

## FENCES Discussion Guide

### INTRODUCTION



Academy Award winner Denzel Washington directs and stars in the powerful and moving drama, *FENCES*. Adapted by legendary writer August Wilson from his own renowned play, *FENCES* follows former Negro-league baseball player Troy Maxson (Washington) in 1950s Pittsburgh as he fights to provide for those he loves in a world that threatens to push him down. An unforgettable and timeless masterpiece, *FENCES* “connects with people on a deep, emotional level” (Glenn Whipp, *Los Angeles Times*) and pulses with the universal truths of love and forgiveness, despite what lies beyond your own fence.

Now that *Fences* is available to own, it's the perfect time to view it for the first time or to watch it again with friends and family. Below are a series of short discussion starters to spark conversations around this timely and timeless film.

### VICTIMS & VIOLATORS

Perhaps more shockingly and truthfully than any other film, *Fences* reminds us that we are all victims and violators. We suffer at the hands of others' racism, sexism, xenophobia, and abuse. We are belittled, shamed, and denied the opportunity to be our fullest selves. Such is the case with Troy Maxson, a Pittsburgh garbage man, who was once a promising baseball player in the Negro Leagues. He complains about a missed—or robbed—opportunity to play in the Major Leagues. Whether or not he was as talented as he claimed to have been—we don't see him on the field—he consistently talks about the racism of white managers and owners keeping him down. What we do see, is Troy having to fight for a promotion—garbage truck driver—that comes easily to his white counterparts.

At the same time, however, Troy is also a violator. He spent time in prison for murder, which is perhaps the real reason he missed his shot at the Big Leagues. Years later, he is verbally and physically abusive to his wife and youngest son. He denies his son Cory, another talented athlete, the opportunity to play football. He tells him that the white coaches just want to use and exploit him. He expresses nothing close to love or

compassion for his son. Cory doesn't have the opportunity to be his true self. Troy is also abusive to his wife Rose. He does not honor her wishes, frequently belittles her, and, worst of all, cheats on her time and time again. All of this abuse makes Rose feel like less of a person.

*Fences* is an important film because, to varying degrees, it holds up a mirror to our conflicted identities. Like Troy, we are all victims and violators. We should express humility when we are tempted to judge others, recognizing that we cause harm in ways we can't fully understand. When we are victimized by others, perhaps we can practice patience, knowing that our tormentors suffer too.

### **Questions for Considerations**

1. How are you both victim and violator?
2. Can you see your enemy as a victim too? How could this vision help bring about reconciliation?

### **OUR OWN WORST ENEMIES**

As we mentioned above, Troy is a victim. Living in the times and places that he does in the film, he no doubt experienced the racism and marginalization that many African Americans in the real world experienced in those times and places, marginalization that continues even today. Even if Troy's prison time robbed him of precious time on the baseball field, it is still true that many black men were denied the right to play in the Big Leagues simply because the color of their skin.

But like all of us, Troy is a complex character living in a complicated world. There's a chance that some of his frustrations are the products of his own imagination. Troy, in many ways, is his own worst enemy. He takes his real experiences of being neglected or slighted and wallows in anger and hatred years after the initial experience. He takes this anger and frustration out on his wife and son. He could be a better father to Cory and help give him the life he didn't have. He makes Rose's life more difficult than it should be, which, in turn, makes it harder for her to give him the love and respect he needs and craves.

Real threats and real suffering abound in our world. We can't discount those experiences. Yet we are often slow to forgive and are quick to anger. We let wounds fester and infect our lives and relationships with one another. We become our own worst enemies. We must be able to process painful experiences and work to heal wounds so that we can better love and serve others.

### **Questions for Consideration**

1. How have you nursed old wounds? Do they infect the rest of your life or have you found healing?
2. When have you been your own worst enemy?

