

In our Gospel lesson, we just heard one of Jesus' most famous stories, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It's actually the 3rd of a series of 3 parables he tells back-to-back in the 15th chapter of Luke. There'll all about the same subject and told in the same context. Some religious leaders are grumbling that Jesus is ministering to sinful folks. And Jesus responds with these parables that illustrate God's joy when someone returns to him.

The first parable is about a shepherd who has 100 sheep, and when he loses one, leaves the 99 behind to search for the one lost sheep.

The second parable is about a woman who loses one of her 10 silver coins, one of the coins from her dowry. She turns the house upside down until she finds it. And both parables end with the shepherd and the woman turning to their neighbors and asking them to rejoice with them over finding what was lost.

The third parable is about a lost son. Actually two lost sons, but that's another sermon. The younger son asks his dad to give him his inheritance early—then he goes off and blows it all in wild living. When a famine hits, and the boy is hungry and out of resources, he decides to return to his father, not as a son but as a servant. He'll take the demotion in the hopes that his father will provide for him. He'll have to work hard, and he'll have to give up his status, but at least he won't starve.

We're in the midst of a once-a-month sermon series looking at scriptural themes in some Golden-Age Hollywood movies. The movie this month is John Ford's 1952 masterpiece, *The Quiet Man*, which just celebrated its 70th anniversary. It is one of four movies for which Ford won Oscars as best director.

The Quiet Man is also about a lost son trying to return home. It's from 1952, but set 30 years earlier, in the 1920s. The hero, Sean Thornton, is played by John Wayne. Unlike the Prodigal Son, Sean didn't blow his inheritance in wild living. But after growing up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania he's wanting to return home to his birthplace in Inisfree, Ireland. He has worked in the steel mills, and he has been a prize fighter. He has apparently had difficulties we learn of later. But as the movie begins, he's wanting to go back to his roots to find peace in his childhood home in Ireland.

He wants to leave behind America and Pittsburgh with "(Steel) furnaces so hot a man forgets his fear of hell."

He says, perhaps naively, that "Ever since I was a boy and my mother told me about it, Inisfree has been another word for heaven to me."

When he says this, he's told, "Inisfree is far from being heaven, Mr. Thornton."

And this sets up a huge theme and huge conflict in the movie. Sean Thornton wants to look at Ireland through a haze of idealized nostalgia. And interestingly, both director John Ford and star John Wayne were also of Irish ancestry and viewed Ireland in much the same way,

and were thrilled to be there filming on location. And co-star Maureen O'Hara, who plays Mary Kate Danaher, was herself born in Ireland, and was also delighted to be home.

But the real Ireland is not the nostalgic Ireland of memory. And there are difficulties, tensions, and conflicts that arise when Sean Thornton has to deal with the realities of life in Ireland. And one of these is the cultural disjunction. He's lived as an early 20th century American. But his friends, neighbors, and love interest, Mary Kate, are all from a rural Ireland. And their world, even in 1922 is still, for all intents and purposes, basically governed by an even earlier 19th century system of customs and tradition. Many of the plot's difficulties stem from this disjuncture.

Sean Thornton would like to marry the woman he's attracted to. But Mary Kate wants her brother's permission, and he refuses to give it, and that sticks in Sean's American craw.

A quick sidenote. I do have to stipulate that watching this movie made in 1952, set in 1922, and reflecting customs more like 1882 can be difficult at times for 21st century Americans. There are scenes that are even a bit shocking and disturbing to modern eyes. Case in point is the famous scene where Sean Thornton grabs and overpowers Mary Kate to forcefully kiss her. I certainly will NOT try to defend such behavior.

But then again, I would note that Mary Kate is very much a strong and capable woman who stands up for herself. Immediately after that forced kiss, she slaps the crud out of Sean. He even notes, "You've got a wallop!" Which is probably no understatement. In filming that scene, actress Maureen O'Hara actually broke one of the bones in her hand slapping John Wayne.

In *The Quiet Man*, the main arc of the first half of the movie is the difficulties and obstacles in Sean and Mary Kate's courtship. The main arc of the second half is the difficulties after they are married. And one of the key conflicts is Mary Kate's brother refusing to release her dowry money of 350 pounds. This probably seems quaint to us. And it is inconsequential to Sean Thornton. It's only money.

But it's a HUGE deal to Mary Kate and to her neighbors in Inisfree. Remember the woman in the Parable right before the Prodigal Son? She loses one of the coins in her dowry, and turns the house upside down until she finds it again.

What the dowry symbolized in 19th century Irish culture was a woman's standing as a social equal in the marriage. In old Ireland, the highest form of relationship between a man and woman was a union of social equals where each partner would bring property into the marriage. In Mary Kate's eyes, if she doesn't have her dowry, then it's not a true marriage of equals, and she refuses to consummate their relationship until it is.

Sean the American thinks it's all about money. He even lashes out at the "mercenary" motivations of Mary Kate and her brother.

And this is partly because of Sean's past history. After working in the steel mills, he became a professional boxer, a prize fighter. And in one of his bouts, he accidentally killed a man in the ring.

To others it was just one of those things. But to Sean, he was fighting for money, and as a result a man died. And that leaves him with tremendous guilt. He talks it over with the only man in the village who knows about his past, the Rev. Playfair, a protestant priest of our sister church, the Church of Ireland. While the bulk of the village is Roman Catholic, there is a small protestant presence.

So Sean confesses to the Reverend Mr. Playfair about the circumstances of his final fight. He says,

"I didn't go (into the ring) to out-box him. I went in there to beat his brains out. To drive him into the canvas, to murder him. That's what I did. For what? The purse, a piece of the gate. Lousy money."

But to Mary Kate, the dowry is not about the money. It's what the money represents that is important—her place in her community.

And in a triumphant scene when the brother-in-law finally gives Sean and Mary Kate her dowry money, both Sean AND Mary Kate are delighted to throw it in the fire. It's not the actual money—it's what the money symbolizes that's important to Mary Kate. It represents her equal social standing in her marriage. And it represents the fact that she is now seen with FULL standing in her village as a truly married woman. In fact, as she walks home through the midst of her fellow villagers, she has a triumphant and joyful look on her face. She knows that her community will now see her being integrated into a new status without any question marks or asterisks. She now has full social standing in their midst as a married woman.

And at the end of the movie, Sean is also accepted not only as an American who was born in the village, but as a full member of the community of Inisfree. The "Wild Colonial Boy", a long absent son, is finally and fully welcomed home.

In Jesus's parable of the Prodigal Son, the son is willing to give up his status. He's willing to take a demotion and go home to his father's household just to be a servant, not a son. But his father has a different idea.

In Jesus' wonderful words,
"He set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."¹

The son has cut himself off from his family and from his community.

But when he returns, the father runs out to embrace him. And in their culture, that's a signal that will force the rest of the community to accept and reintegrate the lost son as a full

¹ Lk 15:20

member of their community. The whole village will have to acknowledge him as his father's son again.

Jesus tells us this parable to describe the character and nature and abundance of God's love for us.

For Sean Thornton in *The Quiet Man*, memories of Inisfree seem heavenly. But then he has to deal with harsh realities even in such a seemingly idyllic world.

But for us, heaven is not in our past. And it's not something nostalgic. It's something to look forward to.

And one day we can find home, our true and eternal home.

And our loving and eternal heavenly Father will be welcoming us with open arms.