

About a Boy

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

September 26, 2010

3rd in the six-part series: *St. Andrew at the Movies*

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Amos 6:3–5 (The Message)

³⁻⁶Woe to you who are rushing headlong to disaster!
Catastrophe is just around the corner!
Woe to those who live in luxury
and expect everyone else to serve them!
Woe to those who live only for today,
indifferent to the fate of others!
Woe to the playboys, the playgirls,
who think life is a party held just for them!
Woe to those addicted to feeling good—life without pain!
those obsessed with looking good—life without wrinkles!

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 (NRSV)

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ¹¹Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? ¹²And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Philippians 2:4–8 (NRSV)

⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Island Living. It's the dream life. Right?

Sometimes a preacher just needs to get out of the way. I feel like that about this week's movie, *About a Boy*. I'm not quite sure why it is one of my favorite movies, but I laugh each time I see it. At least I'm not alone in my assessment of the film's worth, as its "fresh" rating at www.rottentomatoes.com¹ is 93%.

Before his death, Randy Pautsch wrote that you don't have to preach at people, just tell them the story; they'll figure it out for themselves. Good advice for preachers. This 90 minute story of Will and Marcus is such a story and it is well told.

Money and time (in neat 30-minute units)

John Donne once wrote, "No man is an island," but Will, a London bachelor, takes issue with that:

"All men are islands. And what's more, this is the time to be one. This is an island age. A hundred years ago, for example, you had to depend on other people. No one had TV or CDs or DVDs or home espresso makers. As a matter of fact they didn't have anything cool.

¹This is a handy site if you are a regular movie-goer. They compile hundreds of movies reviews and count the "thumbs up" and the "thumbs down" (fresh/rotten). UP, for example, was 98% "fresh." Paris Hilton's cinematic masterpiece was 7% fresh, as I recall. You get the idea.

Whereas now you can make yourself a little island paradise. With the right supplies, and more importantly the right attitude, you can become sun-drenched, tropical, a magnet for young Swedish tourists.”

What does Will “do” on this island? Not much of anything. A scalp massage here; a meal there and the days just glide by. Of course Will has an advantage most of us don’t; he lives off the royalties from his father’s popular Christmas song. He slips smoothly through life, unencumbered and uninvolved. Will is quite skilled at resisting the occasional urge to help others, even if it’s being the godfather to his own niece.

Affluent and isolated. That’s Will. It’s his definition of the good life. Blind to the need of others? Well . . . not so much blind, just indifferent.

John Donne
Meditation 17
Devotions upon Emergent
Occasions

"No man is an island, entire of
itself; every man is a piece of
the continent, a part of the
main. If a clod be washed
away by the sea, Europe is
the less, as well as if a
promontory were, as well as if
a manor of thy friend's or of
thine own were. Any man's
death diminishes me,
because I am involved in
mankind; and therefore never
send to know for whom the
bell tolls; it tolls for thee..."

Lest you think that idle affluence is a problem limited to Will or even our day, one of God’s prophets came to nation of Israel during some prosperous times.

In the period of peace before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 BC, Amos, a herdsman, brought God’s word to the kingdom of Israel. Working sometime around 760BC, Amos understood the consequences of Israel’s growing complacency and abandonment of God. They were a bit like Will – affluent and blind to the needs of others; complacent and quite sure that their own “island living” could run smoothly along forever.

But God’s way wasn’t their way. Their indifference and self-imposed blindness to the needs of others

brought this response from Amos: “Woe to those who live in luxury and expect everyone else to serve them! Woe to those who live only for today, indifferent to the fate of others! Woe to the playboys, the playgirls, who think life is a party held just for them! (from Amos 6 in *The Message*).

Using the bold imagery preferred by God’s prophets, Amos even used the language of a lament over a young person’s death to describe the coming fall of Israel. “Fallen, no more to rise, is maiden Israel; forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up” (Amos 5:1-2). You can imagine how well his message must have been received by the Israelites!

Why would these terrible things happen to Israel? For Amos, Israel was no better or no worse than their neighbors and that was precisely the problem. Israel was living according the ways of the world just like everyone else. . . . And island living is most certainly not God’s way.

And three are better than two

Island living is the furthest thing from the experiences of young Marcus. His “mum” is suicidal and Marcus comes to see that he can’t handle this all by himself. As he puts it in the film:

Suddenly I realized - two people isn't enough. You need backup. If you're only two people, and someone drops off the edge, then you're on your own. Two isn't a large enough number. You need three at least.

