

# *Engaging Matthew 25 Through Film*

## **Eradicating Systemic Poverty**



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
**Presbyterian Mission**

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## **Video Discussion Series based on Eradicating Systemic Poverty**

A well-chosen film and a guided discussion can put a human face on the issue of systemic poverty. A film like “Rosie” can enable us to see the dilemma faced by employed parents not making enough money to pay their rent and being forced to live in their car. The five films chosen for this series will not only inform us about poverty but also stir our feelings, and maybe move us from our comfort zone to join with others in doing something for those trapped in poverty.

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# Session One: Overview

## What is Systemic Poverty?

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

Matthew 25:34–36

You are no doubt familiar with this foundational parable of the Matthew 25 program. Those who meet the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked and the imprisoned are the ones welcomed by the king, who then recognizes them as his sheep.

Each of the six conditions that Jesus lists, added together, constitute systemic poverty. Middle-class people, even the wealthy, might experience one or two in a film, but not all at once, unless the film is one of those apocalyptic tales in which virtually everything is destroyed. But this is not so for impoverished people who live in the midst of plenty. Poverty is the condition in which humans feel hungry virtually every day; they don’t have a sufficient amount of water, or often it is not pure; homeless people are branded as strangers, facing closed doors; impoverished people in America might not be literally naked, but the quantity and quality of their clothing will be substandard; illness will mean a visit to a hospital emergency room rather than an unaffordable private physician, and a major illness often results in loss of income and eventually, bankruptcy; and lastly, those experiencing poverty are far more likely to be in and out of jail because they cannot afford a lawyer.

The Matthew 25 program offers a helpful 30-second video called [“What Does Poverty Look Like in America?”](#) and a five-minute video titled [“Eradicating Systemic Poverty.”](#) (For the latter, scroll down to the fifth video. This video powerfully demonstrates how one congregation engages the housing crisis in their community. St Mark’s is also part of a presbytery that advocates for affordable housing funding and public policy changes, which are additional ways to address the root causes behind the lack of housing. In these videos, we see Presbyterians and residents of a local homelessness encampment building relationship to tackle the problems of poverty and lack of housing. The personal stories and struggles are powerful and moving. Just think what a full-length film focusing on one person or family in need could do. For more on the subject, see the article [“Ending Poverty in the United States Would Actually Be Pretty Easy.”](#))

In each of the five films selected for this study, we share in the life of a person or family burdened by poverty. All the stories, even the one set in Ireland, take place amid a culture of plenty. Thus, the protagonists are outsiders looking in with longing eyes. We see them struggling and reacting to their situation, not always in a way considered “appropriate,” as will be evident in the summaries of the films. But hopefully in each person in these stories, we will recognize the reflection of Christ and be moved to engage in their suffering as “one of the least of these who are members of my family.”

## Limitation of this Series

One does not need to travel to the villages of Africa or Asia to know that poverty is a worldwide concern. And that it is a complex one involving the attention of a large number of agencies — those of the United Nations, governments of the U.S. and other nations, and a growing number of NGOs — and even of influential individuals such as Bill and Melinda Gates and rock stars like Bono and Sting.

Because of the complexity of the many issues of world poverty, this study series is limited to films dealing with impoverished people in the U.S.A. — except for the film “Rosie,” which is set in Ireland. However, the situation of the working-class family in that film is so similar to that of American working-class families who suddenly find

themselves homeless, and the small details of living with children in a car so vividly portrayed, that it almost begged to be included.

Limiting this study does not mean that we should ignore those beyond our borders or that one should accept the false and selfish statement “Charity begins at home.” The national offices of all denominations have information about programs dealing with world poverty, but exploring the latter at any depth would require a series in itself.

There also is a second limitation: Whereas the five movies each show poverty in unique ways, they can’t address all of the many interlocking issues that create and maintain poverty. For instance, we know that Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities, as well as people whose sexual orientation and gender identity isn’t accepted in their communities, are particularly put at risk of poverty, the latter especially when rejected by their families.

### Survey of the Five Films

Children are very much a part of the families in the five films — even the central characters in the first — but that does not make them “family films.” Three of them are rated R; the other two PG-13. Some church members will have difficulty agreeing that such films should be shown and discussed in a church. In the five recommended films, it is mainly language that is the R element. Leaders might point out that the filmmakers are aiming for realism, not titillation, when they show people, even children, cursing. “Most of the people Jesus dealt with had behaviors or lifestyles that would be considered R-rated at that time, but he did not avoid or reject them. Hopefully, we can accept the films and the people in them without being influenced to emulate their language or other objectional behavior.

Each film clip lasts about six to nine minutes. If time is limited, the leader might just show the clips with a brief summary of the film. But for those who want to explore the clips, a few questions are provided.

#### **“The Florida Project”** (2017)

Director: Sean Baker. Rated R. Running time: 1 hour, 51 minutes.  
Available on DVD and Prime Video.

Six-year-old Moonee is the central character in this story set in a Florida motel where the girl lives in a cheap room with her single mother. It presents a realistic picture of a child living in poverty, of the occasional kindness of others who lighten their load, and of the less than adequate system meant to benefit the child, but also threatens her.

#### Scene

Start at 2:58 and stop at 9:26.

Moonee and her two pals Scooty and Dicky amuse themselves by running up to the balcony of the Futureland Inn and spitting on a blue car below. Grandma Stacy, who owns it, comes out and scolds the children, but they rudely sass her back and then run away. At the Magic Castle motel next door, Moonee climbs through the window of her room where her mother, Halley, is smoking and absorbed in a TV program. The girl lets Scooty in through the door and seems to have forgotten what they had just done. However, the grandmother has not, demanding the motel manager, Bobby, take her to the culprit’s room. (She has already rounded up Dicky.) The grandmother demands that the children clean off her car, and after some bickering, Halley and the others return to the car where the children turn the clean-up into a small party, with even the grandmother’s little girl joining in. The initial hostility between the two adults melts away.

#### For Discussion

1. How closely supervised do the children seem? What is their attitude toward adults?
2. Do you sense that they are aware of their poverty or that it has reduced their playfulness? Related to the above question, does there seem to be anyone to channel their playfulness into less-harmful pursuits?
3. From what little we have seen, how would you compare Halley with the grandmother in terms of their sense

of responsibility toward their child? Do you think Halley would have been as persistent in tracking down the culprits if the situation had been reversed? What does Halley's relationship seem to be with Bobby?

4. When the culprits are made to clean off the car, what does their playfulness result in? Why is the grandmother upset by this? How does this show her greater concern that the children be held responsible for the consequences for their behavior?
5. And yet what does this playfulness lead to — reconciliation between the two women?

### **"Frozen River"** (2008)

Director: Courtney Hunt. Rated R. Running time: 1 hour, 33 minutes.  
Available on DVD and Prime Video.

The story of two impoverished mothers in upstate New York unfolds in this film. The major focus is upon Ray Eddy and her two boys who have been abandoned in their dilapidated trailer home by the boys' compulsive gambling father. The second mother is Lila Littlewolf, who resides on the Mohawk Reservation in a tiny unheated trailer. Widowed and forced to give up her newborn son to her mother-in-law, she works part-time at a casino and at night engages in smuggling Asian immigrants from Canada into the U.S.

#### **Scene**

Start at 1:35 and stop at 6:08.

We see Ray's lined face in an extreme close-up. A tear forms, so we know something is troubling her. As she gets dressed, she is joined by her 5-year-old son Ricky, eager for something about to happen. He asks a question to which Ray has no answer: "When is Daddy coming home?"

A truck pulls up, towing behind it half of a double-wide house trailer. The agent gets out, brusquely asking if she has the money — over \$4,000. She replies that her husband has left unexpectedly with their funds but that she can pay soon. Pointing out that this is the second time he has come out, he refuses, warning her that she will lose the \$1,500 down payment unless she pays by Christmas. Back in their trailer, 15-year-old T.J. sourly asks if she is going to look for his absent father. He also suggests that he get a job, possibly a better one than her part-time one at Yankee Dollar store. She tells him he must remain in school and sends them both off, remembering just in time to give them their lunch money.