### **THE SINS OF THE FATHER**

Troy is a tough character. It's hard to feel sympathetic for him much of the time. However, later in the film, we learn that he was also raised by an abusive father. As reprehensible as his actions towards Cory are, in one way, Troy is simply embodying the parenting lessons he observed or was taught as a child. He is perpetuating a cycle of violence that is often very difficult to break.

Scripture points to something like this in the book of Exodus. Before Moses begins to prepare the tablets for the Ten Commandments, the Lord passes before him and proclaims, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." While these are complex verses open to multiple interpretations—some of which, no doubt have been used for negative purposes—they do express an understanding of human nature. Children are aware of and vulnerable to their parents' actions and behavior.

So much of our brokenness is cyclical. We are implicitly or explicitly taught ways of being that are not conducive to building a just and equitable world. Tracing the path of those cycles will begin to help us break them so that we can better model God's love for the world.

### **Questions for Consideration**

1. What are the cycles of brokenness in your families and communities?
2. What is your community of faith doing to address these?

### **THE LOVE OF A MOTHER**

One of the strongest characters in recent film, Rose is a rock. She stands by Troy, even when he is at his most abusive and unfaithful. She loves Troy's first son, Lyons, like her own, even though he isn't. She supports Cory's dreams and does everything that she can to convince Troy to let him play football. But there have been few examples of selfless love more powerful than Rose's decision to bring Troy's daughter, Raynell, into her home after the child's mother dies. Rose does so knowing full well that this child will be a constant reminder of her husband's infidelity, yet she loves her like she's her

own daughter. And as the family gathers for Troy's funeral years later, she still manages to find the strength to honor her husband's memory.

Rose wears a small cross around her neck through much of the film. It's a small and tasteful nod to her character and to the Christ-like love that she embodies. There's a fine line between unconditional love and living in an abusive relationship, and Rose walks it with dignity and grace. She stands up for herself at every turn, even though she has every right to just walk away. However, her love for Troy and his children compels her to stay.

### **Questions for Consideration**

1. Talk about the Roses in your life. Who are they? How did they love?
2. How is your community of faith practicing such selfless love and care?

### **GOD'S MESSENGER**

Troy's brother Gabriel is a World War II veteran suffering from brain damage. He wanders around the streets of Pittsburgh with a busted trumpet, claiming to be a messenger of God. The neighbors tease or play along with him, but Troy truly cares for him, defends him, and provides him with a place to stay. Their relationship is part of Troy's complex character and something that endears him to us.

Perhaps Gabriel's belief that he is God's messenger is a result of his brain damage. But what if he really is? What if Gabriel and others like him—the least, the lost, and the left out—are God's messengers to us? We hear as much in scripture when Jesus says, in Matthew 25: 35-40, "[...For] 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.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

This is God's message to us and God's instructions for how we are to be and love like God. Our treatment of "the least of these" speaks loudly about who we truly are.

### **Questions for Consideration**

1. Who are the Gabriel's in your life?
2. How does your faith community interact with those Gabriel's?

## WE NEED NATHANS

Troy's friend Bono is an important person in his life. He is a friend, a companion, a confidant, and a critic. Bono listens to and laughs at Troy's jokes and tall tales, and he commiserates with his suffering, but he also points out Troy's flaws and warns him about wandering away from a more righteous path. He pleads with Troy to be faithful to Rose and constantly reminds him of what a special, incredible woman she is. In all of this, Bono recalls an important biblical character.

In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan recounts for David a story about a rich man abusing a poor man. The story so affects David that he would proclaim a death sentence on the rich man. Then Nathan makes a dramatic turn: "Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight'" (7-9).

We often walk through life wearing thick blinders. We don't see clearly the way our actions harm others both near and far. We need people like Nathan in our lives to point out our failings and to help us be and do better. We need to be Nathan to our friends and neighbors, lovingly pointing out their shortcomings too so that we can better partner together in the healing of our communities and our world.

### Questions for Consideration

1. Have you ever been a Nathan to someone? What was that like?
2. Who has been Nathan to you? How did that feel? Were you able to take their criticism to heart?