

A “REEL” EPIPHANY

3) The Hurricane: A Love That Liberates!

We live in a day and age in which mission statements have become common place. By definition, a mission statement should guide the actions of an organization, spell out its overall goal, provide a path, and guide decision-making. It is, essentially, a goal for what a company or organization intends to accomplish.

There are, of course, many creative and insightful mission statements out there. Here are a couple that I believe are noteworthy.

Patagonia: Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.

Life is Good: Spreading the power of optimism. Life is not perfect. Life is not easy. Life is good.

A mission statement declares just what you intend to do in order to accomplish your goal. In the 4th chapter of Luke’s Gospel, we come across what might be termed the “mission statement” that Jesus chose for himself. It was not, of course, original with him. He was actually borrowing a statement that came originally from the Book of Isaiah as it addressed the specific challenge of the oppression experienced by the people under Babylonian rule.

Now, speaking to the hometown crowd at Nazareth, Jesus takes this ancient mission statement and makes it his own:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Now, as far as mission statements go, this, I think, is a pretty good one. It says a lot by saying a little. The whole scope of Jesus’ mission is laid out in one verse. If we wanted to drill down even further and condense this message more succinctly, we might reduce it down to primary point: **“God’s love is liberating!”** That’s pretty much it in a nutshell. Jesus’ mission was to announce and enact the liberating power of God’s love.

I suspect that most of us would be in agreement about this concise summary. In fact, it would be difficult to argue against it. But, the problem that we often discover is that it is not easy to recognize or identify the specific ways in which God’s liberating love is made tangible in the context of our day to day lives. We can talk about this love. We can quote plenty of scripture that describes this love, but what does it look like in real life terms?

The film, “The Hurricane,” offers a glimpse—better yet, an epiphany—into one specific way that God’s liberating love was made tangible. This is the story of Ruben “Hurricane” Carter, who, in the early 1960’s, was ranked as one of the leading contenders for boxing’s Middleweight Crown. Tragically, however, Carter was unjustly arrested and convicted for

murders that he did not commit. He was sentenced to three life sentences in the New Jersey State Prison.

The story line is essentially about Carter's efforts to come to terms with the overt racism of the legal system that incarcerated him and his own response to the injustice visited upon him. As you might imagine, this involved an epic battle for his soul as he struggled to find his footing in his new life in prison. Would he give into the feelings of hatred and revenge that raged within him? Or, would he choose a more redemptive path?

In this first scene that we are about to see, Carter (played by Denzel Washington), is placed in solitary confinement (the hole) for 90 days because he has refused to wear the prison uniform. While it will appear as if there is more than one person in the cell, it is, in reality, only Ruben Carter as he wrestles with the different voices within him. Let's watch...

(SCENE 1 Solitary Confinement: The Battle for Carter's Soul) (Time: 57:22 - 58:36)

The struggle for his soul, of course, does not end when he completes his time in the hole. It continues as he experiences something of a roller coaster ride between feelings of anger, complete withdrawal and hope.

Initially, Carter makes the decision to withdraw from the world and the relationships that he shares. He tries to convince himself that the system will not be able to hurt him if he chooses to live on his terms without needing anything or anyone else. Sadly, this approach leads him to tell his wife that their relationship is over, that with a life sentence before him, they have no future and that she should view him as a "dead man."

As Carter's prison life unfolds, the film then splices in another story line—this one involving a young man by the name of Lesra who happens to be living in Toronto. Originally from the mean streets of Brooklyn, Lesra has been befriended by three white Canadians who meet Lesra while working on a project in Brooklyn. They are immediately drawn to this young man and although he cannot read or write, they see tremendous potential within him.

Given the fact that Lesra's parents are unable to provide for his needs, these three receive their permission to have Lesra come live with them so that they can provide him with the education and support that will enable him to experience a better life. As a part of his education, Lesra attends a library book sale where he buys a copy of a book the Carter has written in this prison cell. Entitled, "The Sixteenth Round," outlines the details of the racism and injustice that Carter had endured. Lesra is so moved by this book, the first one that he has ever read, that he summons the courage to write to Carter and express his support.

While Carter initially tries to steel himself against the feeling of hope that another human being might be able to penetrate his mental and emotional prison, he finally gives in to Lesra's request to visit him in prison. This next scene is the one that depicts their first meeting. Let's watch...

(SCENE 11 Prison Visit with Lesra) (Time: 1:15:05 -- 1:20:07)

The great irony in this exchange was that Carter's advice to Lesra about "transcending the places that hold you," was, of course, advice that he was trying to take to heart in his own life. As their friendship grows, it becomes apparent that both Carter and Lesra are helping each other transcend the places that hold them. In Carter's case, it was the prison bars that literally held him captive. In Lesra's case, it was the prison of low expectation and the feeling of helplessness that threatened to incarcerate him.

