

From the Chapel – May 25: Meet John Doe

[“From the Chapel”](#) is a series of short, daily reflections on life and faith in a time of uncertainty. As people across the world cope with the effects of the coronavirus – including the social isolation necessary to combat its spread – these reflections remind us of the hope that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

Last night, after I returned from [the sparsely attended 5 p.m. Mass](#) at Sts. Peter and Paul here in Huntington, we grabbed a couple of big bowls of popcorn that Amy had popped and headed to the Upper Room to watch a movie. We used to call the Upper Room – the large, open space on the third floor of our house that we use as a family room – the ballroom, after a local urban legend that the original owners who built the house in 1882 had used it as a ballroom. Over the last nine or ten weeks of worshipping from home, I’ve begun to call it the Upper Room, because that’s where we streamed Mass.

As usual, we couldn’t agree on a film, until somehow I convinced everyone to watch the trailer for [“Meet John Doe,”](#) Frank Capra’s largely forgotten 1941 film that builds on some of the themes of “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (1939) and presages others found in “It’s a Wonderful Life” (1946). Filmed and released before the United States officially entered World War II, it’s a remarkable snapshot of a country still struggling with the last effects of the Great Depression and moving toward an American version of national socialism.

It’s been perhaps 20 years since I last watched “Meet John Doe,” and I had forgotten that the ending is rather anticlimactic compared with either “Mr. Smith” or “It’s a Wonderful Life.” The high point of the movie (though not its climax) comes when the title character, a man being paid to

pretend that he wrote a letter threatening to commit suicide on Christmas Eve in protest of the way government and business had left the little man behind, delivers a radio speech designed not to attack the system but to offer an alternative vision of life in the United States – but one that builds on everything that our national myths tell us we are.

That speech is pure Frank Capra, a different view of George Bailey's desperate attempt to explain to the people of Bedford Falls how the money they've deposited in the savings and loan has built other's houses and strengthened their community: "[Y]our teammate, my friend, is the guy next door to you. Your neighbor – he's a terribly important guy, that guy next door. You're gonna need him and he's gonna need you, so look him up. If he's sick, call on him. If he's hungry, feed him. If he's out of a job, find him one. ...

"To most of you, your neighbor is a stranger, a guy with a barkin' dog and high fence around him. Now, you can't be a stranger to any guy that's on your own team. So tear down the fence that separates you. Tear down the fence and you'll tear down a lot of hates and prejudices. Tear down all the fences in the country and you'll really have teamwork. ...

"Yes sir, my friends, the meek can only inherit the earth when the John Doe's start lovin' their neighbors."

Sounds pretty corny, doesn't it? And yet Capra has hit here on the essence of community. American culture swings back and forth between idolizing small-town life and damning it for its narrow-mindedness and prejudices. But the downsides of community, like the downsides of family, are often the things we have to put up with to enjoy the upsides.

John Doe's speech inspires people across the country to reach out to their neighbors, to introduce themselves, to band together and start helping one another. The scenes are so simple that they, like the speech, seem corny – for instance,

a wife telling her husband to say good morning to the grumpy neighbor they've never spoken to before, and the neighbor responding warmly, noting that he'd wanted to reach out himself but never knew how.

But having done similar things myself, having overcome my own reluctance to speak with others and my own innate desire to be left alone, I can assure you there's nothing corny about it. Sometimes, the simplest things are the hardest ones to do, yet they are what community requires – and they are what is required of us as Christians.

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