#### **For Discussion**

1. Though little information is given, how are we shown that Ray has some serious problems?
2. Is this one of those lazy "welfare families" often decried in political debates? What seems to be Ray's status?
3. What seems to be the boys' reaction to their father being gone? Whom does T.J. seem to be blaming for this?
4. Ray cannot meet the balloon payment on the trailer: How is this typical for poor people lured by ads that offer low down payments followed at some point by a large balloon payment?
5. How is T.J. being short-sighted in his desire to help out? Is this typical of a teenager?
6. How do we see Ray being a responsible mother?

### **"Rosie"** (2018)

Director: Paddy Breathnach. Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour, 26 minutes.  
Available on DVD and Prime Video.

Rosie and her husband and their two children are a typical working-class Irish family until the owner of their house decides to sell it. With no savings, they are forced to rely on a government card to pay for temporary housing — when they can find it. Often, they must spend the night sleeping as best they can in their van. Their days are spent with Rosie driving her husband to work at a restaurant, her two children to their schools, tending to errands and spending hours on the phone trying to find a room for that night.

### Scene

Fast forward to 1:18. Stop at 8:19.

### For Discussion

1. How does Rosie spend much of her waking hours? What do you think of her phone manners? Why are there so many turndowns?
2. Which of your wake-up chores would you find difficult to accomplish if you had to live in your car? Why?
3. Which would seem to be a bigger challenge for you — dealing with the needs of a grade school child or a teenager?
4. How is Rosie's burden greater than her husband, John-Paul's?

### "Time Out of Mind" (2014)

Director: Oren Moverman. Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours, 1 minute.

Available on Google Play and Prime Video.

A once-prosperous but now mentally damaged homeowner spends his days sleeping in the abandoned buildings and streets of New York until he is directed to a shelter. He is struggling to obtain new IDs and to reunite with his estranged daughter. George is run out of the corner of an entranceway where he is sleeping. In the morning, he takes a small stack of papers and photos from his traveling bag and leaves the rest. That night, he tries to sleep on a bench, but some toughs throw his shoes at him. He begs some money for a Metro Pass from some passersby. Apparently getting it, we next see him riding the subway. He hears snatches of conversations around him, including a woman begging for money so she can take her two children on a trip to visit her husband. (Her trip is probably to visit her incarcerated husband. One more way in which society punishes impoverished people is to build prisons at long distances from prisoners' families, many of whom do not own cars.)

### Scene

Fast forward to 11:00. Stop at 17:00.

### For Discussion

1. Why would a homeless man not be welcome to sleep in the entranceway of a building? From what George says to the manager, how does he see the situation?
2. Note that we see George the next morning through the window of a door. This will be one of many shots of this kind: What effect does this have? How is this sense of seeing him through barriers and at a distance consistent with his situation?
3. Why do you think the young men harass George?
4. What are the effects on you of the many snatches of conversations going on around George? How do they add to the sense of his isolation?

**“Cesar Chavez”** Director: Diego Luna. Rated R. Running time: 1 hour, 46 minutes.

Available on DVD or HBO.

The story of this Arizona-born Latino is almost identical to that of the struggle of Hispanic American farmworkers everywhere for decent wages and living conditions. From stoop worker to labor organizer to instigator of the famous Delano Grape Strike in California, Cesar Chavez drew worldwide attention to his people’s struggle for economic justice. Like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, he remained committed to nonviolent forms of resistance throughout his life. His commitment to the struggle took its toll, especially on his relationship with his oldest son.

### Scene

Fast forward to 2:23, stop at 8:30.

Cesar summarizes how his farm-owning family in Yuma, Arizona, lost their land during the Depression in 1932. They moved to California, where they picked the crops of others. Cesar joined the Community Services Organization to improve the bad situation of farmworkers and then decides that he must move from behind his desk to work directly with the workers. Even after explaining the move to their eight children, none vote to move. Nonetheless, they travel to Delano.



### For Discussion

1. What happened to the Chavez family in the early '30s?
2. When his family moved to California, how were they apparently treated? In addition to their poverty, what did they have to contend with that white people did not have to endure?
3. Why was Cesar not content to fight for his people from his office? What does he know that his superiors apparently did not?
4. From the brief shots of the field workers, what do you learn of their working conditions? (Note Juan’s knee; the sex and age of the various workers.)
5. Why is he afraid? How is this verified by the man in the truck?
6. How is economic justice a power struggle? How do the following factors favor the growers?
  - ownership of land
  - wealth
  - law enforcement agencies
  - public opinion and prejudices.

# Session Two

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## “The Florida Project”

Rated R. Content ratings (1–10): Violence 2; Language 6; Sex/Nudity 2. Running time: 1 hour, 51 minutes.

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” Deuteronomy 15:11

The wealth of the rich is their fortress; the poverty of the poor is their ruin. Proverbs 10:15

Six-year-old Moonee (Brooklynn Prince) lives with her mother, Halley (Bria Vinaite), in a three-story cheap motel close to Orlando, Florida’s Walt Disney World. The purple-hued Magic Castle, no doubt a knockoff of the nearby Disney castle, was originally built for tourists seeking cheaper lodgings than the pricey ones at or next to Walt Disney World. But now it also is home to Halley and Moonee and others unable to muster the large down payment required by apartment landlords.

Early in the summer school break, we first see sitting against a wall Moonee and best friend Scooty (Christopher Rivera), the latter living close by at the rocket-decorated Futureland Inn. The motel’s large sign invites travelers to “Stay in the Future Today,” but everything about the place points to a far more promising past. Often joined by her friends Jancey (Valeria Cotto) and Dicky (Aiden Malik), the unsupervised Moonee and Scooty romp in the nearby grassy fields and sometimes create chaos at the Magic Castle, the kids spitting on a car below, putting a dead fish in the swimming pool, dropping water balloons onto tourists, disturbing the peace by their shouts and squeals, and one hot day shutting down the motel’s electricity. They run past the gift shops selling Disney merchandise and hit on shoppers for spare change so they can buy an ice cream cone at the stand built to look like a giant cone. When successful, they pass around their cold prize, each of them taking their share of licks.

The children are the bane of motel manager Bobby (Willem Dafoe), who is constantly chasing or cleaning up after them. And yet we soon see that he is a softie at heart. He often stops to talk with Moonee, and at one point his watchful eye spots a would-be child predator talking to the children. He quickly hustles the stranger off the premises with a stern warning not to return. The motel owner’s policy is not to house any long-term residents, but Bobby knows the financially beleaguered parents have nowhere else to go, so he allows them to stay, covering for them when the owner comes to inspect the place.

Halley is barely educated, her body extensively tattooed, her lower lip pierced and her hair garishly dyed. She had worked as a stripper before being fired for refusing to indulge clients in “extra” services. She is always struggling to raise in time the cut-rate weekly rent that Bobby usually has to wheedle out of her. The mother frequently takes Moonee along to help sell bottles of perfume knockoffs to tourists. She scams a gullible man and steals to supplement her erratic income. Occasionally she invites a client into her bed while she gets rid of Moonee by having her play in the room’s bathtub, filled with floatable toys and foaming bubble bath soap. The door is closed, but the curious girl can still hear the couple’s moans.

The first section of the film, reflecting Moonee’s view of their world, is relatively light and sprightly. It reminds us that children are often able to get by despite their poverty because in their innocence they are largely unaware of the larger world beyond their constrained one. The film’s lightheartedness begins to give way when the five children set fire to an abandoned condo. Hitherto their playing had attracted little attention beyond that of their parents and Bobby, but now the fire department has turned out to fight the large blaze, and the smoke has drawn all of the residents of the motels.

