Love Has No Boundaries (2012)

Stefan Mukoski

Valparaiso University

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In the movie *Philadelphia*, the character Joe Miller learns that love is many-sided and that it has no barriers. He also learns that the power of love allows us to endure great physical and emotional hardships. Joe evolved from a homophobic and narrow-minded, flashy and rather greedy lawyer into a more tolerant human being. He became a man who fought for a cause with the hope that he could be part of justice being done to a person who was unfairly treated and fired.

Joe Miller represents the common man’s viewpoint of homosexuality and ignorance of the AIDS epidemic of the early 1990’s. Perhaps it was his upbringing, which he alluded to while talking with Andrew Beckett after the Halloween party, which made him think the way he did. In the movie Joe said,

Let me tell you something, Andrew, when you’re brought up the way I am, the way most people are, there’s not a whole lot of discussion about homosexuality. . . . As a kid, you’re taught that queers are funny, queers are weird, queers dress up like their mothers, that they’re afraid to fight, that they’re a danger to little kids, and that the only thing that they want to do is to get into
your pants. And that pretty much sums up the general thinking out there, if you want to know the truth.

It was difficult for Joe to drop all of his previous misconceptions about homosexuality, but through his association with Andrew and Miguel and their friends, both gay and non-gay, his views started to slowly change. You could sense this as he was watching Andrew and Miguel dancing to a slow dance during the Halloween party. He saw the sincere love and care that Andrew and Miguel had for each other; it was similar to a relationship between a man and woman. He also saw the unconditional love and acceptance by Andrew and Miguel’s families. Joe also learned of Andrew Beckett’s humor, intelligence, work ethics, and his brilliance and passion for the law. Andrew was no longer just a “homosexual” in Joe’s eyes, but rather a funny, intelligent, and caring son, brother, uncle, and friend.

As to the AIDS epidemic, most people in the 1980’s and 90’s were not well informed of the disease, nor of the ways it was transmitted. Because of this ignorance, people were terrified of possibly being infected. According to Andrew, in the early 1980’s, the gay community did not know much of the deadly disease, which was later called AIDS, that was attacking them. They knew that there was a so-called “gay plague or gay cancer,” but they did not know how they could get it or that it was fatal. Not only were the people in the United States in the
early 1990’s afraid of contracting AIDS, but they were also afraid of
talking about it. After learning that Andrew Beckett had AIDS, Joe Miller
became afraid that he could have become infected even by only shaking
his hand. He immediately made an appointment to see his family doctor
who tried to reassure him that there was no danger of infection since the
HIV virus can only be transmitted through bodily fluids. Today, at least
in the United States, we all are better informed about AIDS; its ways of
transmission and treatments, and the taboo of someone having AIDS are
slowly decreasing. The changes in Joe’s behavior regarding AIDS were
noticeable as time went on; he became comfortable sitting next or close
to Andrew, and he did not hesitate to drink coffee that was prepared by
him. Towards the end of the movie, when Joe visited Andrew at the
hospital, he sat on his hospital bed and touched his face as he adjusted
his oxygen mask—there was no fear of possible contamination.

When Andrew first approached Joe Miller about taking on his case,
Joe refused the offer once he found out that Andrew had AIDS. I also
think that Joe felt it would be difficult for him to win the case against the
prestigious law firm of Wyatt and Wheeler. However, he later became
involved after he observed a staff member of the Law Library trying to
persuade Andrew to relocate into an isolated research room—Joe felt the
injustice of this discrimination because of Andrew’s illness. He also
became interested in the case as he learned more of the events leading
up to Andrew’s job termination. In addition, I think that Joe saw an opportunity to gain public exposure and fame by representing Andrew.

Once the trial started, Joe presented to the jury the issue of Andrew’s sexual preference and AIDS illness and the unsubstantiated firing by his employers. Joe Miller stated that the senior partners of the law firm probably panicked when they learned that Andrew was gay and had AIDS, “which is what most of us would like to do with AIDS—that is, to get it and everybody that has it as far away from the rest of us.” However, Joe added, by firing Andrew, the senior partners broke the law, since the Federal Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination against otherwise qualified handicapped persons who are able to perform the duties required by their employment, and AIDS is protected as a handicap under the law. Joe believed a great injustice was made towards Andrew when the senior partners fired him since Andrew was a brilliant lawyer. Later that day, Joe said to reporters that it was ironic that they were standing in Philadelphia, “the city of brotherly love,” the birthplace of freedom, where the founding fathers offered the Declaration of Independence in which it does not say anything about “all straight men are created equal,” but rather “all men are created equal.”

Joe’s exposure to homosexuality and AIDS forced him to reassess his own values and preconceived ideas. It opened the door for
communication with his wife Lisa about homosexuality and how much more prevalent it was among their family members, friends, and coworkers. Joe became more accepting of people’s differences over time. Also, his exposure to illness and death made him appreciate his family much more.

Denzel Washington’s portrayal of Joe Miller was excellent. Through his superb acting, Washington showed us how narrow-mindedness and prejudices hurt not only the people that are directly affected, but their families as well. *Philadelphia* showed us that love is multifaceted and that there shouldn’t be barriers in loving another person. It revealed that love can withstand all emotional and physical stresses.