

Amour

Ecclesiastes 12: 1-8

John 14: 25-31

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I. Introduction

Earlier this month, I turned 52, which was the same age that my mom was when she died of cancer. And so, I've been doing a lot of reflecting this month on the aging process and the dying process. Most of us either are or will have to address this with our parents or have done so with our grandparents, and with any luck, we'll have to figure out how we go about the aging process ourselves with grace and life, and maybe even help our children or guide our children as they shepherd us through that process, which is why I found the Oscar-winning movie *Amour* such a powerful one. *Amour* was nominated for Best Picture, actually won the Best Foreign Language Film this past year. It is the story of an aging Parisian couple -- the wife is a music teacher, they're both music aficionados -- and at the beginning of the movie, the wife has a stroke, and the movie charts, in a pretty unflinching way, her deterioration following that stroke to her death.

It was frankly a very painful movie to watch, and I found myself even the next day still feeling pretty wrung out emotionally by the whole experience. But it also felt like a really important film to me in that it raised a lot of the really tough questions that we have to deal with as we reflect on the aging process, whether our own or our parents or our grandparents. And to the film's credit, it didn't try to answer those

questions in an easy or facile way. It presented all of the excruciatingly difficult decisions and invited us to experience them.

II. Learning from Our Youth

Amour, as you would guess from the film's title, is about this couple's love story and how that love manifests itself throughout the process of this illness. And in many ways, it's very beautiful and very compelling. Other pieces of this journey, the couple navigates less well, and hopefully there are pieces to be learned from both their successes and failures.

One of the first things that struck me in the film echoes this passage that we heard this morning from Ecclesiastes is not that optimistic necessarily but reminds us that the habits that we develop as younger people are the same habits that we carry with us into our old age. So that if we're wrestling with frustration and anger as young people, it just gets worse as we get older, and that hopefully is some motivation to deal with the stuff we've got to deal with now and start developing healthier habits as we move into our old age.

But the one that struck me very powerfully in this film was the whole issue of vulnerability. We enter the world profoundly vulnerable and we often leave this world also profoundly vulnerable. But we spend a whole lot of time in between trying as hard as we can not to be vulnerable. Amen? It strikes me sometimes that when Jesus invites us to be like little children, that maybe what Jesus is suggesting is that we could afford to be a little bit more vulnerable with one another, and in that way, prepare ourselves for a healthier aging process and a healthier dying process.

I was talking with one of our parishioners this week about their caring for an aging parent, and noting that the parent had referred to the aging processes peeling the layers off of an onion, which I think is a wonderful visual image for that, the process of having so much of our self-defense mechanisms stripped away as we become more and more vulnerable. So often we lose our ability to do the things that we valued when we were younger, we lose some of our independence, and we lose some of our privacy as we get to the place when we need help with bathing and very basic self-care activities.

And part of what made *Amour* so difficult was that this was very much the process that this wife went through over the course of the movie as she had more and more of her dignity stripped away. And this is a couple that was very sophisticated, very urbane, very much in control. And so, part of what made this a really painful and difficult journey was being forced to give up some of that control throughout the course of this illness. It just struck me that we talk in our church all the time about the power of vulnerability, but we don't like practicing it very much. We appreciate and we talk about how God moves through us as we engage in helping the people around us, but we're not quite as good about letting ourselves be helped when we need it. We're very good in our church at engaging in service ministries, right? I mean, we feed people and we house people and we engage in all kinds of activities to help build up the people around us. We're great in our church in our caring ministries, in training people to be Stephen Ministers and hospital visitors and sit with people who are sick and dying and be with them in that process. But there's a certain irony, I think, in talking about that as a gift to us because, as you all know, when we engage in service to the

people around us, we become channels of God's grace and love; there's a certain irony to talking about how much a gift it is to serve others and then not letting others serve us when we need it.