Scooty’s mother, Ashley (Mela Murder), suspecting the children caused the fire, forbids her son from playing with Moonee. As a waitress at the Orange Grove, she had been sneaking out food for Moonee and her mother, but now she cuts it off. Halley fights back, with matters becoming more and more complicated. Her prostituting herself results in

Child Services agents and two police officers coming to her motel room. The film soon ends with a surrealistic scene of the deeply disturbed Moonee running away from the social workers and seeking out Jancey. The two little girls run and run. The conclusion, involving Walt Disney World, should evoke plenty of discussion as to its meaning. If only it were possible to escape from reality by entering a Magic Kingdom!

Thus, “The Florida Project,” though about children, is *not* a feel-good movie. Instead, it is a reality check, reminding us that many Americans are not experiencing an era of unprecedented prosperity.

The children are outsiders looking in. The irony of the motel dwellers living right at the edge of one of the world’s major tourist attractions is not pushed, but it is evident throughout the film — such as the camera in close-up showing the name of a street the children pass, “Seven Dwarfs Lane.” In long-shots we see the tourist-catering surroundings as the children walk by such places as a large gift shop decorated by a huge plastic wizard. This is the land of pretense, the kind of pretense that costs a lot of money, which is just what Halley, Moonee and the others do not have, so they are the excluded in their own homeland.

Although the young children capture our hearts, especially little Brooklynn Prince, it is Willem Dafoe’s Bobby whom we end up admiring. No doubt one of the best roles in the actor’s illustrious career, his Bobby is a gruff-faced person of grace. He is constantly watching out not just for the disruptive antics of the children, but also for their welfare, as in the case of the threat from the possible pedophile who walks up to the children in one tense sequence. Bobby sternly lectures Halley about her failed responsibility as a parent, and even though she sasses and insults him in their encounters, he comes to her aid by trying to get her into a nearby motel at a cheaper rate, rather than just kicking her out of his motel after her prostitution makes her persona non grata to the motel residents. Be sure to watch his face during the harrowing sequence in which the Child Services agents and the cops confront Halley with the order to take Moonee into custody. It is the picture of sympathy and helpless despair. Without such loving-hearted people as Bobby, impoverished people in our society would be even worse off. Not that his sympathy is presented by the filmmakers as the solution to the children’s poverty, but any search for solutions must certainly start there. Individual kindness cannot undo societal systems that trap people in poverty, but showing kindness is a core element in any work for human healing.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. Describe the main characters’ attributes:

Moonee    Halley    Bobby    Grandma Stacy

Jancey    Scooty    Dicky    Ashley

Of all the characters, who is probably the most immature and least able to deal with poverty?

2. How is Moonee similar to other children you see in films, and yet different? How does being poor in America make one an outsider? How aware of this is Moonee?
3. What is Moonee’s support system? Halley loves her daughter, but what is happening to her daughter under her care? How, in some ways, is Bobby a better guardian? In what ways do we see that Bobby is a surrogate father to Moonee and her friends?
4. How does the film show that Bobby is a grace bearer:
  - in the ways he puts up with Moonee’s many interruptions
  - in the episode of the stranger talking with the children
  - in the lobby of the other motel where Bobby is trying to get Halley and Moonee housed
  - in the confrontation between the Child Services agents and Halley?
5. What do you think of the episode in which the newlyweds refuse to stay at the motel, calling it a “welfare motel”? What is the sense of the otherness of the affluent and the outsider status of those staying at the motel? How is this reinforced by their ability to escape from the place and that of the residents? What is the choice of most of the residents — a room vs. homelessness?

6. What do you think of Halley's schemes for raising money for rent? How honest is her perfume peddling? And then her stealing valuable theme park tickets from the angry man who comes knocking? Note how Bobby, who could have stayed out of the way, runs interference for Halley. How is Halley's selling sex a sign of her desperation? How might the lack of any broader family or support system add to Halley's desperate and risky attempts to make ends meet? Can you imagine any scenarios where you might make choices that aren't considered honorable in our society?
7. What kind of a crisis does the condo burning bring on for Moonee? How do Scooty's mother and Dicky's father show they are more involved parents than Halley? How is this little girl becoming more like her mother, and thus a dangerous influence? (Note that Grandma Stacy had already seen this: What did she do?)
8. What irony do you see in the motel residents living amid so many signs of Walt Disney World? What does the latter symbolize in our society? Do you think that Halley and Moonee will ever reach the dreams fostered by Walt Disney World?
9. At what points do you see that Halley is often her worst enemy in the way she reacts to situations and other people? How might chronic poverty wear people down so that it becomes nearly impossible to be their best self? How might Halley be different if she had been able to access better employment, housing and support systems immediately after losing her first job?
10. The film's title comes from the name that the Walt Disney Company used when it was trying to buy up land in the area on which to build Walt Disney World. Remember also that the high-rise buildings built to hold the urban poor often were called "The Projects." What do you think of the way in which our society has dealt with providing low-income housing? Especially by clustering them together where parents and children have few, if any, positive role models?
11. How was the arrival of the Child Services people inevitable? How does this development prevent the film from being another fantasy about the freedom or idyll of childhood? Compare the way they are depicted — often as soulless rule enforcers: Do they show sympathy or kindness?
12. If you have some knowledge of local child welfare laws and practices, what have you observed? Why might people living in poverty have more encounters with Child Services? How might wealth be its own privilege in relation to Child Services? Does race, being a single parent and unemployment come into play with the proportion of children removed from their parents? Is Child Services funded well enough by most communities to provide wrap-around services to empower and mentor the parent and to assist in keeping families together?
13. What do you think of the abrupt ending? Did you wonder how the kids got through the front gates? Do you think it reflects the yearning going on in the minds of the fleeing children? A surrealistic way of bringing together all the earlier signs of Walt Disney World and making us see that the kids had been living in a fantasy world created by themselves? Or is it Moonee's fantasy as she is being escorted by the child-care officers?
14. What do you think the future actually holds for Moonee? What does the following reveal about her — Mooney says this when she leads her friend out to a less-developed area where they come to a large tree that has been blown over:

Moonee: You know why this is my favorite tree?

Jancey: Why?

Moonee: 'Cause it's tipped over, and it's still growing.

How is she going to need this optimism as she grows older and discerns more about herself and her mother? (Note how some would have lamented that the tree had fallen, rather than rejoicing that it was still growing.)

15. Does the movie's portrayal of Halley make it easier for us to blame her for her poverty and her daughter's risk-taking behavior? Is there a way in which single mothers bear the brunt of poverty, including judgment and shame for their choices, when they are pushed up against a wall? Do the movie producers let society a little bit "off the hook" by creating a character who does not seem to be a sympathetic character? Might films like this increase some level of prejudice toward women who are single, poor and unemployed by portraying Halley as not showing adequate affectionate toward and supervision of her daughter (while in reality most people who are struggling with poverty want nothing but a better future for their children and are trying with everything they can to care for their children)?
16. In discussions of poverty, Jesus' words recorded by John (12:8) are often used to justify inaction: "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." How is this a misuse of the passage? How would you counter it?
17. Do you see any sign of the church in this film? Although a church's dispatching the bread van shows some awareness and concern for the residents, does there seem to be any other, more extensive outreach to the motel families? Discuss what church members can do in regard to poverty. To spur ideas, show the 2½-minute Presbyterian-produced video "[DREAAM House.](#)" the PC(USA) also offers the [Educate a Child Toolkit](#) filled with resources and ideas.



# Session Three

## “Frozen River”

Rated R. Content ratings (1–10): Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 1. Running time: 1 hour, 26 minutes.

For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever. Psalm 9:18

All the days of the poor are hard, but a cheerful heart has a continual feast. Proverbs 15:15

... It is more blessed to give than to receive. Acts 20:35

Courtney Hunt’s somberly realistic film focuses upon the distraught lives of those whom some of our politicians claim that they want to help, the working poor who often are left out of the American Dream. In upstate New York near the Canadian border, Ray Eddy (Melissa Leo) is left with two sons and unpaid bills because her gambling husband has run off with their meager savings. When the agent drives up with half of their double-wide trailer, he refuses to leave it even though Ray tells him that although she does not have the money, she will pay for it soon. (How often has he probably heard this line?) Unless she comes up with the money by Christmas, he responds, she will lose the \$1,500 down payment. Later we see that the family is also in danger of losing their large-screen TV because of failure to keep up their payments. This would be a sad setback because it provides the two boys with their one escape from their dreary plight.

