

In a 1971 interview, the great actress, Bette Davis, speaks candidly of the perks of her profession. Limousines, glamorous movie premiers, adulation by the fans, great tables at restaurants. But while she admits to enjoying all of those things—who wouldn't?—she also says that seeking such things can never and should never be the goal for an actress. She says, "That must never be your motive. That isn't what you want the most."<sup>1</sup>

If that's the case, what is most important to Bette Davis? What is her goal? What is her primary motivation? She says, point blank, "You want to get on that stage and work."<sup>2</sup>

Rewind 21 years. That dedication to the craft of acting versus seeking the adulation of adoring fans is a huge theme of what is arguably Ms. Davis's greatest role—Margo Channing in the 1950 movie, *All About Eve*. After 71 years, *All About Eve* is still in a 3-way tie for the most Oscar nominations of all time, specifically 14. The film won 6 Academy Awards including Best Picture. It is still the only film in Oscar history to have 4 female acting nominations: 2 for best actress including Ms. Davis, and 2 for best supporting actress.

In *All About Eve* a 40-something Bette Davis plays a 40-something Broadway actress, Margo Channing. Margo is at the top of her game. Not only is she a great actress—she is also a great star. She loves her craft. But the movie never shows her acting on stage. Instead it shows her backstage and off-stage interactions. And Margo seeks to nurture her friendships. And she also struggles with a desire to deepen her relationship with her boyfriend, whom she will eventually marry.

But Margo is also deliciously high maintenance for her friends. At one point, mid-way through the movie, Margo is hosting a party, and the tension is palpable. One of the main characters observes,

"The general atmosphere is very Macbeth-ish. What has or is about to happen...?"

Margo's best friend, Karen, says to her,

"We know you. We've seen you like this before. Is it over or is it just beginning?"

The camera focuses on Margo as she downs her drink and walks away from the little cluster of her friends. And as she's ascending the stairs, she turns, and we hear the most memorable Bette Davis line of all time. She says:

"Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night."

It's not always easy to be Margo's friends. But they stick with her, and she sticks with them.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Dick Cavett Show*, November 17, 1971

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

The movie *All About Eve* contrasts Margo with the titular character, Eve Harrington. The movie chronicles Eve's meteoric rise from backstage fan to the hottest new Broadway star in a mere 9 months. And the movie is largely framed by a big awards show, with Eve taking the biggest award.

The movie opens with the award's presenter waxing overly eloquently, praising Eve Harrington. But from the beginning we can sense that something is off. As words of praise for Eve come from the rostrum, the camera focuses in on various other characters, who turn out to be Margo and her friends. And the camera shows us their various looks of disgust at this praise of Eve.

And as the movie plays out in a long 9-month flashback, we can see why they're all so disgusted. Eve has played them all. She has lied and has manipulated them in order to ingratiate herself to them. She has climbed the ladder by stepping on and stepping over everyone she can. There's lots of backstage backstabbing. But eventually, after 9 short months, Eve gets what she wants. She is lead actress in a big Broadway play, and she receives the adulation of adoring fans. And all it costs her is using and betraying all the people who befriended her and tried to help her on the way up.

Margo, for all her flaws, tries to put her relationships first. Eve is just the opposite. As the saying goes,

Do you use things and love other people? Or do you use people and love other things?

Eve obviously loves stardom. And she uses and steps over all the people she encounters in order to attain it. And as she's accepting the award towards the end of the movie, she waxes poetically and hypocritically about how her heart is with all of the people of the Broadway theater.

Which gives Margo an opportunity for a final zinger after the awards show. She says, "Nice speech, Eve. But I wouldn't worry too much about your heart. You can put that award where your heart ought to be."

Of course at some level, we know this is an all-too-common human theme. It's not confined to a Broadway stage or a 1950 film. In every walk of life we know that there are some people who are in it for themselves, and there are others who are in it for others. Some only seek what benefits them. Others seek the greater good.

We often see this play out very publicly in our political world. We know that there are some politicians who are genuine public servants. But there are plenty of others who are in politics for the power or the perks of their office.

But in talking with parishioners over my past 26 years of parish ministry, I hear all too often of similar things happening at the office, or amongst the faculty, or on charitable boards. And to be brutally honest, it also sometimes plays out amongst Christians in the church, both lay and clergy.

Do you use things and love other people? Or do you use people and love other things?

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the day when we celebrate Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is the day when we remember that Jesus who is the greatest of all, paradoxically lived and died as the greatest servant of all. His power is made known by his sacrifice. His greatest triumph comes through giving of himself for others, even to the point of death on the cross.

In our Gospel lesson we get a brief snippet of dialogue from Jesus' passion. Jesus is talking behind the scenes with Pontius Pilate.

We know historically that Pilate was definitely in the "use people and love other things" category. His life was about power and prestige and position. And thus he seems utterly mystified by Jesus standing in front of him. Pilate is trying to nail down who Jesus is before he has him nailed to a cross.

And the box Pilate keeps trying to slot Jesus into is King. But Pilate doesn't understand Jesus' type of kingship.

"My kingdom is not from this world,"<sup>3</sup> Jesus says to him. If it were from this world Jesus tells him, then his followers would be fighting in a conventional way. Conventional warfare is something that Pilate the Roman Equestrian and Soldier and Prefect would understand. "But as it is," Jesus says, "my kingdom is not from here."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' kingship and Jesus' kingdom and Jesus' kingly tactics involve love, extreme love, even to the point of total self-sacrifice. And that's something that the Pilates of the world cannot understand.

On this Christ the King Sunday we also heard from Revelation as our Epistle lesson. It describes Jesus as the "ruler of the kings of the earth,"<sup>5</sup> and that we are to be part of his kingdom and dominion forever.

And one day, all the world will know who Jesus is and what his kingship is all about. In the words of Revelation,

"Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail."<sup>6</sup>

We sing a version of those words every Advent, and will sing them next week at the 10:30 service:

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<sup>3</sup> John 18:36

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. 1:5

<sup>6</sup> Rev. 1:7

- 1 Lo! he comes, with clouds descending,  
once for our salvation slain;  
thousand thousand saints attending  
swell the triumph of his train:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Christ the Lord returns to reign.
- 2 Every eye shall now behold him,  
robed in dreadful majesty;  
those who set at nought and sold him,  
pierced, and nailed him to the tree,  
deeply wailing, deeply wailing,  
shall the true Messiah see.<sup>7</sup>

One day, all the world will know who Jesus is and what his kind of kingship is all about. But in the meantime, his followers are called to live as part of his kingdom, and to espouse his values.

The actress, Bette Davis, emphasized the value of making fame secondary. Perhaps that's because she was a truly great actress. Perhaps that's also because she tried to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. If you didn't know, Bette Davis was a devout member of the Episcopal Church.

In *All About Eve*, her character Margo Channing values her relationships above all else. And her antagonist, Eve, doesn't.

And in a delightful twist at the end of the movie, there is apparently another young woman waiting in the wings to supplant Eve. Her name is Phoebe. There is no sequel, *All About Phoebe*. So the movie leaves us hanging with the question: "Will the cycle repeat itself? Will Eve get used by Phoebe in the same way Eve has used everyone in her own life?" We don't know. But it seems that the likely answer is, "Yes."

But how about us?

Do we use things and love other people? Or do we use people and love other things?

Which way will we follow? What will we choose?

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<sup>7</sup> #57, *The Hymnal 1982*