It Isn't Religion That's the Problem

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

Last week, Eleanor Wachtel interviewed Lebanese film maker and director Nadine Labaki on her program, "Writers and Company." Labaki became the first Arab woman to win a major prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018 for her third film "Capernaum," a drama about the lives of immigrant and impoverished children in Beirut.

Labaki grew up in Beirut during the civil war in Lebanon. In her films, she tells the stories of the women and children affected by war. "Capernaum" tells the story of religious tensions in an isolated village. She explains the origin of the idea. "One night as I was coming back from a dinner party. I saw a lady on the street, on a very tight, very tiny sidewalk. She had a baby with her, who was maybe one–and–a–half years old, and he was trying to sleep. The only thing he needed in the world was just to close his eyes and sleep and he couldn't. I was so angry, and it hit me—that narrow sidewalk would be his playground for the next few years. This is where he will experience life. When I got home, I drew the face of a child, shouting at adults. It all started from there.

"I started doing research. I went to many very difficult places in Lebanon. I went to court, wanting to understand: how does the system work? How does the system try to find a solution for these kids or try to find structure for these kids? What happens when a kid like that faces abuse or neglect? Where does she go? How do we treat this problem?

"I went to a detention centre for minors, talking to kids and wanting to understand their point of view on life. I asked them, 'Are you happy to be alive?' and ninety–nine per cent of them answered, 'No, I'm not. I don't know why I'm here. Is it just to be punished? Is this my reason to be alive? Why can't I eat when I'm hungry? Why can't I find affection? I want the love I deserve.'

"There was a lot of anger in most of these kids and that's how my movie turned into this story of a kid who was going to sue his parents [for giving him life], but through suing his parents, he's actually suing the whole system."

It was heartbreaking for me to listen to this interview. It was a slice of life which I, in my comfortable middle–class existence, never see. Labaki continued, "These kids are facing very harsh and extreme situations."

The conversation shifted to the role of religion in the conflict in Lebanon. Since Lebanon's population is two–thirds Muslim and one–third Christian, there is a significant amount of religious conflict. In an earlier film, Labaki told the story of a group of women in a village who determine to bring people together rather than divide them. They stand up against their husbands and the other men in the village who are so willing to go to war to fight for religion or some other principle. Every family has been touched by the tragedy of war.

Eleanor Wachtel observes that the women in the film are strong and resourceful, while the men are mostly hotheaded and foolish. At one point, a young widow explodes and cries out angrily to the men, "Have you learned nothing? It's enough to make us lose our faith. Do you think we're just here to mourn you, to wear black forever?"

Labaki tells us that she saw her neighbours turning into enemies in a few hours as the civil war raged in Beirut. She wondered, "Why does this happen? Here we are: we drink the same water, we breathe the same air, we walk on the same streets, we eat the same food, and people turn into enemies overnight? What is wrong?

“What if my son was 18 (she was pregnant at the time), and he killed my neighbour’s son? How would I react? How would I stop him? It’s natural to want to protect your family and your home, but how would I react as a mother?”

Wachtel asks whether religion is the problem. Labaki responds, “Yes, partly. Religion is definitely part of the problem in my land. But it’s not religion itself; it’s the way we interpret religion, how we use our religion. The deeper problem is the fact that we do not tolerate somebody else’s ritual, or the way we behave, or the colour we wear. The heart of the problem is that we do not tolerate somebody being different than we are. It comes out of ignorance.”

Labaki’s answer sticks with me. Religion itself is not the problem; it’s how we use religion.

Artists like Labaki have a way of getting to the heart of the story in a single image, a single phrase, a single sentence. It struck me powerfully that her observation is true of so much of what is wrong in our world. For a thousand different reasons, people take what is good and holy and end up using it for destructive ends out of fear and ignorance.

Somebody asked me the other day how it is possible in this world, which is so angry and divided, how can we remain hopeful and compassionate?

Labaki helps me answer that. I try to use my faith for good, for healing, for making a positive impact in the world. I try hard not to give in to the fear and ignorance all around us.

Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland, counsels us on staying hopeful: “Being human in the face of grief, loss, conflict, and inequality is a constant act of resistance and refusal.”

I will resist being unsympathetic, unfeeling, intolerant. I will refuse to become cynical. I will choose the way of compassion, hope, and love.