

Looks Like You've Been Driving Nails in Your Arms

Ash Wednesday Homily

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational UCC

9 March 2011

Lent is strange. It's a time when we intentionally think of dark and difficult things. We mark each other with ashen crosses to remind us of our mortality. We examine ourselves, confess our sins, and are penitent. Many people choose to fast during these forty days. The scripture readings are often about sin, temptation, and death. Not exactly the light and joy of Christmas or Epiphany!

People often wonder why other people go to see scary movies. They wonder why a person would purposefully subject herself to being frightened. Maybe there's a bit of us that thinks the same way about Lent. Why do we intentionally focus on dark things? Why would the church that proclaims life, love, hope, and joy intentionally spend time focusing on this negative stuff?

Why do we do it? Because lack and suffering, death and pain, sin and violence are all parts of life. The rhythms of the church year are like the rhythms of our lives, containing all of the ups and downs, the crises and the mountain-top ecstasies, that constitute ordinary, everyday human existence.

Think, if you will, about the movie *Steel Magnolias*. I believe it to be a pretty good example of how the rhythms of life and the church year match up. I was talking about this one one day with Deb Kirwan and others and Deb said, "You'll have to talk about that some time." Then, at the EVES retreat they watched the movie together and talked about my claim. So,

here it is.

Steel Magnolias is the story of five women in a small Southern town. There is M'Lynn, played by Sally Field, a mother with deep love for her daughter. That daughter is Shelby, played by Julia Roberts, a young woman who grows into adulthood. There is Truvy, the hairdresser, played by Dolly Parton. And her employee Anelle the religious conservative played by Darryl Hannah. Olympia Dukakis is Clairee, the widow of the former mayor, a woman of culture and sophistication. And Shirley MacLaine is Ouiser, the nasty old neighbor.

The movie opens with preparations for a wedding, moments of anticipation and expectation. Kinda like Advent. Then, there's a wedding, which is a celebration, a joyful event. In mood, it's a lot like the season of Christmas. After the wedding, the film moves into ordinary time, just like the church calendar does during the season of Epiphany which focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus

But then in *Steel Magnolias* Shelby starts having medical problems. You remember that she's in the beauty shop and Dolly Parton notices the physical traces of her dialysis. "Looks like you've been driving nails in your arms," someone says. That scene is Ash Wednesday. You know right then that the movie is about to get sad.

And so you have Lent. Shelby becomes sick, she goes into a coma, and then she dies. Good Friday's that scene in the graveyard. Her mother M'Lynn is crying out to God asking why her beautiful daughter is dead. Daryl Hannah's attempt to console her with pop theology fails, and M'Lynn just wants to be angry with God. Only the opportunity to slap Ouiser provides a chance for laughter to interrupt the crying.

And the movie ends with Easter, literally. An Easter egg hunt where the community comes together as new life, a new baby, ends the film with joy.

We each have Lenten seasons in our own lives, just as we also have Christmases and Easters and lots and lots of ordinary time. This is the Church's time to identify with these realities. Jesus' time on earth wasn't just weddings and baptisms and quiet meals with friends. No, he saw the suffering and pain of others, and he endured great suffering and pain of his own.

So, tonight we take the palms waved in celebration and hosanna on Palm Sunday and burn them to create ashes to remind us of the truth about ourselves. We are finite, mortal beings who sin and suffer. That's the not the full truth about us. We are also beloved children of God, radiant with all the power and glory of the Most High. But we've talked about those truths already during Christmas and Epiphany. Now's the time to remind ourselves of the truths we would like to forget. But, facing the truth, we claim the promise of God that if we know the truth, then the truth will set us free.