Five-year-old Ricky (James Reilly) keeps asking embarrassing questions about “When is Daddy coming home,” but 15-year-old T.J. (Charlie McDermott) knows the score all too well. In fact, Ray has her hands full convincing T.J. that he needs to stay and finish school, rather than drop out and help the family by getting a job. His retort that he could make more money than she does stings because hers is a part-time job at the nearby Yankee Dollar store. Her plea to her boss that she be taken on full time has fallen on deaf ears.

Christmas is almost at hand, but Ray is so concerned with their lack of money that she is not even thinking of buying presents. T.J., loving his little brother in spite of being saddled with his care while their mother is away, is concerned that Ricky not wake up to disappointment on Christmas Day. He tries a telephone credit card scam on an old lady living on the Mohawk Reservation to raise some money to buy Ricky the Hot Wheels set he covets.

Lila Littlewolf (Misty Upham) lives in a tiny trailer on the reservation and, when she is not smuggling illegal aliens across the frozen St. Lawrence River that forms the border, works part-time at the Mohawk bingo casino. We know nothing about her at first, the filmmaker revealing bit by bit her sad situation, the process similar to an archaeologist’s slowly removing the dirt covering up a long-buried mosaic in a temple, thus revealing its beauty. It is at the casino that Ray comes upon her while searching for her runaway husband.

Lila had taken over the parked car when Ray’s husband, leaving the keys in the ignition, had left town on a bus. Lila does not want to give up the car, but Ray is a “pistol-packing mama,” and so Lila reluctantly concurs after a verbal struggle. Both of them needing the money, the two join together in an uneasy scheme to smuggle some Chinese, and then some Pakistani, illegal immigrants across the river and deliver them to a seedy motel on the U.S. side. Each has what the other needs — Ray a car with a pop-up trunk, and Lila the contacts and know-how of smuggling. Also, and this will prove true, Lila points out that Ray is less likely to be thoroughly examined by the police if stopped because she is white.

The two agree to split the fee of \$1,200. Thus, suspense builds: We share Ray’s worry about the ice on the river cracking; the police catching them — a state trooper warns Ray in one scene that the person (Lila) he had seen in her car is known as a smuggler; danger from the rough men who pay them for hauling the immigrants in the car’s trunk; and the question of what can happen with Ricky and T.J., who are left to fend for themselves while their mother is away.

This is a somber and moving story about the hard choices that those left out of the mainstream of society must make. Lila, whose husband has died during a smuggling incident, has an agonizing problem of her own: Her mother-in-law took her baby away when she went into the hospital to deliver it because the older woman did not think she would make a fit mother. Lila engages in the risky smuggling business because she wants to provide money for her infant son. In one poignant scene, she is literally the outsider looking in. One night outside her mother-in-law's trailer, she climbs a tree, steadily dropping a potato chip to silence the watchdog, and spying through a window her infant son and his grandmother. Climbing down, she stuffs the money from her illegal trafficking into an empty canister and leaves it outside the door.

Tensions between Ray and T.J. rise to a boiling point. She is upset that he uses a blowtorch unsupervised for some repair work while she is away. They also argue about his getting a job and her role in his father's decision to abandon them. Then one night while she is away and T.J. uses the torch to thaw out their frozen water pipe, he almost sets the trailer afire. Ray discovers this the next day while already stressed out by the visit of State Trooper Finnerty, who had stopped her with a warning about a broken taillight. The mother and son almost engage in a fistfight over the blowtorch.

The film enters thriller territory on the night that they pick up the Pakistani couple carrying a stuffed duffel bag. Fearful that the couple might be terrorists bringing in explosives because they were from Pakistan, Ray stops on the river and leaves the bag on the ice. They wonder why the Pakistani woman is hysterical when they drop the couple off and she sees the bag is gone. Fortunately, they decide to go back to retrieve the bag and discover the reason for the woman's distress. Lila is so upset that she determines to drop out of their scheme. Ray needs one more trip so she can make the new trailer payment and save her deposit, so she forces Lila to make one last trip.

At the climax, which involves their picking up two young Chinese women at a Canadian strip club and Ray pulling her gun to force the dishonest trafficker to turn over the half of their fee he is holding back, the two face the full consequences of their law-breaking enterprise. The New York State Police have chased them back onto the reservation and blocked the entrance/exit. Also, the trafficker had fired at the women as they had sped away, nipping Ray's ear.

The two women and their cargo wind up at the home of Billy Three Rivers, a reservation tribal policeman, where his wife tends to Ray's bleeding ear. He informs Lila that she has been banished for five years by the tribal council because of her smuggling. Lila, accepting the consequences, gives Ray her share of the money so the white woman can escape the reservation on foot and thus elude the police.

It is out in the darkened woods that Ray has her aha moment, leading to her hard but compassionate decision that will change both women's lives forever. What happens will, I suspect, satisfy most viewers, even though we are left wondering about their long-term prospects. It is a moment of self-sacrifice, but in the long run it will benefit Lila as well, and, of course, their children.

Concerning Ray and Lila, a more romantic scriptwriter might have borrowed from "Casablanca" that film's closing line, "This looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship." Instead, we are given a scene that is as spare in dialogue as the entire film has been. The film's very last scene even involves a moment of restorative justice for T.J. and the old woman whom he had scammed. The film does not try to solve all of the problems of the characters, but it does help us to understand the plight of two desperate women caught up in situations beyond their control — and yet who do try to control their own reactions to events, and thus maintain their humanity.

## For Reflection/Discussion

1. List the ways that Ray and Lila are different and how they are alike.
2. How does Ray try to prevent her sons from being disillusioned and/or angry with their father? Especially, how does she deal with the older T.J.'s anger? What had been the husband's long-term problem? What does Ray's explanation to her sons about their dad reveal about her character? And yet what does her possession of a gun and her use of it, both with the absent husband (according to T.J.) and the trafficker, also reveal? Ray is not "meek and mild," is she? Why do you think she has developed a tough exterior through the years? How could this be dangerous to her own welfare?
3. Were you puzzled at first by Lila's looking through the window at the baby and her sneaking up and leaving money outside the house? What seems to be her backstory from what you pick up throughout the film?
4. What societal hostility do you see? For example, what does Lila say to Ray about the state trooper who keeps watch on the road? Why will he probably not stop Ray? How is this an example of "white privilege," even though she is poor? Also, what does Ray assume about the Pakistanis they transport across the border so that she ditches the refugees' backpack? Where do you think she got such a view?
5. What do you think of the smugglers profiting on the plight of the refugees? How are the immigrants like Ray and Lila in some ways? Were you puzzled at first as to why the Pakistani woman was so distressed? How did this incident reveal that Ray had more than her own interests at heart? What did she think might be in the duffel bag? How did you feel during this incident when they found out that the bag did not hold terrorists' explosives, but — ?
6. How is T.J. trying to be the man of the house? How do his efforts almost end in disaster? And yet who saves Christmas for Ricky? How was it necessary for his moral development that the tribal officer visit him at the end of the film? What kind of a man do you think T.J. will become?
7. What did you think of Ray's and Lila's decision when cornered by the police? How did you feel when Ray changed her mind in the woods?
8. What will Lila and the Eddys contribute to each other? That is, what qualities do each have that the other need? How did you feel at the end of the film? What growth did you see in the various characters? Although set during the Christmas season, this is not "It's a Wonderful Life," is it? You might want to compare the two films and their outlook, one dealing with middle-class characters, and the other those from the underbelly of society.
9. Both Ray and her son resort to unethical means to gain money: How is this often the case with those in dire need — and indeed, is a widespread view by the well-off of those on welfare?
10. What programs might Ray turn to for help? Do you see any mention of food stamps or school lunch programs? Given that money is scarce, what can be done to help Ray provide more than popcorn and Tang for a meal? What public agencies and policies might be available to help the two families? How does the salary level of the working poor affect the government aid they might seek?



