

March 11, 2018 - Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri

John 3:14-21

So how many of you watched all or part of the Academy Awards Ceremony last Sunday? It's a lot more fun to watch when you've actually seen or at least heard about some of the movies that have been nominated for awards, isn't it? I was very excited that this week's movie, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri*, won two of the major awards. Do you remember what they were? (*wait for answer*: Actress in a Leading Role - Frances McDormand & Actor in a Supporting Role – Sam Rockwell) If you remember, the first movie we explored was *Darkest Hour* and it was no surprise that Gary Oldman won an Oscar for his role as Winston Churchill. And next week we are focusing on *The Shape of Water* which one four Oscars including the most coveted of all, Best Picture.

So enough about awards, let's talk about *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri*. So besides its incredibly awkward title, what do you need to know about this film? Well, first of all, it is not based a true story. It is dark drama set in a fictional place called Ebbing, Missouri. The main character is a woman named Mildred Hayes. Mildred is grieving the rape and murder of her teenage daughter. Her grief is complicated by feelings of guilt and shame because their last words were said in anger and it was Mildred who allowed her daughter to walk alone on a deserted highway. Her grief and her guilt turn into frustration and anger at the local police force who have been unable to find her daughter's killer. Her pain increases to the boiling point and then spills over onto three abandoned billboards near her home. On the first billboard she writes, "RAPED

WHILE DYING,” the second says, “AND STILL NO ARRESTS?” and the third asks, “HOW COME, CHIEF WILLOUGHBY?” As you can imagine, these billboards become the talk of the town. Chief Willoughby is well-loved and respected by the people of Ebbing so much of the response is negative. Mildred gets called into the police station and is asked to take the billboards down. She refuses.

One person who is especially upset is Officer Jason Dixon. Very quickly we discover that Officer Dixon is a racist, homophobic and violent alcoholic who talks openly about the time that he beat up a black man while this helpless man was in custody. As we are introduced to more and more people in the town we realize that Ebbing Missouri is filled with flawed individuals many of whom are vulgar and angry. The physical violence in this film can be hard to take, but I felt even more brutalized by the constant foul language. It becomes clear that Officer Dixon is an acute example of the type of brokenness and pain that is rampant in this southern town.

Brokenness and pain often manifest themselves as anger and violence. Even those of us who see ourselves as non-violent and peace-loving can probably recall times in our lives when our voices and possibly even our fists have been raised in anger. Many of us know what loss feels like. We know the anguish of grief or loneliness or illness or injustice. We may even be able to understand some of the pain that Mildred Hayes was feeling when she purchased those three billboards outside Ebbing Missouri. We all know what it feels like to be broken.

So when bad things happen, when the pain and brokenness feel like they are more than we can bear, what is it that keeps us from erupting in anger and forcing our pain on others? What is it that keeps us from yelling profanity, from using our fists, throwing someone out a window or burning down a building? What is it? The movie answers this question through a letter. It is a letter from Chief Willoughby to Officer Jason Dixon. In the letter Chief Willoughby writes:

I think you've got the makings of being a really good cop, Jason, and you know why? Because, deep down, you're a decent man. I know you don't think I think that, but I do, dipshit.

I do think you're too angry though, and I know it's all since your dad died and you had to go look after your mom and all, but as long as you hold on to so much hate, then I don't think you're ever going to become, what I know you want to become - a detective. 'Cause you know what you need to become a detective? And I know you're gonna wince when I say this, but what you need to become a detective is love.

Because through love comes calm, and through calm comes thought. And you need thought to detect stuff sometimes, Jason. It's kinda all you need. You don't even need a gun. And you definitely don't need hate. Hate never solved nothing, but calm did. And thought did. Try it. Try it just for a change. ... Good luck to you, Jason. You're a decent man, and yeah you've had a run of bad luck, but things are gonna change for you. I can feel it. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Three_Billboards_Outside_Ebbing,_Missouri

Chief Willoughby was certainly not perfect either. But through his letter he gave Officer Dixon what was probably the first positive feedback he had ever received. He told Jason that he cared about him. He told him that he was a decent man. He told him that what it takes to heal from pain and brokenness is not hate and anger, but love.

In order to heal the brokenness inside each one of us we need to know and to trust that we are loved. Like Officer Dixon we need to believe that salvation, that healing is possible. When the pain is overwhelming then it is sometimes hard to trust in the power of Love. When our hearts are filled with guilt, shame, anger, bitterness, frustration, and fear then it's hard to believe that we are loveable or that we could ever love again. But God's love is unconditional.

God so loved the world that he gave us Jesus so that we would know and understand the transformative power of unconditional love. We know that Jesus deliberately chose to hang out with the marginalized, the poor, and the broken. He shared God's love with them and they became his disciples. They became agents of God's love in the world. We are no different than them.

Officer Dixon is no different than them. In the last half of the movie we see Jason slowly changing. We watch as he experiences the calming power of love and the positive results that come from thought-filled action. And we see the amazing effect that these changes in him have on the people around him, including Mildred Hayes. Healing comes when we experience God's love and when we are able to share that love with others.