
Clint Eastwood, Gran Torino, Good Friday

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Good Friday is a story that we have heard before. But even if we have heard it before, it saves us when we hear it again and again.

Today, I want to present another story. It is the story from the most powerful movie I have seen in recent years. I realize that only a few of you have seen the movie. I realize that if I reveal the movie story today, somebody might accuse me of spoiling it for you. "Don't give away the plot!" is what they tell all the movie critics and reviewers.

But it does not matter if I give away the plot. A good story describes something that is true no matter when you hear it"like the story of the Crucifixion of Jesus that we have just heard. We know what happens. We have heard the entire story before. But we are still moved, and touched, and saved by its power.

The movie I present to you today is called Gran Torino. It may be the last movie that the seventy-eight year old actor, Clint Eastwood, will ever act in. And it's important, in this movie, that Clint Eastwood plays the main character.

Clint Eastwood, in case you do not know, has become popular almost always playing only one type of character. First, he was the quintessential bounty hunter in the old western frontier movies. Somehow or another, his character always went after the bad guy"with the same skill and strength of the bad guy. Only, Clint Eastwood's character was better at it. He could outdraw the outlaw and kill him in the street. Clint Eastwood has always seemed to play a decent man who accomplished the good by being better at violence. Consider *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, *A Fistful of Dollars*, and *For a Few Dollars More*. In each of those movies, he was "the man with no name."

As a boy, and as a man, I have always loved Clint Eastwood movies. The good guys win, and they do so with God, guns, and guts. They win with testosterone and bravado. They win by being stronger. It's an easy lesson.

Clint Eastwood went from the bounty hunter frontier figure to the same type of character in modern law enforcement. The next set of movies began with *Dirty Harry*. Remember Eastwood as "Dirty Harry," who took San Francisco law enforcement into his own hands and began such violent vigilante work? That movie had four sequels: *Magnum Force*, *The Enforcer*, *Sudden Impact*, *The Dead Pool*.

"Go ahead, make my day," *Dirty Harry* says. He enjoys doing good by killing the bad guy. Yes, Clint Eastwood has made many, many other movies; and he has even been involved in politics. But, for many of us, he is *Dirty Harry*, and he is the laconic "Man with No Name" in western films.

This background was critical to me when I saw Clint Eastwood playing Walt Kowalski in last year's movie, *Gran Torino*.

The character Walt Kowalski is an old veteran of the Korean War. He saw things he shouldn't have had to see in that war, and he did things he should not have had to do; but he also learned to be very good at what he had to do. He shot people. He killed people, for the greater good.

Kowalski then became a line worker in the automobile industry, and he lived in a tidy, modest house in a lovely Detroit neighborhood. He was very good at what he did.

However, when the movie, *Gran Torino*, opens, Walt Kowalski has just suffered the death of his wife. He is a lonely and bitter man. His children have raised rather spoiled grandchildren, or at least rude grandchildren who have no idea of the values that Kowalski stands for.

In fact, he stands for decency, honor, and hard work, in a world that seems to have abandoned all those things. His next door neighbors are Hmong, from an area of Viet Nam; and they look very much like the people he faced in the war. As an initiation rite into a local gang, one of his young neighbors tries to steal his old car, a *Gran Torino*, in mint condition.

The boy's older Hmong sister, Sue, is just as direct and forceful as Kowalski is. When Kowalski stands up against local gang members, the sister and her family want the neighborhood to know of the honorable deed. Kowalski is befriended by his foreign neighbors, and he gradually begins to discover, in them, the same honorable values that he knows.

But the movie, *Gran Torino*, is violent. It is set in an area of Detroit that has fallen into serious crime and abandonment. Thugs and gangs of every ethnic identity show up. Kowalski scowls and curses at them all. He drinks beer, all alone on his front porch, and scowls at the Hmong grandmother he hates next door.

He stands for his notion of the good, when it looks like the whole world has turned bad. The lyrics to the title song, *Gran Torino*, include the line: "Engines hum and bitter dreams grow, a heart locked in a *Gran Torino*, it beats a lonely rhythm all night long." Kowalski is lonely and bitter.

But as the story develops, Kowalski discovers friendship and honor in the foreign next door family. He takes a liking to the very boy, named Thao, who had tried to steal his car. He becomes a father to the teen-ager, and he realizes that the boy doesn't have a chance defending himself against the local gangs.

Ultimately, and tragically, Kowalski realizes that he cannot save his young friend. At least, he cannot save the boy by his usual means. His usual means are power and violence. He has threatened the gang already with a gun, and they know he means business.

The story becomes more violent, and then even more violent. The bright and attractive sister is assaulted by the gang, and Kowalski realizes that the younger brother, his young friend, is about to seek vengeance with a gun he does not know how to use. Kowalski tricks the boy and locks him safely in a basement.

Then, it is Kowalski who appears at the house of the local gang. He stands in the street, just like a western gunfighter, calling out the five gang members. He forms his hand into a fake pistol and takes fake shots at the gang members, just like Dirty Harry taunting his prey; "Go ahead, make my day."

By this time, all the neighbors are watching through their windows. A cloud of witnesses has appeared. Then, knowing completely what he is doing, Kowalski reaches into the inner pocket of his jacket. Will he pull a gun? The gang members think so. They shoot him with more bullets than Bonnie and Clyde seemed to have taken.

The movie story ends there. We see what Kowalski had in his hand: not a gun at all, but an old cigarette lighter. His body lies in the form of a cross on the street. The police do arrive this time, and a cloud of witnesses can attest that he Kowalski was killed innocently. The structure of justice will prevail. The young boy will be saved after all, but not in the usual manner.

Kowalski's body lies in the form of a cross. Kowalski has saved the boy, not by using more violence, but by abolishing that small circle of violence.

Today, the Gran Torino story is a Good Friday story. On Good Friday, many of us ponder just what this violent story of Jesus is all about. The movie, Gran Torino helps to explain it. What Walt Kowalski does for his neighborhood, is what Jesus Christ has done for the whole world.

"My kingdom," Jesus said before Pilate, "is not of this world." If the kingdom of Jesus were of this world, he would be victorious by using the same methods of this world. He would call down angelic superpowers and win with swords and bombs. But the world's violence will never be overcome by more violence. The violence and death of the world is overcome by the witness and truth of Jesus Christ. An innocent Jesus gives his life, gives it openly and freely, and thereby shows us the emptiness of violence and death.

We still have a long way to go, in making this saving truth of Jesus Christ known to the world. There are still gangs and thugs, and there are still innocent people succumbing to violence. Three young members of our own Christian community, in South Atlanta, were victims of that violence last Sunday night.

But today, the witness of the Christian Church is to lift up this Jesus as Savior of this world. He is an innocent victim, yes, but he is a divine and saving victim. In Gran Torino, Walt Kowalski learns that we are not saved by the God of guns and guts. We are saved by the God of giving and love.

When we cling to the cross today, when we lift up the cross today, we are clinging to a godly kingdom. We are lifting up the One who loves us so much that he gave. God loved the world so much that he gave. Jesus loves the world so much that he gives. We walk the way of that love today, the way of a powerful love that overcomes violence and death.

AMEN.

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