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“We Would See Jesus...” A Wesleyan Approach to Three Recent Films

Abstract

Many Hollywood films are content to offer Americans an escape from the conflicts of contemporary life. A handful of special films lead us instead to probe and question the way we live. Here we look at three films through the lens of John Wesley’s theology: *Forrest Gump*, *Babbette’s Feast*, and *Places in the Heart*. The aims of the essay are threefold: (1) to initiate a more meaningful conversation about the way film can help us raise religious questions, (2) to learn more about God’s power to renew His image in our lives, and (3) to seek the transformation of society through faith, hope, and love. Special attention is given to the role Wesley’s sermons can play in this process, especially “On Love,” “The Marks of the New Birth,” and “Scriptural Christianity.”

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Robert B. Ray's book, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, argues that most American films work hard to prevent us from asking fundamental religious and moral questions. They either exclude the harsh world of conflict through escapism, or redefine it as a merely personal melodrama.¹ There are a handful of important films that are exceptions to this rule, however. Rick's conversion in *Casablanca* from alienated café-owner to committed partisan is something of a high point, from Ray's perspective. Another film from the 1940's, *It's a Wonderful Life* allows us to probe some of the deep questions that Job wrestles with: Has my life been for nothing? Does anyone hear me when I pray, or am I alone in the universe?

Closer to 1980, Ray turns his attention to a pair of films quite different from these two. America's deep need of God is revealed through (1) the moral wasteland and pervasive violence of Coppola's *Godfather*, and (2) the spiritual emptiness of Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. We might say of these movies, in the spirit of Psalm 19:11, "By them is Thy servant warned." Warned, yes. But healed? No.

Certainly "there are more things in heaven and earth" than Ray's account of the movies has dreamt of. If we are asking about films by which we can learn to see Christ's healing presence in the world, however, Ray usefully sets the stage to help us consider what it is that sets a few films apart from most others. I propose, then, to look at three films that are not explicitly about Jesus, but which nevertheless challenge us to take up the cross, to follow him as disciples, and to transform hurtful practices in our society. I also want show how a theological approach to these films can be grounded in the Wesleyan tradition.

Seeking the Lost: The Son of Man and Forrest Gump

In the opening sequence of *Forrest Gump*, a feather floats down from the sky and lands near Forrest. The image of the feather recalls the story of Jesus' baptism, when the Holy Spirit came upon him in the form of a dove at the River Jordan (Mark 1:10): This is the Chosen One: Listen to him. Forrest is compassionate and gentle, and these strengths will enable him to bring hope to others who desperately need it. As we learn from John's Gospel, however, "Jesus came unto his own and his own received him not" (John 1:11). And so it is with Forrest. Why is Forrest met with so much resistance? A large part of the answer seems to be that his uncalculating love for others is just too direct and simple for most people to take at face value.

The two people who most need the simple love Forrest offers, Lt. Dan and Jenny, dismiss him as a fool at crucial times in their lives. Lt. Dan asks him scornfully, “Have you found God yet, Gump?” Forrest’s straightforward answer — “I didn’t know I was supposed to be looking for Him” — is revealing. It shows that Forrest doesn’t fully understand the extent to which he is being ridiculed, but far more than that, it reveals that Lt. Dan’s sarcasm is an attempt to cover up his own emptiness.

Lt. Dan’s need for God is soon to become all too evident. His life becomes a whirlpool of torment when he loses his legs in the Vietnam War. He cannot escape the feeling that it would have been better for him to die gloriously in battle than to live as he does now. That was the heroic destiny that he should have had, the legacy he should have left behind. Lt. Dan’s bitterness and despair are revealed in his recounting of what “religious” people have told him:

That’s what all these cripples down at the VA talk about: Jesus this and Jesus that. They even had a priest come and talk to me. He said God is listening and if I found Jesus, I’d get to walk beside him in the kingdom of Heaven. Did you hear what I said?! WALK beside him in the kingdom of Heaven! ... God is listening? What a crock.

Lt. Dan’s suspicion regarding shallow religion is well-founded, but even more deeply founded is Forrest’s trust in The Living God. Eventually Forrest’s encouragement helps Lt. Dan “make his peace with God” and he finds a new “destiny” with a wife and family of his own. We aren’t allowed to see everything that Lt. Dan endures on the hard road to recovery, but we glimpse enough to know that he is like the one leper out of ten who came back to thank Jesus (Luke 17:12-19).² We know, too, that he has transcended the narcissism of his old life. Lt. Dan has a role to play in the lives of others, with people who recognize him not as a failed warrior, but as someone genuinely worth loving.