Early in the last century, the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote extensively about the power of three. He noted that three close, mutually supporting friends or loved ones

can create a bond capable of withstanding troubles that might crush a pair. The third person, Simmel said, created opportunities for mediation and compromise that weren't available to a pair, no matter how strong their bond. Marcus learned that for himself.

Will thinks he doesn't need anyone. As he puts it, "The thing is, a person's life is like a TV show. I was the star of The Will Show. And The Will Show wasn't an ensemble

Ecclesiastes

If you've read Ecclesiastes, you might be asking yourself how this book made it into the Bible at all!

At first glance, Ecclesiastes seems to endorse a despairing view of life and creation. In the opening phrases, we are introduced to the Teacher's teaching: "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." The Hebrew word that the NRSV translates as "vanity" is *hebel*, which literally means breath or vapor. The NRSV retains the archaic word "vanity" because of its long tradition in English literature. Here, the word means something close to "meaninglessness" and that is how the NIV renders it.

Yet, by painting vivid pictures of a purposeless, godless life, Ecclesiastes points us toward the futility of any life not grounded in God and even the futility of all life if there is no god.

In *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Andrew Hill & John Walton¹ suggest that there are four main themes in Ecclesiastes:

- We should not expect life to be self-fulfilling.
- Our frustrations in life are unavoidable.
- We must accept the seasons of life.
- We can truly *enjoy* life only through a God-centered world-view.

drama. Guests came and went, but I was the regular. It came down to me and me alone."

Alone . . . that's Will. Until a twelve year old pest of a boy starts showing up after school to sit on the couch with Will and watch game shows. It takes a while, but even the king of island living slowly comes to realize that his life is richer because of Marcus. Even more important, Will comes to see that Marcus means something to him and he to Marcus.

I don't suppose that Will ever read the Bible. If he had, he'd probably have felt most comfortable in the book of Ecclesiastes, which is mostly a portrait of a life lived without God. There is no God, life is meaningless; so eat, drink, and make merry for tomorrow you may die. That sort of thing. Will, like many of us, comes to understand that such a life isn't happiness, it is bleak and empty.

Even the writer of Ecclesiastes knows that we are not built to be alone: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil . . . A threefold cord is not quickly broken" (4:9,11).

We were all created by God and made in his image. God is inherently relational, an eternal community of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, it shouldn't surprise us that we too are

inherently relational. We are not built to be alone. It is about more than the practicalities of life. It is about coming to truly understand, embrace, and practice love, which, by definition, requires another . . . and another . . . and another.

The truth is that for me and many men, relationships are not always at the top of our list, no matter how much we profess that we love God and neighbor. In his book, *Chazown*, Craig Groeschel admits that "for years, I didn't see the value of intentionally developing godly relationships. That was my wife's department, so I left the relational ball in her court. Content with following along, I struggled relationally, not seeing the value of investing in and receiving from them." Sounds a lot like me and other men I know. We know with our heads and even our hearts that we proclaim a relational God who desires love from us before all else – love for God and love of others. But when it

comes to the real work of relationships, too many men back off, unsure of how to proceed and even unwilling.

Marcus is Will's salvation. It is Marcus who teaches him the value and importance of others, of being connected, of needing and being needed. Of course, learning such lessons doesn't happen overnight – especially for us men. At the end of the movie, Will is willing to go only this far:

Every man is an island. I stand by that. But clearly some men are island CHAINS.
Underneath, they are connected.

True love

One of my favorite moments in the film is near the end. Marcus has decided to sing “Killing Me Softly” at his school's rock concert. He's doing it for his “mum,” having decided that it is the one gift that he can give her to bring her out of her depression, i.e., to give her new life. He goes to see Ellie, a much older girl on whom Marcus has a crush. She is the coolest girl in the high school and has taken the boy under her wing. Marcus asks her to accompany him when he sings the song in front of the entire song. She refuses, sensibly enough. She tells him that it would be suicide, social suicide. She obviously cares for the little boy, but she isn't going to go that far.

As Marcus turns to leave, she tells him, “They'll crucify you.”

There it is. In a nutshell . . . sacrifice. love. cross. death. new life.

