

Reel Faith Sermon Series
Seven Pounds – Romans 12:1-5
June 23, 2019
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I've seen a lot of movies in my day, so I'm aware of what usually happens when the movie ends. When the credits start to roll and the lights come up, people gather their empty popcorn containers, unstick their shoes from the floor and – unless they know there's an extra scene after the credits – they leave. That's what you do when a movie ends.

But that didn't happen when I saw "Seven Pounds." When that movie ended, people stayed in their seats, quiet at first, then in deep discussion when their friends about what just happened. Some were sad, some were angry, some were questioning what they would do if they were in the situation of the main character. The same thing happened last night when I showed the movie here at Crestwood. People just stared at the screen. One said, "Wow." When I asked if they liked it, another person said emphatically, "No!" All of this reaction revolves around one question: if you did something wrong, how far would you go to seek forgiveness? For our summer sermon series, we're looking at the spiritual themes of popular movies to see how God speaks to us through movie scripts as well as scripture.

Contrary to what most people think, "Seven Pounds" is NOT a movie about how much food I ate on vacation. "Seven Pounds" came out on Dec. 19, 2008, but it's not your typical feel-good Christmas movie. I think "Seven Pounds" is a fantastic movie that was completely misrepresented. Because of the plot twists, there's so little that can be told about the movie ahead of time. In Sermon Talkback, which meets each Wednesday, we usually talk about the upcoming sermon and the directions I'm considering going. That usually takes about a half hour. This week, it took five minutes, because I couldn't talk about the movie without revealing any of the spoilers which are integral to the plot. I said, "This week's sermon is about the movie 'Seven Pounds.'" Stuff happens. That's all I can tell you!"

If you haven't seen the movie, I'm going to spoil it for you today, but I still encourage you to watch it, because I believe it's one of Will Smith's greatest performances. This is not the goofy, rapping, action-movie Will Smith. This is Will Smith at his most dramatic, like "Ali" or "The Pursuit of Happyness." It also features great performances from Rosario Dawson and Woody Harrelson, who I'm convinced has been in every movie ever made. But here's the thing: this goal of this movie isn't to entertain you. It's to make you think. For me it's a lot like "Schindler's List," the masterful movie about the Holocaust. I saw it once, loved it, and never want to see it again. It's too painful.

So, let's get into it. Will Smith plays Ben Thomas, a man with a secret. As he says at the beginning, "In seven days, God created the world. In seven seconds, I shattered mine." What did he do? While driving one night with his fiancée, he looks down to check his buzzing Blackberry and his distraction leads to an accident that kills seven people, including his fiancée. Ben is wracked with guilt and can't get over this tragedy that he has caused. How do you atone for such a tragedy? How do you forgive yourself when you live and seven people die?

Ben devises a plan. He finds seven people who are in desperate need of a lucky break, he researches and observes them to make sure they are worthy, and then, at his own expense, he gives them that break. He donates bone marrow to a little boy stricken with cancer. He turns over the keys to his beach house to a younger mother looking to get out of an abusive relationship. He gives part of his lung to his brother, part of his liver to a social worker, and one of his kidneys to

a kid's hockey coach. The hockey coach asks him, "Why me?" Ben says, "Because you're a good man. Even when you don't know people are watching you."

That leaves two more people Ben needs to help to match the seven that died. The first is Ezra Turner, a blind telemarketer. Ben calls Ezra to harass him and try to provoke him into an angry response, but Ezra doesn't take the bait. He passes Ben's test of being a good person. The last person is Emily Posa, a young woman suffering from congenital heart failure. When he meets with Emily, he poses as an IRS agent and tells her, "It is within my power to drastically change your circumstances." Against Ben's desires, the two fall in love and there's kissing and other mushy stuff. But Ben is resolute on carrying through with his plan.

Was it that plan? It's teased in the opening scene of the movie, when Ben calls 911 to report a suicide. When the operator asks, "Who's the victim?" he responds, "I am." Using a deadly species of jellyfish, Ben climbs into a bathtub full of ice, which will preserve his organs, and allows himself to be stung by the jellyfish until he dies. After his death, his corneas are given to Ezra and his heart is transplanted to Emily. Ben has finally atoned for his actions. Like I said, this is the kind of movie that makes you want to sit around and talk.