# Session Four

## “Rosie” (2018)

Rated PG-13. Content ratings (1–10): Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 1. Running time: 1 hour, 26 minutes.

And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Matthew 8:20

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” Luke 18:1–5

Viewers may well feel fatigued after viewing director Paddy Breathnach and screenwriter Roddy Doyle’s superb film about a family in Dublin catapulted into homelessness through no fault of their own. News headlines at the beginning of the film inform us that high rents and the low amount of housing stock has led to Ireland having the highest rate of homelessness in Europe.

Taking place over a 36-hour period, the film depicts the plight of one family, whose fate we see is very similar to that of the working poor on this side of the Atlantic. The titular Rosie (Sarah Greene) is married to John-Paul (Moe Dunford). Their four children are 13-year-old Kayleigh (Ellie O’Halloran), 8-year-old Millie (Ruby Dunne), 6-year-old Alfie (Darragh McKenzie), and 4-year-old Madison (Molly McCann). The father is a low-paid dishwasher in a restaurant. Rosie has her hands full caring for the children, driving the older three to their schools, and constantly talking on her cellphone trying to obtain housing for the night.

For seven years, the family had lived in a modest but nice house but were evicted suddenly when their landlord decided he could make more money by selling the place. Because of their low income, the couple has been provided by the Dublin City Council with a credit card and a long list of telephone numbers of hotels and landlords. Often when Rosie makes a fruitless call, the person on the other end terminates the conversation as soon as Rosie mentions the council credit card. At other times, the admission that she has four children seems to be the reason for a turndown. Despite how she is refused, Rosie always ends with a polite “Thank you.”

The family does manage to find a place for one night, requiring everyone to carry in their possessions in the large plastic garbage bags, something that others can see, to their embarrassment. Because of having to get John-Paul to work and three of the children to school, the frazzled Rosie is always behind the wheel and/or on the telephone. The children are reasonably well behaved, but sometimes resentful of being late for school. She also has to deal with a well-meaning teacher concerning why her daughter is being bullied: When told some classmates are calling the girl “Smelly,” Rosie is outraged because she tries so hard to keep the children clean. (In one scene where they spend time in a fish and chips restaurant, we see her taking the kids into the bathroom so they can wash and brush their teeth. They stay until they are ushered out at closing time, returning to their crowded car for the rest of the night.)

There is also a suspenseful sequence in which teenaged Kayleigh rebels by not waiting for her pick-up after school. Rosie frantically searches for the runaway at their old house and friends’, at last catching up with the girl at her classmate’s home. During this time, Rosie also checks in with her widowed mother in case the girl had shown up there, and we learn of their estrangement over her father. The specifics are not given, though they can be surmised by Rosie’s resentment and refusal to forgive him. But for this, the mother would have taken in the whole family, and does offer at least to take in the children, but Rosie turns her down.

We are completely drawn into the travails of this family by a combination of convincing acting and effective camera work. The use of close-ups by the hand-held camera evokes a claustrophobic feeling in the confined spaces of the car,

as well as a sense of intimacy as we follow Rosie about. This is the kind of family that deserves a break, so we root for them. They are the put-upon people with whom the prophets and Jesus sympathized. However, Rosie refuses to play the role of victim, declaring, “We’re not homeless, we’re just lost. We lost our keys, that’s what it feels like.”

The slice of life film, we hope, does not tell her whole story. We keep hoping that she will persist going down her telephone number list of lodgings and, like that woman in Jesus’ parable of the widow and the unjust judge, eventually find someone who will say “Yes.” The filmmakers do not offer a solution or a fairy tale ending. They just ask us to look at these people as likable human beings who deserve our sympathy and support in a dilemma not of their making. Their story unfolds in Ireland, but it is also the plight of many of the working poor in the viewers’ own countries as well. Maybe if enough of us see such films and take their values to heart, we will lobby for changes in our societies.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. Describe Rosie and John-Paul. How do they not meet the stereotype of homeless people held by many? How are they a part of “the working poor”? What does her handling of the telephone rejections reveal about her character?
2. How must the children feel about their situation? Their classmates? Why does the teenage daughter rebel? How is this feeling of public shame often a problem for children of impoverished people? What can it lead to in school?
3. Why do you think Rosie does not accept her friend’s invitation to bring in the children while she does the family laundry? How is Rosie’s pride an obstacle in obtaining help? And yet how is it vital in maintaining her sense of self-worth?
4. What apparently had happened between her father and Rosie before his death? How is her mother’s refusal to face up to it a major impediment?
5. What do you think of Rosie’s claim, “We’re not homeless, we’re just lost. We lost our keys, that’s what it feels like”? Is it an attempt to hang onto her dignity and sense of self-worth? How does society take this away from homeless people?
6. How does the government show a minimum concern for such folk as Rosie and her family? How does the situation in Ireland seem to compare to the plight of homeless people in our country?
7. Judging by the large number of turndowns when Rosie makes her calls, how does the private sector seem to be cooperating with the subsidized housing program? What might be the real reasons for motel managers turning Rosie down?
8. How did you feel at the conclusion of the film? Any sign of hope? Some activists state that homelessness can be eliminated in a society that spends billions of dollars on luxuries. How can such a film as this one help?
9. Discuss how the following might help families like this one:
  - raising the minimum wage
  - rent subsidies
  - child-care subsidies
  - educational loans and grants
  - mental health
  - legal aid
  - government food and nutrition programs.

For more ideas and resources on this topic, go to [The National Coalition for the Homeless website](#).

10. What do you think churches might do for homeless people? Serving meals, preparing personal toiletry kits, opening up rooms for daytime rest and shelter — but beyond such palliative measures, what can be done toward dealing with the problem on a systematic basis? Presbyterians offer a free 40-page resource called [“From Homelessness to Hope.”](#)

# Session Five

## “Time Out of Mind” (2014)

Rated R. Content ratings (1–10): Violence 2; Language 7; Sex/Nudity 3. Running time: 2 hours, 1 minute.

“He has put my family far from me, and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me. My relatives and my close friends have failed me.” Job 19:13–14

You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Psalm 88:8–9a

Look on my right hand and see — there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for me. Psalm 142:4

Short of leaving behind our wallets and “good” clothing and taking to the streets ourselves for a week, becoming involved in director/writer Oren Moverman’s powerful film about a homeless man is as close as we can get to the stark reality that far too many people face. I write “becoming involved” because this is not a film one just watches. Thanks to Richard Gere’s magnificent acting and the sensitive writing and direction, this is a film that draws you into its life. Each incident that befalls Gere’s hapless George Hammond is so upsetting and unsettling. He is a man truly alone and as unnoticed as the writers of the above psalms. A good word describing the viewing experience is “immersive.”

There is little or no soundtrack music for the first part of the film. Instead, we hear the voices of those around George as he wanders hallways and city streets. From the snatches of conversations that we catch, we are shown that life goes on around George, but in no way is he included — or in most cases is his existence even acknowledged, unless he is in the way.

With no backstory, we are thrust right into George’s sad life when a building manager (Steve Buscemi), showing someone a dilapidated apartment, comes upon George sleeping in the bathtub. When roused and asked what he is doing in the place, he struggles to put words together, mumbling something about “waiting for her.” It takes some time for the frustrated manager to get George to pack his belongings and then to lure him out of the apartment and onto the street. George seems puzzled by his surroundings as he trudges along trailing a small carry-on case and a plastic bag of clothing, and we see later, some papers and photographs. He follows a Black man and a blond young white woman to a bar, where she works as a bar maid. He talks someone into delivering to her some photographs but does not go in to talk with her.