Having been victimized by the racism of those who framed him and put him in prison, Carter was suspicious, to say the least, of white people. They were, in his own thinking, the enemy that could be blamed for his present circumstance. As a result, Hurricane Carter was reluctant to allow the lawyer friends of Lesra to get too close. When Carter's appeal for a retrial is denied, he makes the angry choice to pull back, once again, from all outside contact. He writes to Lesra and his white friends, asking them not to make contact with him. In this letter, he explains why: **"This place (the prison) is one in which humanity cannot survive. Only steel can. Please do not visit me. Please do not call me. Please find it in your hearts not to weaken me with your love."**

And so it would be for a year. But then, Carter would receive a note from Lesra with a picture of himself and his girlfriend. In addition, there was a copy of his high school diploma which, Lesra suggested, was something that he, Ruben Carter, had made possible. It was too much for Carter. His outward steel wall begins to melt. Carter breaks his silence by making a phone call to Lesra and his friends, telling them that he didn't think that he could endure his prison agony any longer. It was, essentially, a cry for help.

In this next scene, we witness, the response of Lesra and his three white friends. Ruben gets a note in prison to return a phone call and suddenly, hope makes its presence known once more. Let's watch...

(SCENE 111 Ruben Carter's Phone Call)

(Time: 1:36:12 - 1:37:57)

Out of their love for Ruben Carter and their conviction that he was the victim of a great injustice, Lesra's unconventional family vows to do whatever they can to work for a retrial and his release. This, of course, includes moving to New Jersey from Toronto. As the film unfolds, they are able to uncover clear evidence of the fact that Ruben Carter has been framed. As this evidence is compiled, they discover that they are, in fact, putting their own lives at risk as there are those who have a vested interest to make sure that the truth does not come out.

Nevertheless, they persist in their efforts and those efforts all come to a head when Ruben Carter decides that he will risk an appeal in Federal Court. He realizes that if this appeal is denied, he will have no other option in the legal process. It is all or nothing—freedom or the rest of his life in prison.

After hearing strong evidence in support of the racial nature of Carter's conviction, the judge calls for a recess in order to make his determination. In the final scene that we will see, Lesra

and Ruben Carter share a quiet moment of reflection as they wait to be called back to the courtroom. Let's watch...

(SCENE 1V "Love is gonna' bust me out!")

(Time: 2:12:38 - 2:15:00)

"Hate put me in here...but love is gonna' best me out!" The battle for the soul of Ruben "Hurricane" Carter had finally come to an end and it was love—not hate—that was declared the winner. It was love, Carter discovered, that enabled him to "transcend the places," both physical and emotional, that held him. It was the love of Lesra and his friends that had, in some respects, already made him a free man.

What we see clearly at work in this film is the liberating power of love—the power that liberated not only Ruben "Hurricane" Carter, but also Lesra and his three friends who taken him in. They were all "freed up" to experience the great liberating power of their conviction to right what was clearly wrong.

It did not, of course, come cheaply. It required that they uproot themselves from their comfortable lives in Toronto. It meant that they would face the threats of those who were determined that they should not succeed. Love cost them something. But, the truth of the matter is that it proved to be a small price compared to the love that they experienced in return.

It was in November of 1985 that a Federal Court judge heard Carter's appeal and then proceeded to set Ruben Carter free. The State of New Jersey appealed this decision and then, two years later, the Supreme Court ruled against the State of New Jersey's appeal. It was officially and finally over. Carter was now free to move forward with his life once more.

As it turned out, he would join his Canadian friends as he moved to Toronto where he became the Executive Director of the Defense of Those Wrongly Convicted. Lesra Martin would graduate with honors from the University of Toronto and would go on to practice law.

"The Hurricane" is a film that suggests that, ultimately, there is nothing that can separate us from the love that God has for us. It reminds us that Jesus' primary mission was to share this love by "proclaiming release to the captives...by letting the oppressed go free." This mission, of course, was directed not only to those who happen to find themselves behind bars in actual physical prisons, but to those who find themselves incarcerated by their fear, by their prejudice, and by their hatred. I don't think that it would be a stretch to suggest that there are many people in our world who find themselves imprisoned. This seems to be part and parcel of the human condition.

Jesus' mission statement was quite clear—to proclaim and enact a love that liberates. I would suggest that this is our mission statement as well—to proclaim and to practice a love that liberates ourselves and others from the prisons that hold them, to be conduits of the electrical charge of God's life changing love.

As we look at our world today, it is quite clear that hate will do nothing more than put us in prison. It is love—God's love at work in and through us—that will, in fact, "bust us out." **Amen.**

