

It's one of the most ironic names for any villain in the history of cinema: Johnny Friendly. Because Johnny Friendly is anything but friendly. He is a thug and a mobster. He is purportedly a union boss. But he skims off the union dues of his members who work as longshoremen on the waterfront docks in Hoboken, NJ. He alone controls when and where and whether they work. He gets richer, and the workers under him are kept subservient to him, and indebted to him in myriad ways.

Today we're continuing with our once-a-month sermon series on biblical themes in classic Hollywood movies with the 1954 classic, *On the Waterfront*. It was nominated for 12 Academy Awards and won 8 of them, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actress—newcomer Eva Marie Saint, and Best Actor—Marlon Brando. Amazingly, it was only Brando's 6th film, and yet it was already his 4th nomination for the Best Actor Oscar, as well as his first win. And many film historians regard Brando's work in this film as THE finest acting performance in the history of cinema. *On the Waterfront* also had an amazing three nominations for Best Supporting Actor, who ended up cancelling each other out: Lee J. Cobb as Johnny Friendly, Karl Malden as Fr. Barry, and Rod Steiger as brother Charley.

Brando and co-star Rod Steiger play two brothers who are in the employ of Johnny Friendly. Steiger is the brains and Friendly's right-hand man: Charley "The Gent". And Brando is some of the brawn, an ex-prize fighter named Terry Malloy.

At the beginning of the movie, we see Terry standing on the street trying to lure his friend, a would-be informant named Joey, to meet him on the roof. Terry thinks that Friendly's thugs who are waiting on the roof are just going to talk to Joey, but the next thing you know, Joey is thrown off the roof and lies dead in the street.

There in the street we meet Fr. Barry who comes to give last rites. And we see Terry reconnecting with Joey's sister, Edie, who is back from convent school. You can see the attraction and budding romance, but Edie has no idea that Terry was complicit in her brother's death.

Edie also goads Fr. Barry into doing more than just staying in his church, but to really help the members of his congregation by encouraging them to stand up against Johnny Friendly. Eventually Fr. Barry convinces one of his members named Dugan to testify. But Dugan is killed in the hold of a ship when cargo is "accidentally" dropped on him. Fr. Barry shows up again to give him last rites. But he also gives an impassioned sermon in the bottom of that ship to all the longshoremen gathered around, including Johnny Friendly and his henchmen. Fr. Barry calls Joey's death and Dugan's death "crucifixions." And then he says, "And every time the Mob puts the pressure on a good man, tries to stop him from doing his duty as a citizen, it's a crucifixion. And anybody who sits around and lets it happen, keeps silent about something he knows that happened, shares the guilt of it just as much as the Roman soldier who pierced the flesh of our Lord." It's a powerful scene.

It's also a core spiritual theme of the movie—what are the responsibilities of the dock workers to each other? Do they stand together and stand up to the mob? Or do they play deaf and dumb whenever they witness mob action?

It's the same question as we hear in our Gospel lesson: Who is my neighbor?

A lawyer trained in Jewish religious law asks Jesus how to be right with God.¹ Jesus flips the question right back at him and asks him what he sees in the Jewish scriptures.² The lawyer replies, 'Love God totally, and love your neighbor as yourself.'³ Jesus says, 'That's the right answer.'⁴

But the lawyer wants to pin Jesus down. He asks, "And who is my neighbor?"⁵ In other words, 'What exactly are my responsibilities, and how far do they extend, and to whom?'

Jesus replies with the famous parable of the Good Samaritan, which is enshrined in our 2nd window. I've preached on this parable extensively before—I'll only mention it briefly today. A man is waylaid by criminals, robbed, and left for dead. Two religious leaders, a priest and a Levite pass him by. You can see them fading off into the distance in the window. But a hated Samaritan stops and renders aid. And Jesus flips the question back to the lawyer: 'Which one of these three acted neighborly to the man who was the victim of the criminals.' And the lawyer grudgingly gives the obvious and clear answer—the Samaritan. The Samaritan, one of those people whom good Jews despised on ethnic and religious grounds. The one who acted mercifully, the man who was the only one to act as a neighbor to the Jew was an otherwise scorned and reviled Samaritan.

In *On the Waterfront*, Terry is pretty clear about what the limits of his responsibilities are to others. He tells Edie early on,

"Hey, you wanna hear my philosophy of life? Do it to him before he does it to you."

It's reminiscent of Rick in *Casablanca*: "I stick my neck out for no one."