So, I want to suggest that learning to be a little bit vulnerable is a gift that we can offer the people around us as we allow them to become channels of God's grace in our life, and also, prepare ourselves for the places in our life where we're going to have some of the layers of the onion stripped away and are going to need the people around us to nurture and support us and need to be able to let them do that with grace. That also means, of course, becoming comfortable with the vulnerability of the people around us that may have nurtured us through much of our lives. Parents and children have this challenging dynamic often where the parent has been the one providing the care for decades, and then, shifts into a place where the parent may need a little bit more care. That's sometimes hard for the parent, it's also sometimes hard for the children. And one of the struggles in this movie was that the daughter of this couple had such a difficult time accepting her mother's incapacity. And what you saw over the course of the movie was that because the daughter was so uncomfortable with her mother's deteriorating state, the father ends up more and more isolating both of them from the daughter, so he doesn't have to deal with the daughter's grief as well as his own.

The process of being vulnerable with one another is a gift that we are invited to engage in as a way of creating healthier relationships and preparing ourselves for the places where we are going to have no choice.

Which leads fairly naturally to the next point I wanted to make which is that my overwhelming image of this movie is an image of increasing isolation as this couple goes through this very difficult process. It is made even more difficult in many respects by the way in which they cut themselves off from the people around them, and ultimately, from each other.

There's a very powerful scene in the movie when one of the wife's -- her name is Anne -- when one of Anne's piano students who has gone on to become a very renowned concert pianist comes to visit his old teacher, and he doesn't realize that she's had a stroke and that she's fairly incapacitated. As she gets wheeled into the sitting room to meet with him, he's rather taken aback, and he tries to reach out to engage her in some conversation about this and says, "Tell me what happened," and her immediate response is, "Let's talk about something else, if you don't mind." So, you have this profound life-changing experience that she has had and her husband is having with her and she's rejecting the people around her who can support her through this process.

I have been very blessed over the course of many years at having the opportunity to work with a lot of seniors, and was very blessed by the opportunity to have both of my Parker grandparents in our home, because we had a three-generational home, as they died. Also, the opportunity to spend a lot of time with my late father-in-law as he went through the process of his Alzheimer's. And what I can tell you from all of that is that we're not meant to do this by ourselves. We go through life and we go through death as a community. We are called to support and love one another and called to invite the people around us into relationship with us through this

journey, so that the process of dying should not be one in which people are increasingly isolated. For the sake of the people who are dying, for sake of the people who are supporting them, we've got to do this together. And we know this on some very fundamental level in the church, and sometimes we do this very well. But we're in this journey as a family, as a community, and we all need to be part of the process of one another's living and dying.

We are freed up to do that emotionally because of our fundamental core belief that in life and in death we are all always God's.

III. Untroubled Hearts

Jesus' sermon to His disciples on the last night of His life is preparing them for His imminent death, these wonderful words that we so often hear at funerals because they are the core of our hope, that death is never the last word, that God is always moving in the process of living and dying to bring forth new life, and that hope gives us the ability to engage on another, not without grief -- there's always grief -- but without despair, because death is just another chapter in the journey that God has prepared for us and that we can trust in God's providential love and grace and care at every point in that journey.

Part of the struggle that is often the process of dying is as people get towards the end of life and families struggle, children struggle, siblings struggle with, how to let a loved one go. Jesus' words offer us, give us permission to let go of our loved ones knowing that they are in safe hands as we will be when we get to that stage, and that God's love, God's desire for us transcends life and death.

Conclusion

Amour was a very powerful and, in many ways, disturbing film. Many places in which the husband's very tender care for his wife was beautiful and inspiring and breathtaking, but many places that were really difficult and troubling. And I want to suggest as we engage in or engage with a society in which we have the medical potential to extend life for extremely long times sometimes, that we as a community of faith have an opportunity to offer a witness about what makes that healthy. We can offer the wisdom of vulnerability, we can offer the power of a community being with one through that process, and we can offer a word of hope that death never has the last word.

Amen.