For the next couple days, George wanders the streets or rides the subway, attempts to sleep on a bench and fails to navigate the intake system at Bellevue Hospital. For a couple of days, all he has to eat, or drink, is a six-pack he buys with the little money that he has. He secures a little more cash by pawning the short, but once fine, overcoat that he has used to ward off the cold those first couple of nights. When he is interviewed by a clerk at Bellevue, he has trouble answering her questions — all he wants is for her to give him the papers that will grant him a warm bed and a plate of food the next morning.

The shelter system is not an easy one to navigate for a man whose “time is out of mind” — not only can he not remember his Social Security number, but he has only vague memories of the past few years on the street. He comes close to getting into a fight with a racist fellow shelter client, and when he picks up Dixon (Ben Vereen) for a companion — or we should say, Dixon picks him up — the motor-mouth old Black man disturbs George’s silence so much that he wishes he would go away. But when this happens, George feels his loneliness all the more, his isolation intensified when he tries to get help at various city offices. A couple of the clerks show great patience and compassion as they try to extract the information necessary to receive more help, but in his mentally dilapidated state he just cannot call it up. About all he can say is, “I’m just a f--- up.”

There is little of religion in the film, except for Dixon's showing George the Lord's Prayer tattooed on his back (In Aramaic of all things!). This might seem like a strange witness to others of the Black man's faith, but it suggests that he is still clinging to the idea that God is watching over him. Note George's inappropriate reaction to Dixon's witness — or, in the light of his experience, is it so? If, as the old song puts it, "His eye is on the sparrow," then "He" seems to have overlooked George. Indeed, at one point we hear over a radio a preacher saying, "God cares about you," but this seems to be included for irony. Another matter in regard to the old Black man is his claim to be a jazz pianist: What did you think when he had the opportunity to sit down at the small piano, and he ... ? Later, George surprises us at that old piano, leading us to wonder more about his background.

We discover that our earlier suspicion that the young girl he had followed might be his estranged daughter is right. She is Maggie (Jena Malone), though not the "her" he had been waiting for back at the apartment, as he had referred to her as Sheila. When he tries to reconnect with her, Maggie wants no part of him. She is very resentful that following the death of her mother from cancer he had fallen into such a state of helpless grief that her grandmother had stepped in and raised her during the years he was lost in the city streets.

George's isolation is well depicted by the fine camera work of Bobby Bukowski, who shoots him through windows, doorways and mirrors, while at other times he almost loses him in a long shot of crowded streets or in the immense main hall of Grand Central Station. These shots, along with the already mentioned snatches of conversations, make us feel like we, too, are wandering around and eavesdropping on the man. The noise of grumbling and arguing in the shelter and the wailing sirens outside shows how difficult it is for the disturbed mind of George to relax and escape into sleep.

This is a minimalist production that packs a maximum punch. Before this, the two films that I've used to explore with groups the plight of homeless people were the excellent "The Saint of Fort Washington" and "God Bless the Child." Now there is one more. It is a film requiring close concentration, unlike so many studio films, but the result is worth the effort. Oren Moverman offers no solution, and just a faint touch of hope in the very last shot that takes a long time to fade to black. His is not a film about the issue of homelessness. Rather, it is about a homeless *man*. Words said of Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman" also apply to George:

"... His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So, attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall in his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person" (Act 1).

Some critics have written that the film's title comes from Bob Dylan's 30th album of the same name, but I prefer the explanation of another reviewer that it comes from a verse of Warren Zevon's song "Accidentally Like a Martyr." This originally was a love-lost song, but about midway through it this verse is sung:

"The days slide by, should have done  
Should have done, we all sigh  
Never thought I'd ever be so lonely  
After such a long, long time  
Time out of mind."

Compare this song with the three Scripture passages above. Can there be any loneliness greater than what a mentally damaged homeless man like George is experiencing? Maggie is still hurting too much to alleviate her father's loneliness. And yet, what hope does the film leave us with in that last shot of her?

## For Reflection/Discussion

The leader should order and read the free booklet from the PC(USA) called “From Homelessness to Hope.” Because it is free and is so full of information, a couple of extra copies could be made for the group participants.

1. Describe the main characters:  
George                      Dixon                      Maggie
2. How do you feel when you encounter a homeless person? Are you tired of so many people with their “hands out”? Or do you live in an area where you are insulated from such people? What do you think of the policy in which the authorities have dealt with homeless people by banning them from tourist and business areas of a city?
3. What do you think of the filmmaker starting in the middle of things with no clues at first to George’s backstory? How does this make us pay closer attention to what is said and done by the characters?
4. How does the soundtrack contribute to our experiencing George’s isolation and frustration?
5. How do we see George reduced to elemental needs: That is, what are his basic concerns (and pleas) in the first half of the film?
6. What do you think of the system for sheltering homeless people? At what points do we see some of the clerks trying to treat George with dignity, but what effect do you think working in such a huge crowded system would have on you?
7. How do pawn shops serve as the lending bank for George?
8. In the segment when he holds out a cup for donations, how do people react to him? Or, do they react at all, but just pass by without looking? How is he then and at other times essentially “invisible”? This would be a good time to read aloud G.A. Studdert-Kennedy’s poem “When Jesus Came to Birmingham.”



9. What does the pushcart lady think of the shelters? What probably happened to her there? Why do you think she left George after their night together? Do you think she is capable of sustaining a lasting relationship? How was the undressed George subjected to one more humiliation when he awoke?
10. What do you make of Dixon? Do you think he is really the talented jazzman he claims to be? What makes you think one way or the other? Why do you think he latches onto George despite the latter's lack of reaction to him — indeed, at times his rejection? (If you have seen the wonderful Danny Glover-Matt Dillon film "The Saint of Fort Washington," compare the two friendships.)
11. What do you think of Maggie's reaction to her father? Subjected to so many past hurts herself, do you think she can see past them in order to reach out beyond herself? How did you feel as a result of the ending? What do you think the future holds for George?
12. What have you learned from this film about the struggles and plights of people who find themselves without housing? What is being done in your area to help such people? How is your church involved? To discover what one woman did, see the inspirational film "Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story."
13. To add depth to your exploration of the film, invite a representative from a homeless shelter or an advocate to co-lead the discussion. Also, information about ways to become involved can be obtained from The National Coalition for the Homeless.
14. How is mental health involved in this issue? Of the many internet articles on this subject, this one from the Mental Illness Policy Org is a succinct and informative one. What is the danger that films like this one might contribute to the stereotypical view that all homeless people are mentally ill?
15. Another aspect of homelessness not covered in the film is the issue of LGBTQ youth: See the article Homelessness & Housing at Youth.gov. The issue is also dramatically depicted in the film "Stonewall."

# Session Six

## “Cesar Chavez”

Rated PG-13. Content ratings: (1–10): Violence 4; Language 3; Sex/Nudity 1. Running time: 2 hours, 1 minute.

Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. Malachi 3:5

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

Matthew 5:38–41

Director Diego Luna’s biography of the great labor and civil rights leader starts with Cesar Chavez (Michael Peña) deciding in the early 1960s to go from his office job with the Community Service Organization in San Jose, California, to work directly with the farmworkers in the fields — “to get my hands dirty,” as he put it. Thus, he and wife Helen (America Ferrera) pack their eight children and meager possessions in and atop their car and head for Delano, located in the heart of California’s grape-growing San Joaquin Valley. Helen is excited, but the children resent leaving their friends behind, nor are they pleased when they arrive and find that a far smaller house has been provided than promised.

As he works side by side with those picking grapes, Cesar thinks of his own childhood slaving in the hot fields for meager wages. Then and now, the growers and the overseers treat the workers as if they were children, allowing them no sense of dignity.

