

Doorways
Films and Faith: *Atonement*
The United Church of Gainesville
June 29, 2008
New Members' Sunday
Larry Reimer

Proverbs 16:6 – By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for...
Luke 15:11-32 – The parable of the lost (prodigal) son and his brother.
Atonement – Definition – Amends or reparation made for an injury or wrong. Reconciliation or an instance of reconciliation between God and humans. The exemplifying of a human oneness with God

A terrible misunderstanding occurs at the beginning of the film “Atonement”, and the rest of the film is about one woman’s attempt to atone for that misunderstanding with her entire life. Briony Tallis is a thirteen year old girl from a wealthy family in 1935 Britain. She sees three events all through the limitations of her age, her distance from the encounters, and her own girlhood romantic crush and jealousy.

The first is a meeting between her nineteen year old sister Cecilia and Robbie, an Oxford graduate waiting to begin medical school, son of the late caretaker of the estate, semi-adopted by her father. Through a distant wavy window, Briony sees an encounter between Cecilia and Robbie by a garden fountain, where Cecilia strips to her underwear, jumps into the fountain, emerges virtually naked, and stomps angrily away.

The second is a note Robbie gives Briony to pass on to Cecilia. It is the wrong note mistakenly given to her, a crude note not meant to be read, which Briony, of course, reads.

In the third event, Briony walks in on a sudden sexual encounter between Cecilia and Robbie, a vivid stand up affair against the bookshelves in the mansion’s library.

Through her eyes, each of these events is an aggressive sexual act.

We see each of these events again, but this time we see them through the lens of Cecilia and Robbie’s relationship and understand their struggle as a love long brewing, finally declared between the beautiful, elegant princess-like Cecilia and the handsome, bright, ennobled young peasant, Robbie.

Later that evening, unrelated to any of the events of the day, Briony has her fourth traumatic experience. She stumbles upon her fifteen year old cousin Lola, held face down in a field, being sexually assaulted. Lola cannot see or say who did it. Briony catches only a glimpse in the darkness of a man running from the scene. Given what she has perceived that day, she shows her parents the note Robbie had written and tells them and the police that she saw who assaulted Lola. She says it was Robbie.

Robbie is hauled off to jail.

The movie then shifts to four years later. Robbie has been released from prison to serve in the British army which is now in chaotic retreat from the Germans invading France. Robbie, with a chest wound is trying to make it back to the French shore to be evacuated to England. In a flashback, we see that he and Cecilia had a brief meeting before he was shipped out. Cecilia, a nurse to the war wounded, has completely disowned her family because of their belief in Robbie's guilt. Cecilia and Robbie re-declare their love. Cecilia pleads with him to live through the war and return to her. He promises to do so. We ache for their love.

Robbie is now on the beaches of Dunkirk where three hundred thousand men wait to be evacuated. Getting sicker and weaker, Robbie finds a place with his friends to sleep as they await rescue.

We then see Briony find her way to Cecilia's London apartment where she forces Cecilia to listen to her confession that she was wrong about Robbie and that she wants to set things right. Robbie, home on a brief leave, emerges from the bedroom. Both Cecilia and Robbie are furious at Briony, but instruct her to write everything down as she seeks to recant her accusation.

The power of the film is the way it keeps shifting perspectives. Suddenly it is 1999, and the aged, and in fact dying, Briony is interviewed on television about her last book, an autobiographical novel detailing these exact events. She reveals that in fact, nothing after the account of Robbie falling asleep in Dunkirk the night before the evacuation, nothing, none of those details, actually happened. In reality, Briony never went to Cecilia to explain that she had been wrong. Instead, Cecilia was killed in a German bombing raid on London before she and Briony ever made contact. Robbie died of sepsis from his wound the night before the evacuation. Cecilia and Robbie never saw each other after the first day he left for war.

The older Briony explains that she wrote her novel as her own story of atonement for Robbie and Cecilia. She wanted to give them the healing they so much deserved and which she had stolen from them. In Briony's novel of their lives, the one we have just seen on the screen, Briony recants her testimony. After much suffering, Robbie and Cecilia find their way to each other after the war to love, live, and begin their healing in a white clapboard cottage with green shutters by the sea.

But none of this really happened.

So what of atonement? Is, as the book of Proverbs maintains, iniquity atoned for by loyalty and faithfulness? Can one make amends or reparation for seeming irreparable wrong? The answer is never clear.

On the one hand, through Briony's young eye, Robbie commits three strikes. First there is a struggle by the fountain that results in her sister stomping off, virtually naked. Second, there is the graphic sexual note beyond Briony's experience or ability to fully comprehend. Third is her witness of Robbie and Cecilia engaging in torrid sex in the library. We

are furious at Briony's rush to judgment and yet we understand something of the limitations of her thirteen year old reality. We also realize, with her, that what we believe is truth changes with time and perspective.

Yet the results of her misapprehension are so severe, that our hearts break for the tragedy of it all. We, like Briony, hope so much for some way that this may turn out right for Robbie and for Cecilia. We want to believe in her final version of the story.

Then we are challenged again by one of the deepest and most painful questions of life. Are there are certain mistakes from whose consequences we never recover? Is the definition of hell, as William Sloane Coffin once said, truth seen too late? And is Briony, who never actually had the courage to see her sister and tell the truth, able to truly atone by giving them, in art, the happiness she stole from them in life?

One part of me would say that sometimes there is no atonement for evil done. When a moment is lost, it is lost.

Yet another part of me asks if a life changed by acknowledged failure can atone for and even right our worst wrongs? I think of our New Testament scripture, the story of the prodigal, or lost son. A father gives two sons their inheritance. The younger squanders it, returns home to repent, only hoping to be accepted as a servant, and receives complete forgiveness from his father.

I have a theory that has never been supported or accepted by any biblical theologian, and precious few other clergy. My theory is that the parables of Jesus are based on life experiences he had during the years between ages 12 and 30 when we know nothing of him. What if Jesus, a headstrong young man with visions yet unfocused was the prodigal who left home with his inheritance at say age eighteen? And what if, when he had squandered everything and returned home, his father had already died and there was no way to repent or be forgiven?

So Jesus does what Proverbs requires for atonement. He lives a just and faithful life. And he does what Briony did through her writing. He tells the story of the prodigal son, to give people an experience that with God, there is always hope of outstretched arms and a warm welcome home.

And maybe by writing the story of the prodigal, as Briony did by writing the story of her sister and Robbie, art and faith call us to walk through the a different door of life. Maybe stories can warn us of the danger of justice without love. Maybe stories remind us that we can also hope for love overcoming injustice. Maybe we can see how God always holds a hope for healing, and grace does mysteriously happen.

That is what I hope for every one of us today, that every continuing member and every new member may envision hope and healing as we welcome one another with the bread of new life and this sacred cup of forgiveness.

I hope that all of us in this church, renewed today by the promise of all you who join us, may see again how important it is to judge slowly and love generously. I hope that all of us will understand that this is a moment of second chances, and that all our lives, inevitably flawed by moments we wish beyond dreams we could take back, are wrapped in God who ever fashions us into new stories.

Resources for this sermon include –

Kimberly Jones – The San Francisco Chronicle, 12-14-07

Roger Ebert – Chicago Sun Times, 12-07-07

Anthony Lane – The New Yorker, 12-010-07

Peter Travers – Rolling Stone, 12-13-07

A.O. Scott – New York Times, 12-7-07