

Sermon: The Power of the Dog

Imagine this scene: it is night in Paris, France. You are driving the streets on a day when there isn't a covid curfew. You turn a corner, and spot three young women standing beside a wall. They have long sticks and what seem to be paint rollers. They are quickly gluing pieces of paper to the wall of an alley that can be seen from the street. They are women in their twenties. One piece of paper after another goes up, a letter on each sheet. Then, suddenly, they are done, and they scatter.¹ On the wall above them they have left a message, written in French: No more femicide.



These simple messages can be found all over France now. They started two years ago. The messages vary.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/23/no-more-shame-the-french-women-breaking-the-law-to-highlight-femicide>



Some say that consent is not optional, others demand that street harassment stop.

Many are concerned with femicide: the stalking and killing of women for being women. This is a popular theme in crime shows: the serial killer who stalks and kills women he does not know personally. Yet this kind of femicide is exceedingly rare, to the point of being a smokescreen for what is really going on. Most women who are killed in Canada are murdered by men they know, half of whom are partners or ex-partners². This holds true all over the world. In the United Kingdom, if you are a mother, you have a greater chance of being murdered by your son than by a stranger.³ Men, by contrast, are usually killed by people outside their family.⁴

Femicide is part of the criminal code in France, the act of killing a woman because she is female. It is also an official crime in many Latin American countries.⁵ It is not in the Canadian criminal code, which still treats all murders as homicides.⁶ The word homicide derives from the Latin word for "man" – "homos".⁷ The law starts with the assumption that murder is about the murder of men. In an age of feminism, killing women for being women is all too common. As with racist acts,

² <https://www.femicideincanada.ca/about/trends>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/aug/15/victims-of-femicide-are-shamefully-ignored-in-strategy-on-violence-against-women>

⁴ <https://www.femicideincanada.ca/about/trends>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/feb/25/mexico-femicide-frida-guerrera>

⁶ <https://www.femicideincanada.ca/courts>

⁷ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/homicide>

the media and society as a whole likes to blame individual, deviant men for the crime, and deny that there may be something bigger going on. We seem reluctant to have an honest discussion about it, so women must paste up messages in the cover of night on alley walls.

Jane Campion's movie *The Power of the Dog* is an exploration of what this kind of women hating looks like. It is set in 1925, on a ranch in Montana. The men appear to be classic cowboys – rude, hyper masculine, macho. The story centers on two brothers, Phil, and George. They own the ranch.



Phil is played by Benedict Cumberbatch, an angry, macho man who, in time, we discover is secretly gay. His younger brother George is more refined and gentler. Tired of being alone in the big ranch house,



George woos and marries Rose, who is played by Kirsten Dunst. She is a widow who has been running a restaurant. She has a grown son, Peter. He is the opposite of the cowboys.



He is gentle, seemingly meek, and mild. He is rail thin, appears to be physically weak and effeminate, or perhaps just gender neutral. One thing is for sure: he is no cowboy.

He and his mother move to the ranch. Here, they are psychologically taunted and tortured by Phil. He deeply resents anyone stealing the affections of his brother

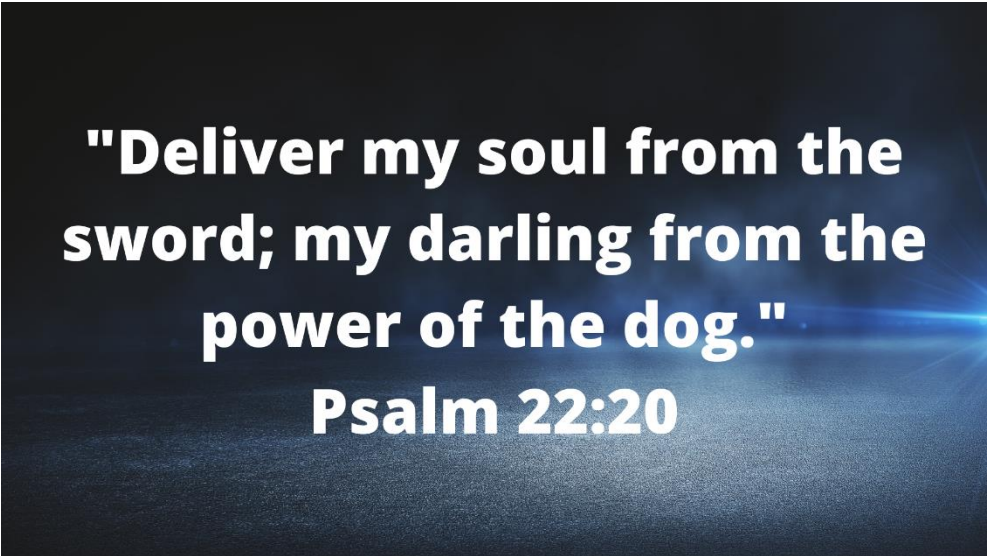
George, so he makes fun of the young man while he psychologically manipulates Rose. She turns to alcohol and spirals into depression.

