**At the Movies: The Half of It**

**1 John 4:7-19**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

June 28, 2020

In 1897, French playwright Edmund Rostand wrote a play about a swordsman and poet who falls in love with his distant cousin, Roxanne.  Sadly, the hero has an exceptionally large nose and is convinced that no woman will ever love him.  When he learns that Roxanne has eyes for another young man, Christian, he agrees to tell Christian of her interest. At first, Christian is delighted but soon he gets anxious.  He sees Roxanne as an intellectual and himself as a simple man who is not good with words.  So, our hero volunteers to write to Roxanne using Christian’s name. Naturally, his poetic words proclaiming his love for her charm Roxanne and lead her to fall in love with Christian.  The two ultimately get married, leaving the story’s hero all alone.  Not until many years later, after Christian has died and the hero is dying, does the truth come out.

Does that plot sound familiar?  The hero is, of course, Cyrano de Bergerac and the play itself bears his name. Over the years since it was written, it has been translated, performed, and updated countless times.  Perhaps you remember the Steve Martin version, the 1987 movie, “Roxanne”.  Now, Netflix has released a new remake of the Cyrano story, updated for the 21st century and entitled “The Half of It”.

This is the second week of our “Faith at the Movies” sermon series in which we’re examining theological themes found in recent movies.   Today, we’re looking at “The Half of It” which not only honors the Cyrano tradition but also deftly explores the nature of love and the relationship between love, God, and identity.

Unlike the original, “The Half of It” is a coming of age story set in the fictional, small town of Squahamish located somewhere in the Pacific Northwest.  The story is told through the eyes of its main character, Ellie, a Chinese-American high school student who is smart, lonely, introverted and queer.  Ellie lives with her widowed father who moved them to the United States after Ellie’s mother died.  The two struggle financially, so Ellie helps to make ends meet by writing academic papers for her classmates and selling them for $20 each.

Early in the movie, Ellie meets Paul Munsky, a tongue-tied football player with a big heart and an even bigger crush on their classmate, Aster Flores.  Paul wants to hire Ellie to write a letter to Aster for him.  But, unbeknownst to Paul, or anyone else, Ellie has a crush on Aster, too.  After some arm-twisting, Ellie finally agrees to write one letter for Paul.  When Aster answers, neither Paul nor Ellie can resist keeping the correspondence going.  Through a series of letters, Ellie, posing as Paul and Aster share their mutual passion for art and literature and social justice.  Together they explore painting as a metaphor for life.  Do you paint with bold strokes or safe ones?

The topics of their letters are not of much interest to Paul, so of course, when Paul and Aster finally go on a date, Paul fumbles for something to say. From then on, Ellie coaches him in everything from what books to read to how to carry on a meaningful conversation.  Over time, the two become good friends, sharing stories about their families and their dreams, but Ellie never tells Paul how she feels about Aster.

What becomes clear as the story unfolds is that all three of the main characters are struggling with big questions.  Who am I?  Who is God?  And what is love?  At the very beginning of the movie, we hear Ellie talk about the ancient Greek idea that humans once had four arms, four legs, and a single head with two faces.  We were complete, but the gods, fearing that our wholeness would make them meaningless, cleaved us in two.  Since then, humans have spent our lives searching for our missing half.  The search for love is the search to be whole again.

Ellie’s philosophical thoughts about love are quite a contrast to what Paul has to say.  As they begin to work on the first letter to Aster, Ellie says, “So, what you’re saying is…”

“I’m in love with her.”

“Have you ever spoken to her?”

“I’m not good with words.”

“But you know you love her.”

“I know that I think about her when I wake up and when I’m doing my sprints and when I’m eating my mom’s bratwurst and when I say my prayers.”

“That just means you’re stubborn not that you’re in love.”

“No, it’s love.  Love makes you screwy.”

And then we have Aster.  The whole town expects that Aster will marry her boyfriend, Trig -  star football player, rock band lead, and son of the richest man in town.  Yet, Aster is clearly yearning for something more.  She says to Ellie, “I overheard Trig talking to my father about our future wedding.  I mean, he hasn’t even asked me yet, but...he’s just so sure.  Maybe that is what love is...I should marry Trig.  Should I? I keep asking God for a sign. And then Paul’s letter appeared in my locker.  I’ve never felt so understood.”

The backdrop to all of these questions is the local church where Aster’s father is a deacon and Ellie plays piano every week.  Aster, Trig, and Paul have attended this church their whole lives. Everything they know about God, sin, and morality has been shaped by a small town church with a narrow vision of right and wrong. This is especially clear when Paul finally learns of Ellie’s crush on Aster and he says quietly, “But it’s a sin.  You’re going to hell.”

Ellie, on the other hand, doesn’t believe in God, and her disbelief leads Aster to begin questioning.  What if there is more to God, more to love, and more to life?  The climax of the movie takes place on Easter Sunday when, at the end of the service, Trig begins to read to the congregation from I Corinthians 13 - “Love is patient, love is kind” - and then proposes to Aster.  Ellie and Paul both stand up to object. Paul blurts out, “Love isn’t pretending.  I know because I’ve been pretending.”  He goes on to say about Ellie that he has realized how awful it must be to have to pretend you are someone other than who you are. He declares, “I never want to be the guy who stops loving someone for loving the way that they wanna’ love.”

Meanwhile, Ellie draws together all her courage and comes down from the balcony, looks Aster directly in the eye and says, “Love isn’t patient and kind and humble.  Love is messy and horrible and selfish and bold.  It’s not finding your perfect other half.  It’s the trying and reaching and failing.  It’s being willing to ruin your good painting for the chance of creating a great one.”

In that moment, Aster realizes that all of these beautiful letters about art and music and transformation were written by Ellie.  She also recognizes that she can’t marry Trig.  Overwhelmed, she leaves the church with Ellie watching after her.

There in the church on Easter morning, we see how each of the characters has been transformed by love. Ellie has found her voice.  Paul has opened his heart to someone who is queer.  And Aster has recognized that her life is her own. Through their questions and their doubts, they have broken loose from the constraints of small town thinking and grown into people who know how to love - love themselves and love each other.

And that is where we find the theological theme of the movie.  So often in the past, religion has given us these rigid rules about how to love and who to love, about what to believe about God and sin, about what “good Christians do”.  There was no room for questioning or doubting.  And yet, what we see in Ellie and Aster and Paul is that rigid rules and beliefs just perplex them.  In their story, it is because they ask questions that they grow.

And that is the way God works in our lives.  God works through challenging us to grow, to question, to doubt.  God works when we quit pretending that we know the answers and instead dive deeply into the questions.  God works when we quit relying on someone else’s words and we struggle to find our own words for how we feel and what we believe. And God works through the people who walk that journey with us and teach us how to love.

 As the author of First John so eloquently reminds us, God is the source of all love.  We learn to love from God, and God commands us to love each other.  As Ellie, Paul, and Aster learn, ultimately, the answer to so many of our questions - who am I? Who is God?  What is love? - is the same.  You are a child of God, and God is love.  You are loved wholly as you are by God, and you were created by God to love others.

May it be so.  Amen.