And yet, Terry is subpoenaed to testify by the Waterfront Crime Commission. And he is conflicted about what to do. He's feeling guilty about his role in Joey's death. His growing feelings for Edie and her moral influence are starting to sway him, as is Fr. Barry, to whom Terry eventually confesses his role in Joey's death. Fr. Barry encourages Terry to also confess it to Joey's sister Edie. That confession does not go well, and it adds some real difficulty in their budding romantic relationship.

But apparently Johnny Friendly is also getting nervous about what Terry will say to the commission. In fact, he sends brother Charley to either persuade Terry to keep quiet, or to deliver him to other thugs who will silence him permanently. So we have this wonderful scene of brothers Charley and Terry talking in the back seat of a cab for almost 6 straight minutes. Deceptively simple, yet one of the most blisteringly well-acted and famous scenes in the history of cinema.

¹ Lk 10:25

² Lk 10:26

³ Lk 10:27

⁴ Lk 10:28

⁵ Lk 10:29

It becomes clear to Charley that Terry will not keep silent. So Charley pulls a gun on his brother. But Terry just sadly and gently pushes it away. Then they get to reminiscing about Terry's failed boxing career. Charley blames Terry's manager. But Terry is crystal clear about who is responsible.

"It wasn't him, Charley, it was you."

And then he reminds Charley about how he and Johnny Friendly convinced Terry to throw his big fight against a man he could have easily beaten. And then Terry says,

"So what happens? He gets the title shot outdoors in the ballpark and what do I get? A one-way ticket to Palooka-ville! You was my brother, Charley, you shoulda looked out for me a little bit. You shoulda taken care of me just a little bit so I wouldn't have to take them dives for the short-end money."

Charley replies,

"Oh I had some bets down for you. You saw some money."

And Terry famously replies:

"You don't understand. I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am, let's face it. It was you, Charley."

Well, Charley decides he won't betray his brother again. He gives Terry the pistol. He has the cab pull over to let Terry out immediately. And he says he'll try to convince Johnny Friendly that he couldn't find his brother. Apparently that doesn't work, because later that night, Terry finds his brother's body hanging like this [cruciform position] from a hook. As Fr. Barry would say, it's yet another example of a crucifixion.

Terry takes his brother's pistol and prepares to try to go and shoot Johnny Friendly. Fr. Barry intervenes and convinces him not to live by the sword and die by the sword, but to do far more damage by testifying against the mobster. Terry does. And Johnny Friendly now faces indictment.

But the next day, Terry shows up at the docks to work. All of the other longshoremen are chosen EXCEPT Terry. Johnny Friendly goads Terry into a fight, and Terry is winning until Friendly calls in his thugs for assistance. They beat Terry to a pulp.

But the longshoremen who have witnessed all this suddenly refuse to follow Friendly's orders, and refuse to work unless Terry gets to work. Fr. Barry tells Terry he has lost the battle, but could win the war if he could only get up and walk into the warehouse to show up for work. Terry agonizingly does get up and stagger into the warehouse. It's filmed very much like Jesus' agonizing walk to Golgotha. But Terry persists and doesn't give up until he reaches the warehouse door. And all the men follow Terry inside, ignoring the threats from Johnny Friendly who is lashing out against them.

In the final scene, Terry takes all of them inside to work, and Johnny Friendly is impotent, having lost his power and influence over these men. These men finally have each others' backs and are standing together.

Who is my neighbor? These longshoremen realize that they are each other's neighbors, and they have to look out for each other and stand together as a group. In a real way, Terry has formed them into a new group, a new community.

And in a wonderfully symbolic cinematic flourish, the fog and haze that had been ubiquitously present throughout the movie is now gone. There is new light and new clarity on the Hoboken waterfront.

In Jesus' parable, three men encounter the Good Samaritan. Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these... was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"⁶

The lawyer grudgingly replies, "The one who showed him mercy."⁷

And Jesus replies, "Go and do likewise."⁸

Like the lawyer, we might like to have a narrow definition of neighbor. But Jesus makes it very broad. Show mercy to others. Love others. Not just those like you. But all of God's children. "Go and do likewise."

And in our hyper-polarized 21st century American culture that's tough.

Because it means I need to love those who are like me and those who aren't. I have to love those who vote and think the same way I do, and those who don't. I have act mercifully to those who share my ethnicity or my sexuality, and those who don't.

Our culture would encourage us to divide up along the dividing lines that separate us. But Jesus doesn't give us that option.

Our differences may be important. But they are not of ultimate importance. Our common humanity transcends any of the sub-categories that might tend to separate us.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Love ALL your neighbors as yourself. Jesus is clear. That's our calling if we are to follow him.

⁶ Lk 10:36

⁷ Lk 10:37

⁸ Lk 10:37