Now I have to provide a spoiler because this is the kind of film that seems very odd until the last minute. Rose's son Peter, who seems so weak and spineless, has found a way to protect his mother from Phil's unrelenting psychological abuse. Using his medical knowledge from school, he poisons Phil with anthrax, entering a cut in his hand. Phil dies of the wound, a perfect crime that looks like an accident. Peter has protected his mother, and at the end of the film, he stows away the lasso rope under his bed. His mother will now be able to have a good life with George.

This film packs a punch, because few people would suspect that Peter would have the strength of character to murder Phil. We buy into the idea that it is the macho cowboys who do the killing in Westerns, not the weak city boy. This film works because it shows the audience that all of us have been watching with classic patriarchal values in mind. Cowboys kill, not weak men with ambiguous sexuality and gender.

The twist in the movie becomes clear only when Peter opens a book to read the 22nd Psalm, which we heard earlier today. In it, we see the line,

"Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog"
Psalm 22:20



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power of the dog."
Psalm 22:20**

In the psalms, the writers often cry out for God's help. Indeed, we're all familiar with the first line of this psalm, because Jesus quotes it from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In the psalms, people never ask for help to commit acts of vengeance. There are no psalms that pray for weapons, or for a good day in battle when the writer can murder his enemies. Instead, psalms God to intervene, to provide protection. And in the Hebrew Scriptures, God does intervene, often by sending avenging angels. Like the ones who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

In Jane Campion's film, Peter is Rose's son, but he also acts like an avenging angel. He spends the film dressed in white – a pristine white shirt, and he chooses to wear white shoes at the ranch, even when everyone else is covered in dirt and dung. He seems a bit otherworldly, floating through each scene.



We see him with halo shapes, from a hula hoop at the beginning of the film, to the coil of rope he uses to poison Phil.

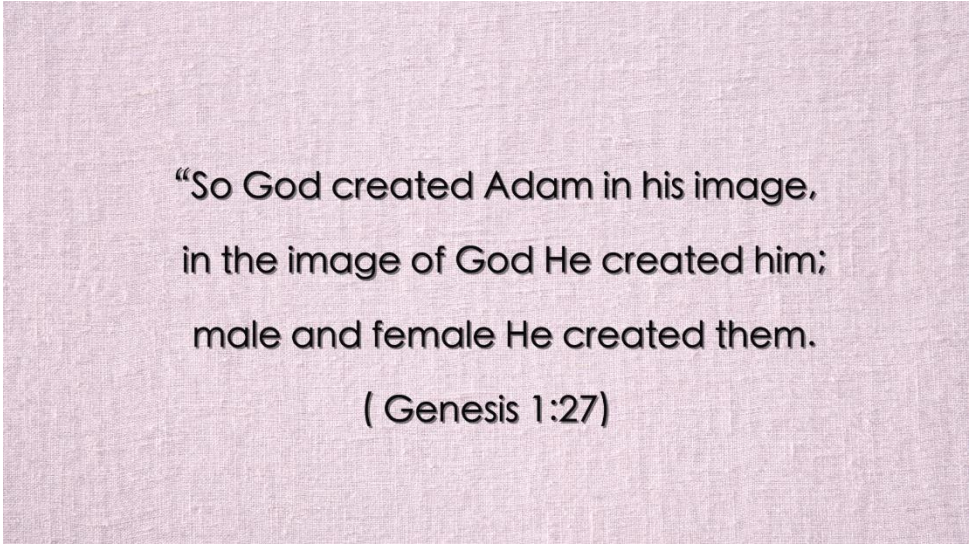
In Psalm 22, the writer calls for God to save his darling from the abuse of the power of the dog. Tradition has it that King David wrote the psalms, so when the psalm asks for protection, it is for David. But who is the "darling" in this film? It is clearly Peter's beloved mother, Rose. She is being hounded by Phil, and he is the one whom Peter kills to end the abuse. In one curious scene, Rose is drunk and speaks to Peter about a school days memory of being given a star by her teacher.

As she tells the story, she draws a star of David with her finger in some split sugar. She is the darling who needs to be saved.

But that raises a thornier question: who and what is the power of the dog? At one level, the answer is obvious: Phil, the macho cowboy is the dog. Yet, the film makes it very clear that Phil is as much a victim as a tormentor. Being gay in the macho, patriarchal world of cowboys means that Phil must lead a secret life. Being unable to be honest about his sexuality, he compensates by being hyper masculine. He explicitly condemns any show of tenderness or kindness among men. He presents a front of being all male, all the time, and weakness of any kind will not be tolerated.

Campion could have portrayed Phil as a cruel psychopath, but she doesn't. The film doesn't ask us to hate Phil, but to see that he is a victim of the power of the dog. That power is the idea that straight, masculine men should be in charge at all times. That value system sees weakness and gentleness as a feminine trait that should only be found in women. Men are tough, women are soft. It's a way of seeing gender which is ancient, and which has made life hell for men and women who refuse to fit into these stereotypes.

