

In The Trenches

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The other night, Ed and I watched the movie “The Verdict”. I had seen it when it was in the theaters and remembered that I had liked it, forgetting everything else about it.

Paul Newman plays an alcoholic lawyer who takes a case of malpractice hoping for a large settlement out of court. The suit is against two doctors, an obstetrician and an anesthesiologist, both well known and well respected, the anesthesiologist the author of a textbook on anesthesiology. The hospital portrayed is St. Catherine’s in Boston, a fictitious but likely institution run by the Archdiocese of Boston. The plot is predictable but played out well, as the lawyer, Bill Galvin grows increasingly involved in the moral dilemma posed by the case.

The patient, a young woman admitted four years prior for delivery by Cesarean Section, was rendered comatose by complications of anesthesia, and had since been confined to a miserable nursing home bed, attached to a respirator in a vegetative state. The lawsuit is being brought on her behalf by her sister who wants to afford better accommodations for her.

The main players are the Archbishop and his horde of lawyers, who try to buy off Galvin for \$210,000, Galvin and his partner who wants him to take the money and run, a woman who becomes Galvin’s love interest only to betray him at the end, and of course the eminent and esteemed Doctor Towler, the anesthesiologist.

Galvin actually visits the young woman and witnesses firsthand the terrible confines of her existence. He experiences an epiphany at the foot of her bed that forces him to decide against the settlement and determines his course of action. He will try the case and he will win the case. He has only one witness, he faces the expertise and vast resources of the Archdiocesan lawyers, and he will stand before a corrupt judge with a personal grudge against him. He does it because he can do nothing else. In his own words, if Galvin does not take the case to trial, he is lost.

Three major institutions, religion, law, medicine. Twenty years ago. A moral dilemma, a cast of players in a drama that has been repeated in courtrooms, chanceries, and hospital conference rooms countless times since the movie was made. A victim, helpless, poor, without clout, money or prestige, destined to exist at the mercy of the courts, with only her family and a sorry lawyer to fight her battle for her.

My strongest impression? Nothing has changed, only gotten worse.

As the story unfolded, Galvin finds his star witness bought off by the Archbishop. His Excellency, of course, never participates in the dastardly deed, merely permitting the defending lawyer to prostitute the church for the benefit of the hospital’s reputation.

Galvin, then, is forced to actually work to find another witness to back his case in court. He calls as a surprise witness at the end of the trial, a young OB nurse whose testimony is damning - clearly implicating the anesthesiologist and stymieing the defense. In the end, Galvin wins the case, the jury requests a large settlement, the family cries tears of relief, Galvin gets rich and satisfies his conscience, the bad doctor gets punished, the sneaky lawyer and his team of toadies gets rebuffed, the judge actually learns something of human decency from the jury, the ladylove rightfully loses Galvin’s affection and it’s over.

One scene haunts me still. It is the scene that changes the whole outcome of the trial. It is the end of the scene when the young nurse testifies against the doctor.

It is the truth telling scene where she reveals that he tried to force her to alter her nursing notes to clear him of any responsibility for the disastrous outcome of his mistake. She refused, and ended up leaving both Boston and the profession of nursing. The records were, however, changed. What turned the jury around, was her statement that she had made a copy of her original notes anticipating the need for them someday. After revealing the truth in little increments, still reluctant to expose this revered man to the public eye, still afraid of his power over her, though she is no longer even practicing nursing, she breaks down in tears under intense cross examination and cries out, "I only wanted to be a nurse."

In this movie, as in real life sometimes, the good guys won. But as the credits rolled, I sat there in my chair and thought how little had changed in the twenty years since the movie was made. Paul Newman as the born again lawyer made an impassioned case for right, for justice, for leading with the heart and sacrificing self for the greater good. In his closing remarks he scorned a world that has become so callous that the protectors of the race, the caretakers of the vulnerable, the leaders and the defenders of right blithely turn their backs on that race, close their eyes on those who look to them for protection and guidance, and tempted beyond redemption by the sound of thirty pieces of silver cast at their feet, simply walk away.

How little has changed, and how much has gotten even worse. But then there is the nurse. There is the small, timid voice, who when put to the test, spoke once, spoke briefly and spoke the truth.

Why was the testimony of this frightened character, so insignificant in the eyes of the defense that she was never even contacted by them, the one that changed the tide of the trial? What did she do to the jury that made them want to decide in favor of the victim?

Simply, she told the truth. She set aside her own pain to help another, and though or perhaps because she too was a victim, revealed to the jury their own vulnerability, the danger that they too could become victims of power, liars and corrupt judges themselves, unwittingly sliding into the pit of deceit, only to find themselves out on the courthouse steps, wondering why they were sick with shame over their decision.

"I wanted to be a nurse!"

This short statement represents the anguish so many of us feel in our profession. Any job title could be at the end of that sentence, corruption and avarice know no limits, desire no exclusive address. We are all potential victims, both as witness and jurist, perhaps as patient or doctor, even as Archbishop. We are not nearly as vulnerable to obvious corruption as we are to the subtle lie that we are powerless to change it. If we fall prey to the clink of silver, if we slide down in our chairs when the hard questions are asked, if we busy ourselves with a loose shoelace when the poor man calls our name, we risk our very salvation.

We must be bearers of the light. We must be willing to speak the truth, even when we cannot see anyone who wants to hear it. The price of putting our light under a bushel is enormously high. It is the price of chains around our conscience, barricades around our hearts, gauze tangling our thoughts and ideas. We cannot afford this price. We cannot deny the truth, because the truth is Christ Jesus. Thirty pieces of silver was not enough for Judas. He ended up so ruined that he took his own life.

There is no gain worth the price of our immortal soul. There is no security worth the sacrifice of our integrity. Nothing is permanent except the love of God, so all of our decisions, all of our actions, every word from our mouths must proclaim this. When someone looks us in the face, when we are "put on the stand," when our backs are against the wall, we need only remember that the Son of God Himself stands between us and any corrupt power the world has to offer. We are not victims! We know that through baptism we are the sons and daughters of The King of Creation. There is no power greater than His love, no threat more dangerous than the shield of His truth.

We have nothing to fear, we need only to trust.

