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Romans 12:1-2

At the Movies: *Almost Famous*

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Romans 12:1-2 New Revised Standard Version

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world,but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

We’ve all heard the saying, “home is where the heart is” right? It’s a place, not just a physical place mind you, but a place where we are happiest, where our heart is. *D Magazine* writer, Scott Craig, a man who loves, really loves, BBQ, attended a worship service, where, Craig writes, “from the pulpit…the preacher said, ‘Show me what a man thinks about when he doesn’t have to think about anything in particular, and I’ll show you what that man is.’ (Craig’s) wife leaned over to (him) and softly whispered, ‘Honey, that means you’re a brisket”!

In our movie clip, young William Miller, all of 15 years old, is on the road with up and coming rock ’n’ roll band Stillwater, hanging out with the band, the roadies, the girlfriends, the rock ’n’ roll life! He’s on assignment from *Rolling Stone* magazine, trying to get all the lowdown on the band for a cover story. William’s mother, a college professor, is aghast at rock ’n’ roll, equally horrified by William’s passion for it, yet begrudgingly, allows him to go on the road with the band.

The band is led by charismatic lead guitarist Russell Hammond, who, right before the clip we’ve just seen, takes William to a house party, spending the night with a cadre of teenage fans. In the clip William tells Russell’s “girlfriend”, famed “Band-Aid” groupie, Penny Lane, “I have to get home” to which Penny replies, “you *are* home!” Penny sees where William’s heart is, where his passion lies, where his “home” is, even though William is still trying to convince himself, his “home” is the physical location where his worried mother resides.

In our movie clip, William, the band, the girls, all share in a community “prayer” of sorts, bonded by their love of rock ’n’ roll, expressed by singing along with Elton John’s hymn, “Tiny Dancer”! Sharing a communal moment of joy & love, not only with one another, but even their audience, their fans, beyond the bus, on the road, one gig to the next.

*Almost Famous*, is a fictional retelling of writer/director Cameron Crowe’s life. He was a 15 year old writer for *Rolling Stone*, on the road with some of the future legends of rock ’n’ roll: Led Zeppelin, the Allman Brothers Band, the Eagles, and many others. It was his love and passion, later he even married a rock star: Heart’s Nancy Wilson! Although Crowe is now in film industry, he still occasionally writes for *Rolling Stone*, most recently penning Eagles founder Glen Frey’s obituary. Rock ’n’ roll is still very much “home” to Cameron Crowe.

In 1969/70 my family lived in Topeka, Kansas. I was 5 years old. I clearly recall hearing the voice of God at this time. Repeatedly, over & over, coming through the speakers of my older sisters’ stereo, through the radio, when they would drive me to school (they were all teenagers), the voice of God was singing, “Get Back, get back to where you once belonged” alternately with “She’s a Honky Tonk Woman, get back get back you honky tonk girl!” The Beatles & Rolling Stones! God was speaking to me, yes ME, through these joyful songs, so full of life, love, and happiness! Regardless of what the words meant, the songs were so uplifting, still two of my all time favorite songs!

Music seeped into my brain, rock ’n’ roll was the vehicle, but it rolled down a path of jazz, blues, classical, infinite variations on melody, harmony, poetry, and rhythm! To this day, if I’m not thinking of anything in particular, there’s a song rolling in my mind, so that pretty much makes me a rock song!

As a teenager, I *WAS* William Miller, except I wasn’t on the road w/ awesome rock bands! The first time I saw the film Woodstock, watching Joe Cocker in his tie-dyed shirt take the Beatles’ “With a Little Help from My Friends” to ecstatic heights, I thought, “this is like the old time revivals!” Music, rock ’n’ roll, in particular, was just that transformative for me, a revival of my soul! Max Yasgur, who owned the farm where the Woodstock concert was held, once said, “if we join (the Woodstock hippies), we can turn those adversities that are the problems of America today into a hope for a brighter and more peaceful future...”

