

We continue our once-a-month sermon series on the Gospel and the Golden Age of Hollywood with an Alfred Hitchcock classic. By the time 1954 rolled around, the great Alfred Hitchcock had directed more than 40 films. He began with silent films in the 1920s, and had growing success in the 30s and 40s. But 1954 marked the start of the peak decade of his career which included a string of great movies: *Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, *The Birds*. I love all these classic Hitchcock films, but *Rear Window* is my favorite.

The first 4-minutes are a tour de force of movie making. Hitchcock gives us an enormous amount of information with no dialogue being spoken. As the opening credits roll, an apartment's window blinds are being raised. Then the camera shows us the view from this window. It looks out over a courtyard with the backsides of a number of other Greenwich Village apartment buildings, and we can see into a large number of neighboring apartments. The thermometer is shown at a sweltering 94°, so in those pre-air conditioning days, windows are open all around the courtyard.

Then the camera shows us the apartment that is our vantage point. We see Jimmy Stewart taking a sweaty, mid-day nap in a wheelchair. He has a cast on his leg and pelvis. And as the camera pans around his apartment, we see action photos, including one with crashing race cars coming right at the camera. In front of that photo is a smashed-up camera. We see other cameras as well. It becomes apparent—Jimmy Stewart is a photographer, and getting that dramatic photo of the race-car crash has landed him in the wheelchair with a broken leg.

Part of Hitchcock's genius is that almost the entire movie is shown from the vantage point of Jimmy Stewart's apartment. He is indeed a photographer named Jeff. Jeff is used to traveling around the world for his work. It's an adventurous life. But now he's stuck in his apartment. And he has nothing to do all day. So he starts to watch all the neighbors.

Jeff has no television. But all the neighbors' apartment windows almost function like a collection of small screens where he rather voyeuristically watches their lives play out. And as he watches them, we watch him.

Hitchcock filmed this movie on one gigantic soundstage set, which accounted for a whopping 25% of the movie's budget. The set—the courtyard, and all the surrounding apartments—is almost like an additional character in the movie.

And besides all the neighbors, there are other characters we see. Jeff has a wise-cracking insurance company nurse named Stella who stops by daily. She is played by Thelma Ritter, whom we saw a couple months ago in *All About Eve*. Stella tries to get Jeff to stop watching the neighbors. At one point she says,

"The New York State sentence for a Peeping Tom is six months in the workhouse... They got no windows in the workhouse. You know, in the old days, they used to put your eyes out with a red-hot poker."

And then she gets philosophical and says,

"We've become a race of Peeping Toms. What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change."

And that's a huge problem with Jeff. He's looking at other people's lives, so he doesn't have to deal with the complexities of his own life. He's got a wonderful girlfriend, Lisa, played by the immortal Grace Kelly. And yet Jeff has got a deep fear of commitment. Settling down in New York would cramp his adventurous lifestyle. And he can't expect Lisa to traipse around the world with him roughing it. And so he's at an impasse in his relationship. He and Lisa care deeply for each other. But Jeff can't commit.

And Jeff is also getting tripped up by what he sees in other windows. There's a full spectrum of relationships. Behind one window is a couple of newlyweds who can't keep their hands off each other. In another apartment is a young dancer who has to fend off a number of "wolves" attracted to her. In another apartment is a contented middle-aged couple who dote over their little dog. In another is a lonely middle-aged woman who dreams of love but turns to alcohol for solace. In yet another apartment is a miserable, bickering couple, an angry salesman with a nagging bed-ridden wife.

What's the future for Jeff? Which window shows the way his relationship and his life will turn out?

Last month we had a very different Jimmy Stewart character in *It's a Wonderful Life*. In that movie, Jimmy Stewart played George Bailey. George Bailey longed for adventure, but gave it up to be a family man, and to help the people in his community.

But in *Rear Window*, Jimmy Stewart's Jeff doesn't want to give up his adventurous life. And he simply watches his neighbors, rather than trying to help them.