After months of manual labor, Cesar and fellow worker Dolores Huerta (Rosario Dawson) form what will become the National Farm Workers Association. They at first cannot do much to improve the laborers’ work conditions, but they can help economically by setting up a credit union. Through small loans, they help families in sudden need of funds, and thus the laborers begin to trust the two of them as leaders. Sheriff Smith (Michael Cudlitz), “owned” by the powerful growers, can hardly believe that “Mexicans” could have set up such an institution. He also thinks the troublesome Cesar must be a communist, but the latter scoffs, “Communists? We’re Catholic. How can Catholics be communists?” Cesar manages to persuade his reluctant followers to join the Filipino Americans who have gone out on strike against the grape growers. They use picket lines, flyers, speeches and marches to spread their cause — much of this in the face of intimidation, even violence. Cesar keeps emphasizing the need to stay nonviolent if they are to win. In 1966, he leads a large band of strikers on a walk of 250 miles to the state capitol in Sacramento to make their demands known — a sequence reminiscent of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Selma to Montgomery marches or Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt March to the Sea. They wear down one of the grape growers so that he signs a contract, achieving their first victory.

They will need even more perseverance and courage in their longer fight to win the right of what is to become the United Farm Workers Union to represent virtually all of the workers in the grape industry. To show what they are up against, the film combines lots of characters in the fictional opponent known in the film simply as Bogdanovich (John Malkovich), who with his son nurtures a passionate hatred of this “Mexican” who dares to tell them what they must pay and how they must treat their workers. The film shows well the tedious pleading of the UFW organizers with the timid grape pickers, fearful of losing their jobs if they are seen talking with an organizer. Some union workers are beaten up, rammed by cars, arrested and jailed, and at least one shot. Through it all, Cesar tries to prevent his workers from returning the violence. He fires one man who strikes back, nearly launching a riot, and later, when his followers disagree, he announces that he will go on a hunger strike until everyone agrees to stand by nonviolence. He has learned well from the mentor he has never met, Gandhi. Not shown in the movie is the lengthy telegram that King sent to him, encouraging and offering his prayers and praising him as a great American leader.

During this period, politicians are drawn into the grape conflict. Some of this is shown through archival footage, with Gov. Ronald Reagan siding with the growers — he even eats some grapes during a TV interview. Jack Holmes artfully portrays Sen. Robert Kennedy, who speaks eloquently on behalf of the grape pickers and praises Cesar as a great hero. Indeed, because of his influence, the sheriff tells the growers that he cannot overtly move against the UFW unless they actually break the law.

Although Helen at first mainly watches over the children, she shows her independence at times, even going against her husband's wishes in risking arrest on a picket line. When Cesar turns to Dolores to back him in forbidding her, she supports Helen instead. Even Cesar has to be taught to lay aside his culture's machismo attitude to become an effective leader.

Probably the heaviest burden for Cesar to bear was the rift that developed between him and his oldest son Fernando (Eli Vargas), who justly felt neglected by a father who seemed to care more for others than himself. In this respect, Cesar is much like the man whom he admired, Gandhi, whose resentful oldest son rebelled against his father when grown up. For a time, Fernando refuses to talk with his father, even when the former is suffering during his hunger strike. I wish the film could have been as long as "Gandhi" to work in more of the details of such stressful family relationships.

What we are given is more of the highlights of an incredibly rich life of service to others, of sacrificial service that carried a heavy cost. The two brief depictions of the workers sharing the Eucharist show that the source for Cesar's passion for social justice was his deeply felt Catholic faith. Also seen during the demonstrations and marches are banners of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a symbol both religious and cultural for Mexican people and their American offspring.

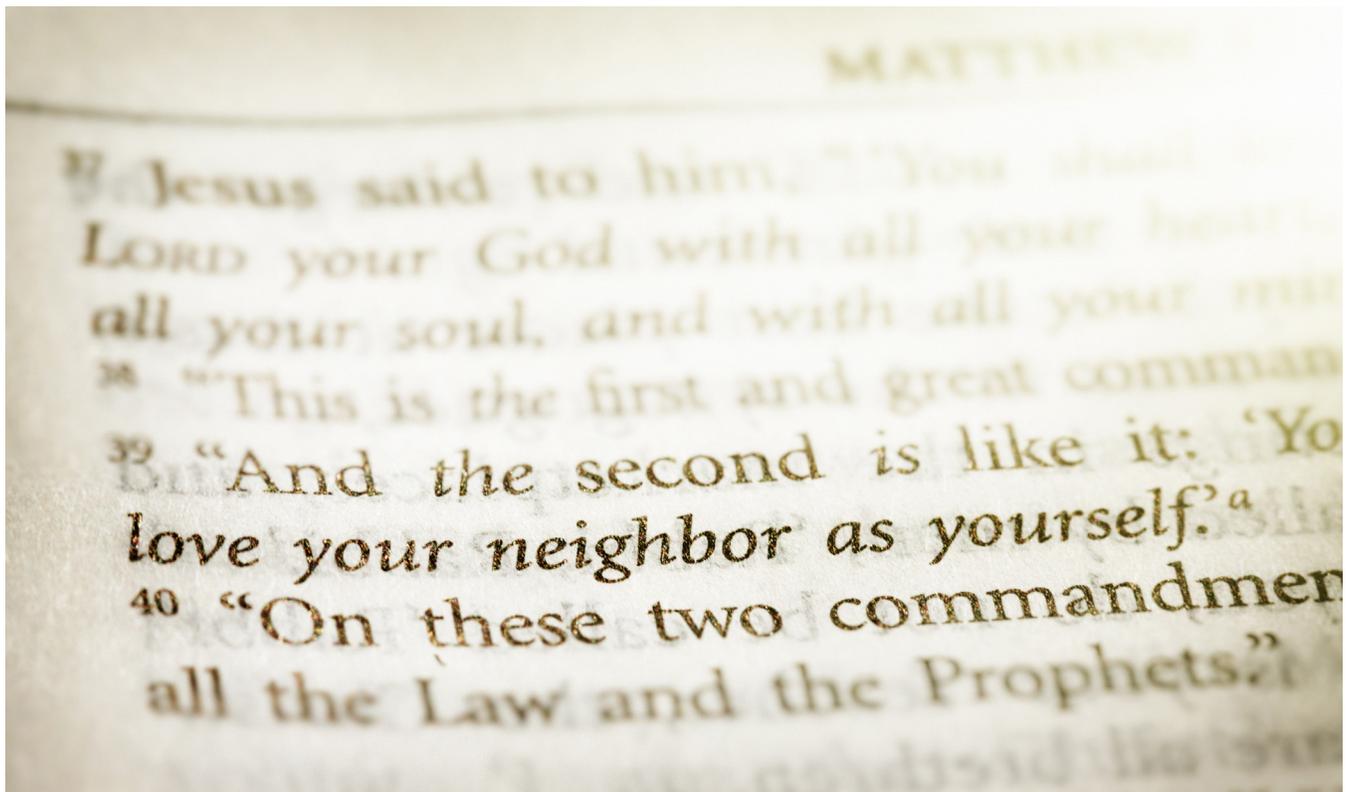
One sequence that a longer film might have shown was his friendship in San Jose with Father Donald McDonnell, who introduced him to the writings of St. Francis and Gandhi. Although Cesar had had to drop out of school so that his mother could leave the fields, this lack of formal education did not hold him back, no more than the



disappointments and failures that beset his movement at times. He once said, “It is possible to become discouraged about the injustice we see everywhere. But God did not promise us that the world would be humane and just. He gives us the gift of life and allows us to choose the way we will use our limited time on earth. It is an awesome opportunity.”

In a sequence I did not know about, Cesar even feels forced to leave the country when the grape boycott, now supported by churches, unions and families all around the country, is threatened by actions taken by President Richard Nixon. A Californian, no doubt with many wealthy supporters among the grape growers, Nixon set out to break the strike by ordering the Defense Department to purchase the grapes the growers could not sell, and to send supplies of grapes to Great Britain and Europe, thus assuring markets for the growers. Cesar spoke out through TV and radio interviews and rallies in England, gaining sympathy and support for his people. In a scene that reminds one of the Boston Tea Party, Brits are shown dumping grapes into the Thames River.

The film shows us that a determined person dedicated to their faith, and the values that grow out of it — the worth and dignity of the individual, and love as the proper response to violence — can triumph over the entrenched powers that would hold back justice. The film is well summed up by the observation that Cesar makes in the film:



“Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore. We have seen the future, and the future is ours.”

