

A "REEL" EPIPHANY

2) The Spitfire Grill: A Second Helping of Grace

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It was, I think, a great "one liner." Jesus, of course, had a lot of them. He had the amazing gift of saying more by speaking less. But this "one liner" in the eighth chapter of John's Gospel, was, in its own way, one of the most memorable and powerful of all.

It was one that certainly surprised the religious authorities who were absolutely sure that they had finally tapped Jesus by presenting him with a test case that would expose him for what he was—a law breaking false prophet. After all, the law was unequivocally clear. The penalty for adultery was death by stoning. Jesus, they felt, had little choice but to go along.

When he knelt down to doodle in the dust, they were sure, absolutely sure that they had him. Some of them even began picking up large stones for the punishment sure to follow.

But then, Jesus stood and offered a "one liner" that caught them completely off guard: **"Let the one who is without sin, cast the first stone."** He then bent down, once again and resumed his doodling.

Suddenly, the absolute clarity of the law and the urgent need for punishment lost its decisive edge. Suddenly, they felt themselves less inclined to participate in the punishment of the woman's death. One by one, they quietly dropped their instruments of death on the ground and drifted away, hiding their sense of shame and embarrassment from the others.

When Jesus looked up, he noticed that everyone but the woman had left. "Where are they?" he asked. "Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir" she replied.

"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and do not sin again."

In this lesson, this morning, we witness a classic encounter between judgment and grace. It was, of course, an encounter that Jesus was to experience on more than a few occasions with the religious authorities who felt ordained by God to judge others. Jesus, on the other hand, consistently insisted upon the overriding importance of grace.

The clash between judgment and grace is, of course, not one that was limited to the time of Jesus. It is a clash that continues unabated in the circumstances and events of our lives as well.

The Spitfire Grill is a film that illustrates the way this theme of judgment and grace can play out in our current context. The winner of the "Audience Award" at the Sun Dance Film Festival, this film brings to life the story of Percy, a young woman who is seeking to begin a new life after being released from prison. The victim of ongoing abuse from a malicious step-father, Percy had served time for killing him when he attacked her and killed her unborn child. She was 16 at the time.

Now, after being released from prison, she arrives in Gilead, a small town in Maine. While Gilead was a picturesque New England town, it was not an easy place to fit into. From the moment that the bus drops her off in Gilead, her every movement is monitored by the curious (nosey) townspeople. Many of them are suspicious about this “newcomer” and why she would come to their town.

In this first scene, Percy has managed to secure a job in the Spitfire Grill. Her first day on the job, however, is not without its challenges.

SCENE 1: First Day on the Job (9:20—12:17)

Having made her public “confession,” Percy seeks to get on with her life, but it is not easy. Tormented by her painful memories, Percy battles the demons that still haunt her. Understandably, she is afraid to trust anyone with the deeper secrets of her past.

With the passing of time, however, Percy begins to experience trust and some of the healing that comes with it. When Hannah, the owner of the Spitfire Grill, falls and breaks her leg, she asks Percy to run the Grill until she recovers. While her cooking skills are essentially non-existent, Percy agrees to take on this assignment and slowly demonstrates that she is worthy of the trust and confidence of others.

There is, however, one member of the community who does not trust Percy. His name is Nahum and he is the nephew of Hannah. He has done his detective work and has discovered that Percy has served time for manslaughter. Armed with this information, he launches a crusade to discredit her. The truth of the matter, however, is that Nahum is jealous of the growing affection and trust that Percy has gained in the town. In this next scene, we gain a glimpse of Nahum’s jealousy...

SCENE 2: Nahum and the Police Chief (14:59 – 16:00)

The plot then begins to thicken as Percy takes over one rather peculiar chore that Hannah can no longer carry out. She is instructed by Hannah to fill a large bag with various canned goods and food items and then leave it, once a week, on the stump behind the grill.

Percy, of course, is curious about who the recipient of this food bag is. Eventually, she discovers that the food is for a mysterious man of the woods who, under the cover of darkness, picks up his gift bag of food.