Jenny, Forrest’s only sweetheart, is another of God’s creatures who suffers, seemingly without hope. Abused by her father as a child, she descends by stages into a hell of drugs, sexual promiscuity, and wandering. Forrest has never harmed her, though many others have, and when he reaches out to her to express his love, she protests: “You don’t know what love is, Forrest.” Yet who more than Jenny resembles the woman at the well in John 4? It is Jenny’s search for love that keeps turning up empty.³ Forrest does know what love is, and he continues to love Jenny extravagantly, without feeling that he is owed anything in return.⁴ “Having loved his own who were in the world,” says John 13:1, “he loved them to the end.” Eventually Jenny, too, acknowledges that Forrest’s simple faith in God and his steadfast love for her

are the keys to a sense of hope that has so far eluded her.

Forrest fleshes out for Lt. Dan and Jenny the marks of the new birth: faith, hope, and love.⁵ His “mission” is to love those in front of him as though they are infinitely precious, as though the renewal of God’s image in their lives and the fulfillment of all their exhausted hopes depend on this love.⁶ And in this, he is very like the Son of Man, who has come “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

Babette’s Feast:

“Open our eyes to see thy face...”⁷

Luke 24 tells the story of the road to Emmaus. After the crucifixion, the disciples fled. Cleopas and another disciple were walking away from Jerusalem toward the village of Emmaus, discussing Jesus’ death and the unbelievable report from some of the women in their circle: Jesus had been seen alive. A stranger joined them on the road and asked what they were discussing in such sorrowful tones. When they explained, the stranger began to tell them why the Messiah had to suffer and then be raised. They invited this stranger to have supper with them, and there was something in the way he broke the bread at the table... Their eyes were opened and they knew then that their companion on the road had been Jesus himself. Christians love to tell this story, and the emphasis in their re-telling is always that “Jesus is known to us in the breaking of the bread.”

This is the main theme of *Babette’s Feast*, also. This story deals with a small Lutheran community in Norway that has been somewhat scattered over the years, but they are called together again to celebrate the 100th anniversary of their founder’s birth. The old pastor has been gone for many years now, but his two daughters, Martine and Philippa, have remained faithful to his teaching and to each other. Perhaps they have even been too faithful, because neither has ever married or had children of her own. From so many years of taking care of each other, their lives have grown rather narrow and provincial, and at this stage, they are given to quarreling with each other over what their father’s teaching really means.

The sisters have recently taken in a refugee from a troubled France as their cook and housekeeper. Babette Hersant’s cooking has brought unexpected light and life to this community, where it has always been the rule that “food should be plain.” The sisters little suspect that they have received into their home one of the great chefs of Paris. In that center of French culture, Babette was famous for the meals she prepared for wealthy aristocrats. In the failed uprising of 1871, however, she joined the starving people on the barricades in the streets. Her husband and son were shot dead in the conflict, and she was forced to leave France, abandoning her career as master chef. While working

in Norway, however, Babette learns by letter that she has won a small fortune in the French lottery. She decides to give this little community of believers a meal they will always remember.

When the special evening arrives, we find among the guests an old general. As their reunion approaches, General Loewenhielm has been imagining a conversation with his younger self from many years ago: did he make the right choice? Was it all for the best so many years ago, when he left the village and his hopeless love for the minister's daughter in order to pursue a military career? He has earned many honors; nonetheless, his uncertainty remains. Did his decision cost him something deeper and more meaningful in life? It is the serious kind of question asked by the rich young man in Matthew 19: "Good master, what is the best way for me to live my life?"⁸ The General's retrospective thoughts cannot rise above the skeptical mood of Ecclesiastes: "All is vanity."

As the guests gather around the table, they quietly express their doubts concerning the special meal they are about to be served. They recall that their founder wrote a hymn that directs their longings away from earth:

Jerusalem, my heart's true home,
Your name is forever dear to me;
Your kindness is second to none,
You keep us clothed and fed.
Never would you give a stone
To the child who begs for bread.⁹

But as each delicious dish comes forth from Babette's kitchen, the spirits of the twelve guests begin to soar in spite of their vows to resist, and they feel free speak to each other out of love as they have never dared to do before this night. General Loewenhielm, the only one whose experience of the world is broad enough to fully appreciate the feast, is astonished to find such food served in the far reaches of Norway. In the midst of their celebration he proposes a toast that is based on Psalm 85: "Mercy and truth shall meet. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss each other." This little community has been so focused on truth and righteousness that they have forgotten about mercy and bliss. Now, however, they see that both are needed. It shows how far they have come in one brief night, from the dark mood of Ecclesiastes to the affirmation of a joy-filled verse from the Psalms. None of these friends need worry about the meaningfulness of the sacrifices they have made for their vocations. Nothing done out of love is lost, and whatever they have given up will come back to them in a different way.¹⁰