Obviously, there are a lot of spiritual themes here, but the movie doesn't provide any neatly packaged morality points or long-winded pontifications about the power of forgiveness. Unlike so many of Will Smith's movies, his character is not a superhero. You could argue whether he's even a hero. After all, he killed seven people. He is weighed down by his actions to the point that you can see the physical toll his guilt takes on him, which Smith conveys brilliantly. After the movie ended, I found myself asking, "What would I do in that situation? How far would I be willing to go to make amends?"

All of us struggle with that at some level. I told you all about the time I accidentally left my shopping cart blocking a parking space so that a little old lady who was planning on parking there couldn't get her car in. For weeks after that, I walked around parking lots putting stray carts in their corrals just to atone for my transgression. How many carts is enough? Seven? Seventy times seven? Guilt is a strong motivator. But how much are we willing to sacrifice in order to find peace? For Ben, the only path to peace was to sacrifice his life to save seven others.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that we are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Paul's use of the concept of sacrifice was not arbitrary. Sacrifices played a huge role in the religion of the Jews and the pagans. For the Jews, the practice was instituted as a way of paying restitution when God's law had been transgressed. For example, God's law says not to steal a candy bar or there will be punishment. Then someone steals a candy bar. Rather than face the punishment, which was usually something unpleasant like cutting off your hand or death, a system was instituted that allowed a lamb or a dove to take the place of the candy-bar-stealer. That animal's blood would be spilled as a means of what was called substitutionary punishment. The animal's essence of life – its blood – would be drained as a way of paying the penalty required for breaking the law.

Then comes Jesus. One of the many ways of understanding the crucifixion of Jesus was that he was the ultimate sacrifice. His blood was spilled once and for all so that no one else – human or animal - would have to face the penalty for breaking the law. The law is fulfilled through him. This way of thinking says we are freed from paying that penalty once and for all through the sacrifice of Christ, and we now live in light of God's grace, not in God's wrath. No more animals had to die. There were a lot of lambs and doves who applauded this decision.

But that doesn't let us off the hook, says Paul. We are still beholden to God for the abundance of love and grace and forgiveness God has offered us through Jesus Christ, none of

which we deserve. Therefore, Paul says, we still are compelled to offer a sacrifice, to pour out the essence of our lives for God. But this sacrifice isn't a physical one; instead, we are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. We are to take our lives and lay it before God as a way of saying, "Here, God. Thank you. This is yours." The Message translates the first two verses of our reading this way: "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering."

I find it highly significant that Ben Thomas chooses to die in a bathtub filled with water, and through his death Emily is given a new heart. Paul says in Romans 6, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." Through Ben's sacrifice, Emily has new life.

The problem with Ben was that he didn't think he was worthy of the new life that Christ offered. He thought his transgression was so tragic, so egregious, that the only way to atone for those seven deaths was for him to die himself. But what we Christians know and trust is that Jesus has already died that death for us and has been raised to life through the resurrection. Jesus died so that we can be living sacrifices, pouring ourselves each and every day to help other people experience a new way of seeing, a new way of loving, a new way of having hope and receiving God's grace. I don't know what you've done, but God knows, and yet God still offers you forgiveness and a new chance at living. We are not only saved from the punishment of our sins, we are saved for the joy of sharing God's love and grace and new life with others.

In the last scene of the movie, Ezra and Emily meet. Emily looks into Ezra's eyes – which used to be Ben's – and begins to tear up. Ezra doesn't recognize her at first, but when he says the scar at the top of her chest, he says, "You must be Emily." They recognize in each other the sacrifice Ben made for them that allowed them to experience a second chance.

We are all offered that same second chance and many of us here have chosen to accept it. But there are a lot of other people around us who haven't. Maybe they have been hurt by the church. Maybe they've been told God doesn't love them. Maybe they don't feel they are worthy of being loved or have strayed too far to be forgiven. But that's simply not true because God's love doesn't know those kinds of limits. Our job, as the recipients of God's amazing grace, is to show them – not just tell them – that God's love is for them. We are called to be living sacrifices, pouring out ourselves for the sake of others. Doesn't matter who they are. Doesn't matter what they've done. We're not called to be the judge or the jury. We are simply called to share with them the gift we've been given, the gift of new life God has so graciously given us. To quote Ben, "It is within our power to drastically change your circumstances." Thanks be to God.