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. Describe the major characters:

Cesar Chavez                      Helen Chavez                      Dolores Huerta                      Jerry Cohen  
Fernando Chavez                      Sen. Robert Kennedy  
Chavez brothers (Lumped together because it is unclear who is who from cast list)  
Sheriff Smith                      Bogdanovich Senior                      Bogdanovich Junior

2. Compare Cesar to other social justice leaders such as:  
Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.  
How and why were each of the above branded as agitators and dangerous troublemakers?

3. How does this film broaden our view of poverty and impoverished people?

4. What are the elements of the system that Cesar and his people are up against?

- the growers
- the police
- the local court
- the division among the workers (between the Filipinos and Latinos)
- white culture.

5. Are any of these on the side of the farm laborers? How do each of the above work against them?

The film also shows that a great leader’s family pays when a father’s leadership of a cause demands almost all of his attention. How must Fernando feel about his father and what does he do about it? How might the father have dealt better with the son?

6. How do we see that Cesar was at first inhibited by his culture’s emphasis on male dominance? How does Helen display her independence, and Dolores, co-founder of the National Farm Workers Association, support her? Note that this and the above question could be cited as answering the criticism that the script makes Cesar too much the saint: How is this criticism often true of a film biography?

7. Often, impoverished people are depicted as always having their hand out wanting help from government and charitable groups. What do we see Cesar and Dolores doing in the way of self-help?

- setting up a credit union
- publishing and distributing a newspaper
- inviting the press to spread the word through stories, photographs and newsreel clips
- calling a strike when the growers will not negotiate
- picketing and appealing to the laborers to join their strike
- appealing to government and seeking new laws
- being willing to submit to arrest and go to jail
- boycotting grapes.

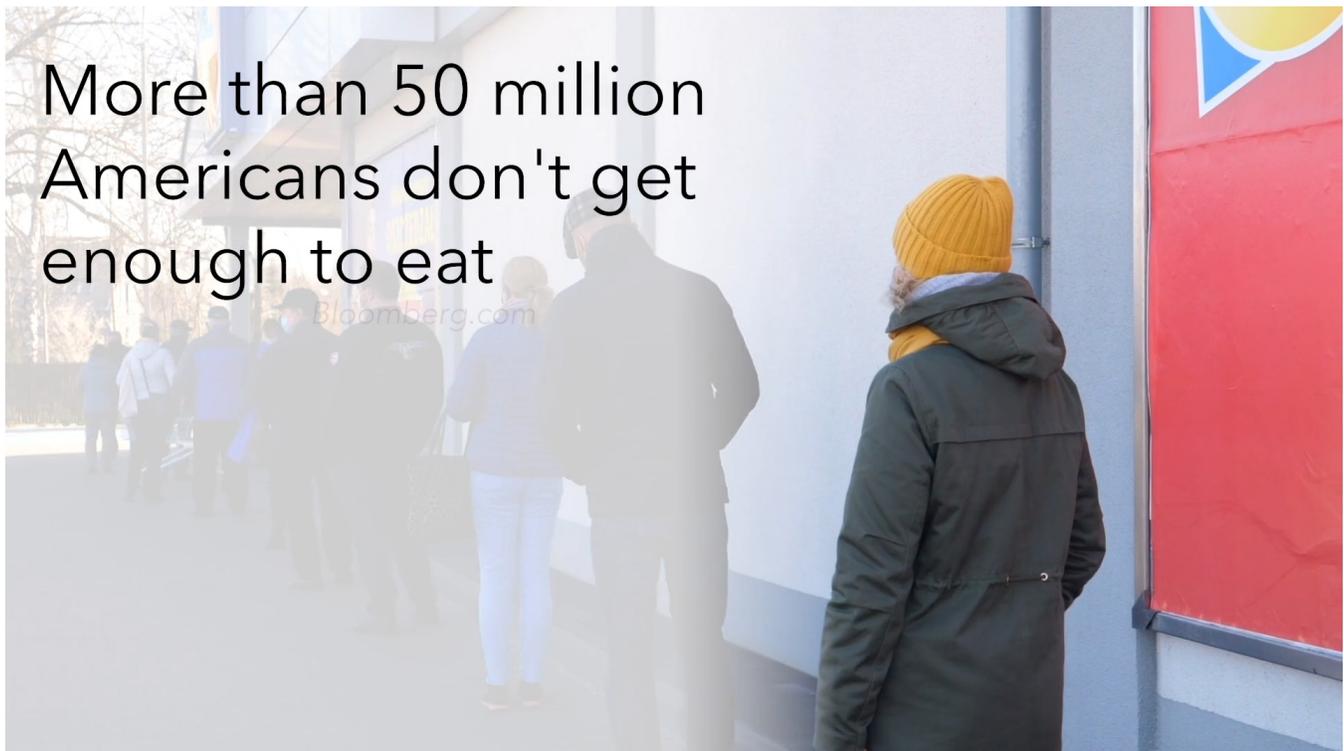
8. Discuss Cesar’s insistence on nonviolence in the following quotation:

“Nonviolence is a very powerful weapon. Most people don’t understand the power of nonviolence and tend to be amazed by the whole idea. Those who have been involved in bringing about change and see the difference between violence and nonviolence are firmly committed to a lifetime of nonviolence, not because it is easy or because it is cowardly, but because it is an effective and very powerful way.”

9. What does his fast reveal about his commitment to nonviolence? Why did Cesar (and Gandhi) commit themselves to a self-damaging regimen? Those who have seen “Gandhi,” in which this also is emphasized,

might compare the two men and its effectiveness.

10. In connection with the above, what did the scene in which a priest is leading in the Rite of Confession add to the story? What contrasting scenes of violence and intimidation are being shown also?
11. How is religious faith a vital element in the struggle? How do we see the Catholic church serving the farmworkers in a way similar to the role that the Black Protestant churches took up in the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s?
12. How can we see the struggle as one for public opinion, especially as Gov. Ronald Reagan and President Richard Nixon lend their support to the growers?
13. How does the community organizing, networking and advocacy work of Cesar, Dolores and the farmworkers union empower and give concrete solutions to the farmworkers who are trapped in a system of poverty and exploitation? How does this story help us understand that communities living in poverty can find their own solutions and also need solidarity and encouragement from people at all levels of society, from local communities to policymakers and international supporters?
14. It has been many decades since Cesar and Dolores led their campaign. What is the situation of farmworkers in America today in your community or in America? How is immigration policy and law an integral part of the debate? In the past, how were churches involved in the Sanctuary Movement? What are our churches doing today in this area of concern? Two informative resources are available for free from the PC(USA) website:
  - "We Choose Welcome," a very practical resource for those sponsoring one or more refugees/immigrants
  - "Transformation of Churches and Society Through Encounter with New Neighbors," a 43-page booklet.



## Other Good Films

All of these are embedded with links to a full review on [visualparables.org](http://visualparables.org).

[“Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story”](#)

[“God Bless the Child”](#)

[“The Inevitable Defeat of Mister and Pete”](#)

[“The Saint of Fort Washington”](#)

[“The Year of Living Dangerously”](#)

**Author’s Endnote:** Although written by one person, others have also contributed to this set of guides, correcting or modifying some statements and bringing new insights to the fore. I especially want to thank Rebecca Barnes, coordinator of the Presbyterian Hunger Program, who will recognize whole sentences that she suggested for improvement.

The author Dr. Edward McNulty is a Presbyterian minister who for many years was the film reviewer for Presbyterians Today. Three of his 14 books are published by Westminster/John Knox Press: *Praying the Movies I & II* and *FAITH and FILM*. There are many more of his reviews of films dealing with racism and social justice issues at [visualparables.org](http://visualparables.org). Each week he posts new reviews on this website. His most intense exposure to US poverty came from his participation in migrant ministry, the Mississippi Summer Freedom Project, and as pastor of an inner city church.



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