So the feast prepared by Babette resembles the Lord's Supper, and whatever hungers they have known, of the body and of the spirit, find fulfillment

here. Babette's costly gift has allowed them to catch a glimpse of the deepest meaning of their lives, to forgive each other, and to live more joyously together. Each of the guests seems to be asking the same astonished question as the one found in Charles Wesley's hymn about the Lord's Supper: "How can spirits heavenward rise, by earthly matter fed, drink herewith divine supplies and eat immortal bread?"¹¹

Places in the Heart:

The Lord's Supper and Hope

Places in the Heart (1984) is set in Waxahachie, Texas, a cotton community, in the era of The Great Depression. The sheriff is Royce Spalding, a better man than we might expect to find in this time and place. We see just enough of him to know that he is not a violent man. After praying with family at the supper table, he is called away from them in order to arrest Wylie. Wylie is a young black man who has been drinking and waving a pistol in the air. When the sheriff approaches Wylie to relieve him of his weapon, Wylie accidentally shoots him. We are little surprised when the Klan drags Wylie off and kills him.

The remainder of the story follows from the tragedy of these opening scenes. The sheriff's widow, Edna Spalding, struggles to keep her family together on the farm. Her chief adversaries are the local banker and the largest cotton buyer in the area, who seem to be conspiring together to cheat her so they can confiscate her farm. As a pair, they remind us of what the prophet Isaiah said in 10:1-2: "Woe to those who issue unrighteous decrees, and to those who deal crookedly in order to turn aside the needy from justice, and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!"

Psalms 146 answers Isaiah's protest with a promise: "God helps the widow obtain justice." Among the unlikely companions who come to help Edna is Mozes, a black man who is looking for work.¹² When he is still a stranger, Mozes nearly goes to prison for stealing household items from the Spaldings. Edna thinks quickly, however, like the bishop in *Les Misérables*, and tells the new sheriff that it was she who sent Mozes with this bundle to her sister's house. Mozes, thus indebted to Edna, is persuaded to stay, and he turns out to be especially skilled in growing cotton. Mozes also knows how to negotiate the best price for the crop, and for this reason he will come to have a crucial role in saving the farm.

Another boarder in the new Spalding "family" is Mr. Will, an army veteran who was blinded in World War I. When Mr. Will first comes to the Spalding household, no one can reach beyond the wall of isolation he has built around himself. But he has gifts that the others need, and these will be developed in

the days ahead. Gradually he lowers his defenses, and he finds a place in the household — he can cook for them so that other hands will be free for farm work. Then, when the Klan comes to the farm to kill again, he saves Mozes by identifying the voices hidden beneath the hoods and threatening to expose them, thanks to his discerning ear.

After a successful harvest that saves family and friends from hunger and financial ruin, the final scene is in a church where the Lord's Supper is being served. The camera follows the bread and the wine as they are passed from person to person in the congregation. At first, we take this as a realistic scene, but gradually we realize something more mysterious is being portrayed. In a sub-plot of the story, Edna's sister Margaret learns that her husband Wayne has been unfaithful to her with her best friend. Though they have been totally estranged until this time, here they receive the bread and the wine together.

In the front row are the beautician and her roaming husband, their reconciliation already shown by a hand clasp. Panning down the pews, we are shown the loan officer and undoubtedly some of the Klansmen as well. It is only when the hired hand is shown that one begins to realize there is more here than an actual event; no blacks would have been in a white church in Waxahachie in 1935. You see the little boy, his sister, and the blind man. Then the widow, and her husband—the sheriff who had been shot—and the young black man who had unintentionally killed him, the one whom the Klan had lynched. All were reconciled. All were in communion. The minister was reading I Corinthians 13. Thus the resolution was ultimately not in history but beyond it. The resolution was in God. The Eucharist was the communion of saints, showing that the death of Christ had reconciled all and made them one.¹³

Those who had no hope, who were estranged because of race, class, sex, or violence, are here brought together in God's kingdom under a new covenant.¹⁴ "No longer will I call you servants, but my friends," says Jesus in John 15:15.

