

2019 03 31 – Roma

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In the history of the Oscars only nine foreign-language films have been nominated for Best Picture. Roma, our fourth installment in this year's Lenten movie series, is one of those films. In Roma we experience a year in the life of a domestic servant named Cleo. Cleo works in the home of an upper middle-class family in Mexico City in the 1970s. For two hours we watch as she cleans up after the dog, mops, cooks, does laundry, makes beds, serves supper, and turns out the lights at the end of the day. This movie is not only subtitled but was also filmed in black and white. The picture is subtle, understated and at times even luminous. It is the antithesis of the action hero movie that we watched last week.

In this movie Cleo cares for a family of seven: a husband and wife, four children and the wife's mother. This is the story of a family, a family probably not that different than the ones we are familiar with. Early in the movie the father leaves on an extended business trip to Quebec and eventually we discover that even though he is back in Mexico City, he is not returning to his wife and children. His wife, Sofia, at first hides the news from her family and tries to pretend that all is well, but the children can sense that something is very wrong.

In the midst of this turmoil, Cleo discovers that she is pregnant and when she tells her boyfriend, he too disappears. Cleo is able to confide in her good friend, Adela, the family's cook, but otherwise she feels very alone. You see Cleo and

Adela both belong to the Mixtecos, one of the Indigenous tribes of Mexico, and they live and work a long distance from their home and family in Oaxaca (w aa-h AA-k uh) State. At times Cleo is homesick but she knows that there is nothing for her in Oaxaca but poverty and hardship.

Our scripture reading today is also a story about a family in turmoil. In this story Jesus tells us about a father and two sons. The younger son is not happy working on the family farm and asks his father to give him his share of the estate so he can leave with all of his inheritance. We can only imagine how painful it was for the father to know that his younger son would not be taking over his half of the farm. How painful it was for the father to sell off half of the land and goods that he had accumulated for this family. How painful it was for this father to watch as one of his sons went off to live in a distant land.

We can only imagine what it was like for the family that was left behind: the father who grieved a lost son and the older brother who watched and grew angry, bitter, and maybe even a little jealous, as he worked to build up the pieces that remained. The story doesn't tell us if the mother was still alive or if there were sisters to grieve as well. All we know is what happened to the prodigal son, the one who left his family to live an extravagant and immoral life in a distant land. All we know is that he ended up a servant, taking care of pigs on someone else's farm and hungry enough to eat the husks that he was throwing into their pen.

So we have two men, one a prodigal son, the other a delinquent father and two families torn apart and struggling to move on. And in one of those families a

household servant worried how her employer will respond when she reveals her pregnant state. I'm sure most of us can relate to their feelings of grief, jealousy, betrayal, anger, fear and loneliness. Most of us have, at some point in our lives, lived with all of these emotions.

At first, Sofia asks her children to write letters in an attempt to bring her husband home. But eventually she accepts that he is gone and she works hard to normalize her children's lives. They go to movies, visit extended family at Christmas and even take a vacation to the beach. Sofia wants her children to know that even though their father is gone, they are still safe and surrounded by people who love them.

One of those people is Cleo. It is obvious in this film that Cleo loves the children in her care and that they love her in return. Cleo eventually tells Sophia her secret and she is assured that her job is safe. In fact, at one point Cleo and Sophia's mother even go shopping together for a crib. The social divide between the maid and her employers is made very clear, but at the same time we also see glimpses of the deep love and compassion that connects them. Like so many maids and nannies before her, Cleo is both separate from and a part of this family. If there is one truth in this movie it is that love can bridge even the widest of social and cultural divides.

In today's parable we also experience the healing power of love. Jesus tells us that when the youngest son was still a long way off, "the father ran out to meet him, threw his arms around him and kissed him." Despite deep disappointment

and grief the father was able to forgive his prodigal son and welcome him without reservation. He even killed a fattened calf, and held a lavish feast to celebrate his son's return.

This parable is a wonderful illustration of God's unconditional love and endless mercy. But, of course, as humans our ability to love and forgive is not as amazing as God's grace. We know that the older son in today's parable struggled to welcome back his brother. We know that Cleo's boyfriend refused her requests for help. We know that even letters from his children was not enough to bring Sofia's husband back to his family. Sometimes our humanity gets in the way of our ability to love as Jesus has taught us to love, to love as God loves us.

So we read and watch stories like these and we pray that our ability to love will grow to be like the love of the father who welcomed his son, like the love of Sophia who welcomed a pregnant maid into her family, like the love of Cleo who adored someone else's children with all her heart and all her soul and all her mind. And when hard things happen and it feels like our lives are being torn apart, we pray that God's love will be there for us through the love of family and friends and through our surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit. May we be filled with healing power of God's amazing grace..