

Our lessons today are chock full of encouragement to live moral lives, to make ethical choices, to do the right thing.

In Deuteronomy, Moses is addressing the people as they prepare to enter the promised land. The structural pattern of Deuteronomy is always about if... then...; and if not... then...

If you follow God's ways, then you'll be in good shape. If you don't, then things won't be good for you.

Case in point is today's passage from Deuteronomy 30. First is the positive if/then: "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess."¹

But then we hear the if not/then:

"But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess."²

Moses's bottom line is to encourage the people to love, follow, and obey God, and to choose to live according to his ways.

And the theme continues with our other lessons.

Our Psalm declares:

1 Happy are they whose way is blameless, * who walk in the law of the Lord!...
3 Who never do any wrong, * but always walk in his ways.³

In our Epistle Paul exhorts the Corinthians to live more spiritual lives, and to stop "behaving according to human inclinations."⁴

And in our Gospel, Jesus is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. And in this section Jesus is exhorting the people to steer clear of anger and murder and lust and adultery.

This talk about adultery reminds me of something one wise old priest in this diocese used to say. He said,

"One of the best choices I make each day is not committing adultery. And my wife appreciates it too. And it's saved me a lot of money over the years."

Which brings me to our movie of the month: the 1960 film *The Apartment*, nominated for 10 Academy Awards, and winning 5 including Best Picture. Today it's listed by the

¹ Dt 30:15-16

² Dt 30:17-18

³ Ps 119

⁴ 1Cor 3:3

American Film Institute as the #93 on the list of the greatest movies of all time, #62 of the greatest Love Stories, and #20 of the greatest Comedies of all time.

And yet, for such a highly rated Rom-Com, *The Apartment* deals with some very dark themes. As one writer describes it:

"You know, it's that old story of boy meets girl... girl is dating boy's married boss... girl tries to commit suicide... boy saves girl's life."⁵

Yes, that is pretty dark for a Romantic Comedy. Maybe that's why it's such a good movie. *The Apartment* deals powerfully with questions of what defines a loving relationship? What does it mean to be a good human being? What price will you pay to achieve success?

In *The Apartment*, Jack Lemmon plays "Bud" Baxter, a faceless drone working in the gigantic office of a New York insurance company. Bud is basically a pretty nice guy, but he has become ensnared by his own ambition. To rise in the company, he curries favor with a number of his married supervisors by loaning out his apartment as a space for them to carry out their extra-marital affairs. It's both poignant and comic. We see Bud cleaning up after their parties. He has to perform quite a juggling act to keep the schedule straight. His supervisors make demands about stocking certain kinds of alcohol and snacks. And Dr. Dreyfuss, Bud's next-door neighbor, thinks that Bud is quite a playboy based on the sounds coming from the apartment.

And Bud can't bring himself to admit to the neighbors the pathetic reality that the partying is being done by his bosses, and not himself. He's simply stuck outside his apartment watching and waiting sadly for others to have their fun.

Bud does have a big crush on an elevator operator in the company: one Fran Kubelik, played by Shirley MacLaine. But unbeknownst to each other, Fran and Bud are both going after the same big fish, Mr. Shelldrake, played by Fred MacMurray. Bud wants to become Shelldrake's right-hand junior executive, and begins loaning out his apartment to Shelldrake. And Fran wants to become Shelldrake's new wife, and is carrying on an extra-marital affair with him hoping he'll leave his current wife.

Neither Fran nor Bud is naïve. They both know what they want from Shelldrake, and they both willingly choose the moral compromises necessary to get what they want. At one point Fran says, "There are some who are takers, and then there are some who get took."

But Bud pushes back on this later, "What you said about those who take and those who get took? Mr. Shelldrake wasn't using me. I was using him. Last month I was at desk 861 on the 19th floor. Now I'm on the 27th floor, paneled office, three windows, so it all worked out fine. We're both getting what we want."

Bud has to admit that he is complicit in this tawdry game in order to get what he wants.

⁵ Wes Alwan, "Expediency and Intimacy in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*"

Of course, Shelldrake also knows what he wants. He doesn't really care for Fran. He's just using her. She's one of a series of women at the office he's had affairs with. He's not interested in her on any kind of permanent basis. And Shelldrake is promoting Bud not because of any kind of merit or for what he can do for the good of the company. He promotes Bud simply so he can keep using Bud's apartment.

Of the three, Shelldrake shows no moral growth in the movie. He's so reprehensible that Fred MacMurray, who normally played nice guys, reported getting accosted in the street by angry women who were not pleased with the Shelldrake character. He reported that one woman at Disneyland even beat him with her purse.

But in *The Apartment*, we do see growth in both Fran and Bud. And that comes through in wonderful, complex acting performances by both Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine, who were both nominated for Oscars. Both characters try to present rather jovial exteriors to others. But underneath there is clearly pain for both of them.

At one point when Bud borrows Fran's mirror, he recognizes it as one that was left in his apartment and that he had returned to Shelldrake. In Bud's face we see the pain of recognition—he realizes that Fran is the woman Shelldrake has been having the affair with. But the mirror is distinctive because it's cracked. And though Fran doesn't know that Bud knows about her affair, she does comment on the crack.

Bud says, "The mirror... it's broken."

And Fran replies poignantly, "Yes, I know. I like it that way. Makes me look the way I feel."

And Fran's cracks really manifest themselves later. Midway through the movie Fran attempts suicide in Bud's apartment, even though she doesn't know it's Bud's apartment. It's simply the place where she and Shelldrake meet. But Bud discovers her unconscious in his bedroom from a sleeping pill overdose. Bud gets his neighbor, Dr. Dreyfus from next door to try to help Fran. The doctor pumps her stomach and gets her revived.

And then Dr. Dreyfus chews out Bud, gently but firmly. He thinks Fran tried to kill herself because of Bud. And he says,

"I don't know what you did to that girl in there—and don't tell me—but it was bound to happen, the way you carry on... Why don't you grow up, Baxter? Be a mensch! You know what that means?... A human being!"

And in the second half of the movie, much of what we see is Bud maturing, growing, learning to be a mensch, a human being. We see Bud nursing Fran back to health, with long conversations over games of gin rummy. And in the end Bud grows a spine and gives up his job. And Fran gives up Shelldrake. They have found each other.

In *The Apartment*, none of the three main characters is making choices that will have earth-shaking implications for the rest of society. Nations will not rise or fall based on our decisions. Rather, we're faced with mundane, smaller choices—whether to compromise in order

to rise in the company, whether to be faithful to marital vows or not. But two of the characters, Bud and Fran, are eventually able to make life-giving choices, choices that allow for real intimacy and relationship to develop. Love, real love, turns out to be literally a matter of life and death for Fran and Bud. And they both choose the path of life. They choose to have a real relationship of real intimacy, not one of utility or convenience in order to get something else.

That's the level of choice Moses was offering the people in Deuteronomy.

The people could choose to follow God, and to make choices based on what God would have them do. Moses promised that choosing God's way would be life-giving.

Most of us will not be faced with choices that will affect our entire world. But every day we are faced with choices that determine the well-being of those closest to us. May we choose wisely.