We could also find an echo of this scene in John Wesley's sermon, "Scriptural Christianity." It is in many ways the most visionary and eschatological of Wesley's sermons. He describes the kingdom of God as a place where there will be neither war nor economic injustice, and where love of God and neighbor will rule over all. Wesley helps us ask a crucial question about this hope:

Where does this Christianity now exist? Where, I pray, do the Christians live? Which is the country, the inhabitants whereof are all thus filled with the Holy Ghost? — are all of one heart and of one soul? Who cannot suffer one among them to lack anything, but continually give to every man as he hath need; who, one and all, have

the love of God filling their hearts, and constraining them to love their neighbour as themselves; who have all “put on bowels of mercy, humbleness of mind, gentleness, long-suffering?” who offend not in any kind, either by word or deed, against justice, mercy, or truth; but in every point do unto all men, as they would these should do unto them? With what propriety can we term any a Christian country, which does not answer this description? Why then, let us confess we have never yet seen a Christian country upon earth.¹⁵

Where shall God’s kingdom be found, then? This is a question that begins in the midst of perplexity, but leads on to hope. Jesus calls us to a sanctified life, a life more in keeping with the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. This sacrament was intended from the beginning to bring healing to all the “little ones” whom Christ cherishes and protects.¹⁶

So now, instead of a conclusion, permit me to frame a question that is at its root Christological. This question is based on the loving kindness portrayed in *Forrest Gump*, the generosity embodied in *Babette’s Feast*, and the vision of a redeemed and reconciled humanity at the end of *Places in the Heart*: What if we were to cooperate humbly with the work of the Holy Spirit, to begin now such practices of faith, hope, and love as described in these films? What kind of difference would such discipleship and obedience make in our churches, in our nation, and throughout the world?

Notes

1. Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

2. John Wesley, “The Reward of the Righteous” (Sermon 99): “It may be, you have snatched the poor man himself, not only from the jaws of death, but from sinking lower than the waters, from the jaws of everlasting destruction. It cannot be doubted, but some of those whose lives you have restored, although they had been before without God in the world, will remember themselves, and not only with their lips, but in their lives, show forth his praise. It is highly probable, some of these (as one out of ten lepers) ‘will return and give thanks to God,’ real, lasting thanks, by devoting themselves to his honourable service.” *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 409-410.

3. Jenny’s life up to this point fits very well the description given by John Wesley of the person who is most in need of renewing her covenant with God. John Wesley, “Directions for Renewing our Covenant with God” Available Online: http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/covenant/index.htm (note especially pages 4-5).

4. John Wesley, “On Love” (Sermon 149): “‘Love suffereth long,’ or is longsuffering. If thou lovest thy neighbour for God’s sake, thou wilt bear long with his infirmities: If he wants wisdom, thou wilt pity and not despise him: If he be in error, thou wilt mildly endeavour to recover him, without any sharpness or

reproach: If he be overtaken in a fault, thou wilt labour to restore him in the spirit of meekness: And if, haply, that cannot be done soon, thou wilt have patience with him; if God, peradventure, may bring him, at length to the knowledge and love of the truth. In all provocations, either from the weakness or malice of men, thou wilt show thyself a pattern of gentleness and meekness..." *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), p. 383.

5. John Wesley, Sermon 18 in "The Marks of the New Birth" *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 417-430.

6. Wesley speaks of God's natural, political, and moral image in Sermon 45, "The New Birth" in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), p. 187-201, especially p. 188. See also, Theodore Runyon, "The New Creation: A Wesleyan Distinctive" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 1996, 31(2): 5-19.

7 From the hymn "O Thou, Who This Mysterious Bread" by Charles Wesley, 1745. Available Online: <http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh613.sht>

8. Wesley's sermon on this passage is "On Riches" (Sermon 108) in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), p. 519-528.

9. Diane Tolomeo Edwards, "Babette's Feast, Sacramental Grace, and the Saga of Redemption" *Christianity & Literature* 42.3 (1993): 421-432.

10. Wendy Wright, "Babette's Feast" *Journal of Religion and Film*, Volume 1, Number 2, October 1997 [Available Online]: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/BabetteWW.htm>

11. "O the Depth of Love Divine" by Charles Wesley, 1745. Available Online: <http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh627.sht>

12. "Unlikely" to our ways of reckoning. But Wesley teaches that God's prevenient grace is always at work in our lives, and that He is drawing us to Himself. See Wesley's description of "the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more," in "The Scripture Way of Salvation" (Sermon 43) in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), p. 156-157. Also: "Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God." *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 203-204.

13. O.C. Edwards, Jr. "Exempla V (Places in the Heart)" *Anglican Theological Review* 72.1 (1990): p. 91.

14. Don Richter, "From Paterfamilias to Covenantal Household: The Redemption of Family in *Places in the Heart*" *Family Ministry* 12.4 (1998):22-31.

15. John Wesley, Sermon 4 "Scriptural Christianity" in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 172-173.

16. Dean G. Blevins, "The Means of Grace and Ways of Knowing: A Wesleyan Approach to Sacramental Learning" *Christian Education Journal* 2000, 4 NS(1): 7-40. See also, Ole E. Borgen, "No End without the Means: John Wesley and the Sacraments" *Asbury Theological Journal* 1991, 46(1): 63-85.