And Hitchcock shows us that Jeff is very much tied to his camera. He eventually uses his telephoto lens to zoom in on other people's apartments. And later in the movie, Jeff gets attacked, and tries to ward off his assailant with blinding flashes from his camera equipment. Interestingly, the camera only slows the man down, it doesn't stop him. The camera and Jeff's desire to continue his adventurous life as a photojournalist wreak havoc with the possibility of building a life with Lisa. Yet, the camera doesn't bring Jeff ultimate safety or satisfaction.

And as all of this wonderful cinematic complexity is playing out, Jeff begins to think that the salesman across the way has murdered his invalid wife. That's becomes the central focus of the plot. Did he or didn't he murder his wife. Jeff tries to gather what evidence he can by peering out of his apartment window. And he tries to enlist both Stella and Lisa in helping to solve the crime. At first, they're resistant to the idea and push back pretty hard. But then they too become seduced by the idea that maybe the neighbor has murdered his wife. And for Lisa, it even becomes something of an adventure—trying to solve a potential crime.

I won't tell you how that part of the plot plays out—Alfred Hitchcock is the undisputed master of building suspense—it you haven't seen *Rear Window*, you'll need to watch it—I'm not going to give you any spoilers that will ruin the ending.

And there are many wonderful moral and ethical questions raised by this movie—I won't be able to touch on most of them.

But at one point midway, Lisa does raise the question,
"Whatever happened to that old saying, 'Love thy neighbor'?"
And that theme resurfaces a bit later. One of the women, in a moment of deep anger and loss, lashes out at everyone in the courtyard. She yells out,
"You don't know the meaning of the word neighbor! Neighbors like each other, speak to each other, care if anybody lives or dies, but none of you do."

It's a hard accusation. They are neighbors. But they're not neighborly. They are not a community. This was apparently a problem in New York City in 1954. But what about Lubbock, Texas in 2022?

I know at our house we tend to interact with the neighbors on either side of us and across the street. But I don't know much about the folks 2 doors down and 3 doors down.

Plus we have another dynamic undreamt of in 1954. We have the double-edged sword of social media. On the one hand, social media can be a great tool to stay in touch with a number of folks—friends, classmates, former students, parishioners.

But social media can be a bit deceptive. If we're not careful, it can be rather superficial. Plus we're only able to know what other people want to reveal to us. In a way it is like *Rear Window*. We can only see through the windows where our friends have opened the curtains to show us some aspects of their lives. We can't see the totality of their lives.

And on social media it's easy to give a thumb's up or a smile—but it takes more work to really engage with our friends, to be a deeper part of their lives.

And it applies to us as a church family. How well do we know others here at St. Paul's? Is it more superficial recognition just on Sunday morning? Or can it go deeper than that?

In our Epistle lesson, Paul compares the Christian church to a body, with Jesus Christ as the head. And each of us individually is a different part of that body.

And as Paul reminds us,
"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"¹

Paul is telling us that we are connected, we are interconnected with each other. And we need each other.

And Paul says,

¹ 1Cor 12:21

"If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it."²

That's what it means to be a Christian community.

One of my hopes for 2022 is that we can build up more sense of community, more sense of interconnectedness at St. Paul's.

We've had good success with our 20s/30s Group. I want us to build on that success. I want to gain back some ground that we lost during the pandemic. I'm wanting us to try to launch some other small groups organized in various ways so that we can better know each other, so that we can rejoice with those who are rejoicing, and support and care for those who are struggling.

Besides—we've gained lots of new members of the St. Paul's family in the past couple of years. And towards the end of 2021 we were seeing returning members who had had to lay low these past couple of years. Once the current omicron wave passes, I believe it'll be a great time to seek to know each other better. Stay tuned as details develop.

May God help us grow closer to each other, and support each other better as a Christian community.

² 1Cor 12:26 CEB