattle in its breath. And let us be clear . . . for John, love is not just a fuzzy feeling, a cozy affection, a sweet syrup of emotion.

For John, love is an action. Love is an action that asserts the worth and value of another being and that seeks to improve the lot of the other. Love is the giving of oneself for the sake of another.

And, according to our text, this act of love is the revelation of the light of God in the dark world. Here's the kicker . . . God's love is for all the world.

God loves the babies born with AIDS and would have them experience love and acceptance as long as their little bodies will last. **And** God also loves the neighbors who would keep the babies out.

God loves the people who run halfway shelters and methadone clinics and all the despondent men and women bent on destroying their lives.

And God loves the police officer who's worked two-shifts straight for three days and is so tired of arresting the same guy week after week.

And if God loves the world, then, strange as it may seem to me, God loves me and God loves you. The Gospel story makes it clear that all who become aware of the love of God for the world and for them receive a new identity. The old habits of hating and lying and killing are no longer appropriate. All who accept God's love become lovers, and they love the world in miniature in the way that God loves the whole.

God so loved the world that God gave us Jesus. And it was Jesus who said, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you.*"