As one deeply wounded, Percy is drawn to know more about this mysterious man who also appears to carry deep wounds. She gives him the name of “Johnny B” even though she has never met him. Then, one day, she catches a glimpse of him in the daylight and follows him to his mountain home. It is there that she makes his acquaintance in this next scene...

(SCENE 3: Meeting Johnny B (1:18:35 – 1:22:28)

In this touching scene, Percy experiences the “healing balm” of redemption and grace—as does Johnny B. As it turns out, Johnny B is really the son of Hannah, who had returned from

Vietnam unable to find a place in the community in which he had grown up. Emotionally devastated by the experience of the war, he had lived for years as a recluse in the surrounding hills. Only Hannah knew of his presence—although she had no contact with him. It is through Percy’s interest and care that Eli finds the grace that he needs.

Due to failing health, Hannah decides that she can no longer operate the grill. Percy comes up with the intriguing idea of offering the grill to the most deserving applicant. The only stipulation is that each applicant must offer a \$100 fee. The response is overwhelming as it generates \$250,000 worth of applications. Hannah places the money in her safe at the grill.

When Nahum learns that Hannah is going to entrust Percy to transport the money to the bank the following day, his suspicion and jealousy get the best of him. He sneaks into the safe, late one night, removes the money and places it in a sack—the sack that Percy then mistakes for the food bag that she is to set out for “Johnny B.” Unknowingly, she places this large sum of money—along with the food—on the stump behind the grill.

The next morning, Hannah discovers that the money is missing and Percy is not to be found. Nahum seizes the moment to pronounce that Percy is clearly the thief and must be apprehended. When it is learned that the bag was taken up into the mountains, a search party is organized and heads up toward “Johnny B’s” ramshackle home. Fearful that this search party with its guns and barking dogs will damage “Johnny B’s” emotional state, Percy runs ahead of the search party to try to protect him from this confrontation.

In her haste, she tries to ford the raging river, loses her balance and is then swept to her death over a waterfall. Her lifeless body is then discovered by “Johnny B” just as Nahum and the search party arrive on the scene. Nahum is stunned to recognize that this mysterious mountain man is none other than his cousin, Eli—whom he hadn’t seen since he returned from the war.

In the wake of the news of Percy’s death, the town goes into mourning. The Spitfire Grill is closed due to a “death in the family” and a memorial service is held. At that service, it is Nahum, of all people, who rises to offer his confession.

SCENE 4 Nahum’s Memorial Service Confession (1:43:35 – 1:45:38)

Chastened and humbled by the consequence of his judgmentalism, Nahum becomes a changed man—one who has learned the lesson of grace that was a part of Percy’s legacy—not only to him, but also to his Aunt Hannah.

In our concluding scene, Hannah experiences this grace through the unexpected visit from her estranged son whom she hadn’t seen in years. It was a gift that Percy had made possible...

SCENE 5 Hannah’s Reunion With Eli (1:48:00 – 1:49:55)

I find “The Spitfire Grill” to be an intriguing film because it offers a powerful witness to the way that the grace of God often makes its presence known. You will note that, more often than not, it is made known not through the strong and the powerful, not through those who have the reputation for having it all together, but through those who themselves have been broken, who have been wounded, who have had to face struggle and defeat in their lives. In her own wounded-ness, Percy discovered a grace that she was able to share with Hannah and Eli and even Nahum himself. Through her witness, Percy was able to transform the entire town of Gilead.

In a world where judgmental-ism often seems to be fashionable, a world that would easily cast the stones of indictment and punishment—often in the name of religion—how important it is to allow the witness of Percy to remind us of God’s true intention for us all.

While there are many things that could be said, perhaps it is best to allow the impact of Jesus’ one liner to make its presence known—in our lives and in the life of our world.

“Let the one without sin, cast the first stone.”

It is enough to give anyone pause...enough to remind us that when all is said and done, we are all broken...all wounded...all in need of God’s grace.

There is a balm in Gilead, that makes the wounded whole...

There is a balm in Alamo, that heals the sin sick soul.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.