Marcus isn't an idiot. He knows what he is doing. By singing that song he will be sacrificing his life in his school . . . to save his mother.

Again, I doubt if Marcus is familiar with the book of Philippians. But when Paul writes that we are to put others interests ahead of our own, having the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:4-5), he could have had Marcus in mind.

Marcus, thanks to Ellie's friendship, had even reached a level of social acceptability amongst his peers that he would have once thought impossible. Nonetheless, he is willing to lose everything to save his “mum,” even if only to purchase a few minutes of happiness for her.

That's what love really is. Not the flowers or songs, not the sentiments or the longing looks. Love is the willingness to sacrifice for someone else, to give everything for another. To humiliate and even shame ourselves for the sake of another. That's love. That's Jesus.

Synopsis of *About a Boy*

The following was written by Amy Simpson of *Christianity Today*.

About a Boy is a film that contrasts the life of Will (Hugh Grant), a self-centered, wealthy bachelor, with that of Marcus (Nicholas Hoult), a geeky, outcast, middle-school kid. Will's inheritance affords him a work-free life of leisure, shopping, and women. His goal is to be a human “island,” pursuing pleasure without any human entanglements. With this end in mind, he devises a plan to meet vulnerable, attractive single mothers by concocting an imaginary son. In the course of one of his deceptive dates with a single mom, Will meets Marcus. Soon, Will is embroiled in a troubled family's life when Marcus's mother, Fiona (Toni Collette), attempts suicide.

Marcus realizes that his life is precarious with his unstable mother and seeks to build up his support system. Thus, Marcus threatens to blow Will's single-dad cover unless Will promises to date his mother. Reluctantly, Will spends time with Marcus and tries to teach him how to be cool. Will realizes that even this charitable gesture is a shallow attempt to use another person. Marcus, despite his quiriness, shows Will his need for others, and the two of them develop an extended family of caring friends.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Edlen Cowley has developed the following questions as discussion starters for St. Andrew's Fall Fellowship Groups:

1. What are some of the benefits of coming together in a Christian community?
2. Do you sometimes, even at church, feel isolated and alone?
3. Will Freeman (Hugh Grant) in the movie "About a Boy" was all about independence, isolation, and solitude. Do you identify with him in anyway?
4. Marcus (the boy) changes Will's life by engaging in community with him. As a result, Marcus changes his life, Will's life, and his mom Fiona's life. What lesson did you learn from the movie?
5. Why do we need each other?
6. What can you do to be more connected to your group the church, and the greater community?
7. Stephen Covey, in his book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," says, people move along a continuum from dependence to independence to interdependence. (Interdependence being the strongest of the three, where people work in teams and offer respect, and commitment to each other.) Are you an interdependent person? Are you on your way to interdependence? Do you agree with Covey?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Amos 4:1-3 More hard words for those who oppress the poor</p>	<p>Tuesday, Amos 8:1-6 Israel's indifference to the needs of the poor has made them like a bowl of rotting over-ripened fruit.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 16:19-31 Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus. This is a warning about the blindness of the rich.</p>	<p>Thursday, Acts 2:42-47 The community of believers in Jerusalem</p>
<p>Friday, Philippians 2:1-11 Spend a lot of time with this passage. It lies at the heart of the Christian story and our theology.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

**Scott's 11:00 Sunday class in Festival Hall
our current series continues:**

The Bible and the Qur'an: Side by Side

How much do you really know about the Qur'an? For most of us, the answer is not much. In this series, we'll be looking at the treatment of important biblical subjects, such as Adam and Jesus, from the perspective of both the Bible and the Qur'an.

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It's not too late to join us!

Monday evening 6:45-8:30

Scott's evening Bible study for the fall Bible Academy

The Book of Daniel

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Also: every Tuesday, a lunchtime brownbag in-depth Bible study with Scott Engle from 11:45 - 1:00, Room 127.

Just drop in when you can. Each week stands alone.

We are studying Paul's letter to the Galatians.

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Scott Engle is leading a trip to the Holy Land in the fall of 2011. In addition to Israel, we will visit the Pyramids, Ephesus, Athens, and Rome. It will be quite an experience. Dozens of St. Andrew members have already joined the trip. We hope you'll join us.

For more information, go to www.scottengle.org.
You can also e-mail Scott at sengle@standrewumc.org.

Sermon Notes