Many justify this patriarchal definition of gender by quoting the Bible. They go to Genesis, in the garden of Eden. There we read,



“So God created Adam in his image,
in the image of God He created him;
male and female He created them.
(Genesis 1:27)

X“So, God created Adam in his image,

in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

These words are taken to mean that men should act like men, women like women. But we are told that God made humanity in the image of God, and to do that takes the male and female. If God had only made a male Adam, this would not have been a full reflection of the nature of God. God is composed of masculine and feminine traits, which suggests that as the image of God, we are, too. Not just as two genders, but as each individual. Each person is a mix of masculine and feminine traits, strength and gentleness, action and passivity, anger, and nurturing. In our patriarchal society, we are told that men should only possess male traits, and women feminine ones. We pretend that we can delegate one part of our personality onto the other gender.



But in practice, that never works. In the film, Phil is tortured by his inability to express his gentle side – the cowboy culture won't allow it. So, he overcompensates by insisting on hyper masculinity from all the men around him. He hates his own feminine side so much that he hates it in Rose, too. All the characters are affected by this patriarchal system.

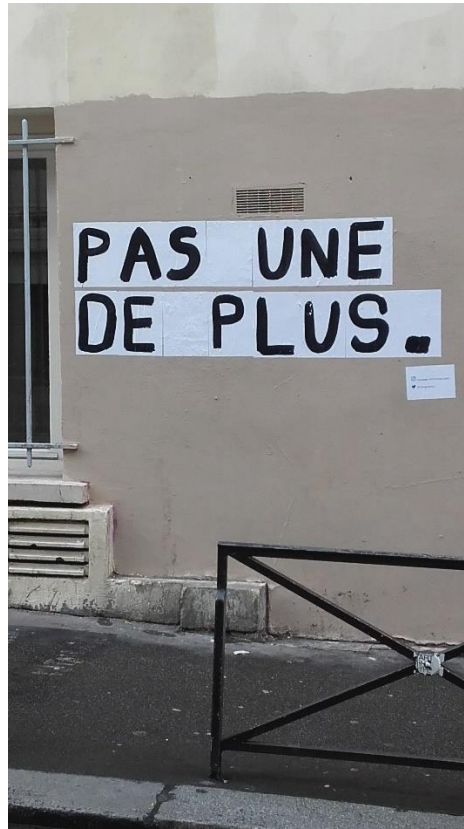


The only character who has an integrated personality is Rose's son, Peter. Peter, whose name which means "rock." He is completely confident in his identity, which is an interesting mix of masculine and feminine traits.

He can be gentle, and he can be aggressive, even murderous. He never reacts to the taunts which he receives from the other cowboys.

As Christians, we must struggle with two images of what gender means. On the one hand, we have traditional interpretations of the Genesis account. On the other, we have Christ's example. Jesus is strong, courageous, able to stand up to his critics, and endure enormous amounts of physical pain. In this respect, he is very masculine. But he is also nurturing, gentle and understanding. He prevents his followers from using violence and chooses to be killed than to strike back or defend himself. These yielding and nurturing aspects of his character are traditional feminine traits. Our image of God, God in human form, appears as a rich blend of masculine and feminine traits. He is meant to be our role model, a reminder of what a rich human personality can look like, be like, act like.

The film encourages us to see that the way modern society defines gender is a poisonous warping of who we are as human beings. It is set in 1925 among cowboys, but the gender identities it portrays are alive and well in 2022. They account for the stalking, taunting and murder of women now.



Those values are why young women risk being arrested in Paris, plastering up signs asking men to stop killing women. Feminism has sparked a deep and cruel backlash in our society.

Abortion rights are being rolled back all over the world, in Texas it is legal to hunt down women who want abortions. Men kill women every day, often because they refuse to be controlled, they refuse to be the caricatures their partners want them to be. The power of the dog is still with us, in our homes and on the streets.

But in real life, there will be no avenging angel like Peter to rescue women. That is work we all need to do. And it starts with recognizing that the problem is not with some men who kill, but with a way of looking at gender which is unrealistic and dangerous for all of us. In the past sixty years, women have made great strides in reclaiming their masculine side. Pop stars show the shift: Beyonce and Taylor Swift are women who can be feminine and ambitious, strong, and soft. There is no contradiction, just full, vibrant personalities.

Men have made progress, too. We are less likely to be the chauvinist pigs of the 1960s when women were considered the weaker sex. In our relationships, we are allowed to be more nurturing and kind. But that side of ourselves is still not okay in public. Our male heroes still don't cry and are more likely to solve a problem with violence than negotiation, based on what we see in the movies. In our church, we explore the nature of what it means to be human in various ways: through Bible classes, meditation, prayer services, and various online talks. Very few men show up for these, even when they take place at night. Men still feel uncomfortable being vulnerable in public. We are more comfortable talking about facts and issues than feelings. Yet, exploring that side of our personality in public is important work, for everyone's sake. We are made in God's image, masculine and feminine.

When we draw on both sides of our God-created personality, we can be extraordinary people. They are a gift, which is never too late to receive. And with it, we can all defeat the power of the dog.

Amen.