Now rock ’n’ roll hasn’t always been “churchy” music, in fact it’s been castigated as the “Devil’s music”, a bad influence, and should most definitely NOT be a part of the church! Yet in his book, *Rock-A-My Soul: An Invitation to Rock Your Religion*, former Jesuit David Nantais, writes, “one role for theology (the church) vis-à-vis the arts in general- and rock music specifically- is to encourage churches to be safe realms where people can raise popular culture topics and explore their theological implications with others. This is not an opportunity for churches to ‘offer ‘Christian answers’ to ‘culture’s questions.’ Rather, such intercourse is meant for Christians to grapple with their/our search for the interplay between faith and the culture in which we are all immersed.”

Too often the institutional church has been a place of stifling condemnation, straightjacket conformity, mind-numbing anti-intellectualism & deflated spirits, due to its insistency on “books of discipline”, on being above & beyond the “world” of “evil” art, igniting fires with the bodies of those who looked, thought, believed, expressed themselves differently. Alternative voices were shunned, excoriated as “deviancy” and “sin”, it’s still happening today in the church. Church has become a very unhappy place, even a frightening place, for people who live life outside the church “rules”, even though those lives are full of love of the Creator, love of self, love of neighbor. For too many the church is no longer a place of transformation, transcendence. Noted author, and one of my personal favorites, Karen Armstrong, in her book, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence,* writes, "If we no longer find this (transcendent) experience in a church or temple, we seek it in art, a musical concert...”

The church should be a haven for “alternative voices”, should be an advocate for those who challenge existing institutions, even the institution of the church itself. The Roman Empire was an institution with clearly defined “rules”, orders, and castes for people, occupying other people with brute force! The Temple in Jerusalem, ruled by the priestly class, the Levites, exorcised its own institutional hegemony over the lives of the faithful. Jesus took on the institutions of his time, took on both the antiquated “rules” of, what he saw, as a corrupt Temple, practicing corrupt unloving religion. He challenged the sanctimonious “Pax Romana,” the “peace of Rome”, as demonic, oppressive. Jesus was the rock ’n’ roller of his day!

In our scripture, Paul reminds us we are not of the oppressive world, a world where greed, profits over people, discrimination, and worship of fame are the “rule”. We are to respond to God’s mercy, God’s grace, with our whole entire being, being a holy sacrifice. Remember, God so loved the world, so loved you, I, US! that God gave us Jesus, who taught us to respond to God’s love by, in turn, loving God with our minds, hearts, souls, bodies- our entire being, and loving our neighbors as we have been loved! And I concede, rock ’n’ roll gives us narcissistic rock stars, who, too often, value fame and money over the spiritual dimensions of artistic creativity. So while we can celebrate rock ’n’ roll, use it in our worship, it’s not to celebrate rock stardom, but to celebrate the artistic triumph of the Creator and the good creation!

John Lennon once sang, “you may say that I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us, and the world will live as one”. This past Friday, the centenary anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, during the First World War, was observed. 60,000 British soldiers died on the first day, the FIRST DAY, alone- in the 20th century, just past, we watched in horror as billions died in wars, the nightmare of the Holocaust, World War 2, the use of nuclear weapons & subsequent arms race… haven’t we lived the nightmare long enough? If the voices of rock ’n’ roll, through John Lennon, beseech us, BEG, us to dream of a world of peace, shouldn’t the church, we who celebrate the “Prince of Peace” join with them? Shouldn’t we be working towards a more just & peaceful world?

Local Dallas musician Sarah Hickman recently revealed her impending retirement, she wrote on Facebook of her love of performing, “…if you've seen me perform, you know I love being on stage. I love bringing people together through song. Gosh. It's a very sacred feeling, giving people a space to be loved through music.” Giving people a space to be loved through music. The church can be that space, SHOULD be that space, and I believe we here at Greenland Hills, ARE, in our modest attempts, to be that space. I believe we appreciate, and encourage alternative voices, means of expression, though I do think we could use a little more rock ’n’ roll in our worship!

We are always at home in community with God, always at home in community with our neighbors, always at home when music lifts us up & carries us forward, when art challenges & inspires us… church should be that “home”, a home which continually transforms us. We, in art, song, dance, liturgy, and prayer point to the empty cross, the resurrected Christ! We can feel the love of Jesus, the resurrected one, even in rock ’n’ roll: the celebration of love over hate, justice over injustice, peace over violence, life over death! So let us be a part of transforming the world, by whatever means, even rock music, to love God and neighbor more fully! Amen.