

Session Three

“Lars and the Real Girl”

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour and 46 minutes.

(Love) hopes all things, endures all things ...

When I was a child, I spoke like a child,

I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;

when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

1 Corinthians 13:7 and 11

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. Welcome one

another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. — Romans 15:1-2 and 7

This is a humorous but touching film showing what a Matthew 25 congregation might be like as the people embrace a deluded young man. I am not sure if Paul's exact words to the Romans fit Lars Lindstrom and his family and friends in this film, but if we could substitute “weird” for “weak,” it certainly would. What a delight to see a filmmaker portray the church and a pastor in such a positive way, as director Craig Gillespie and scriptwriter Nancy Oliver do in what has to be described as a most quirky little film.

One day a large crate arrives at Lars' lodgings, located in a remodeled garage behind the large family home inhabited by his brother, Gus, and sister-in-law, Karin; a delivery that changes the life of not only the three of them, but also that of virtually everyone in their small town. Karin calls Lars at the office to inform him of the unusual parcel, and uncharacteristically, he rushes home, even though quitting time is hours away. The next thing we know, the ultra-shy Lars, who has always turned down Karin's many invitations to breakfast or dinner, shows up at their door to introduce them to “Bianca.”

Karen and Gus are a bit surprised that Lars has initiated the visit, because he has turned down all of her previous invitations to share a meal with them. When they look at Lars' companion, Bianca, they are speechless for a moment. They glance quickly at each other for some clue as to how they should react. Bianca is one of those “anatomically correct” latex “babes” peddled over the internet. In an earlier scene, the porno-loving geek who shares an office cubicle with Lars had shown his coworker the webpage where one could customize a life-size doll and then order it. At the time, Lars quickly turned away from the screen. His painful shyness has been such that he has avoided all social contact, even with his family, and any mention of sex embarrasses him. Indeed, part of his discomfort around Karin is because she is pregnant.

Treating the doll as if it were a real person, Lars says that Bianca is a paraplegic missionary, of mixed Brazilian and Danish parentage. Led by Karin, Gus plays along, even to the extent of allowing Bianca to move into their spare bedroom. Karin rounds up some of her clothes for Bianca, and they locate a wheelchair so that



Lars can transport her around the house and town. Soon, Lars, who had hitherto stayed alone in his apartment, is taking Bianca everywhere.

It's fun watching the reactions of those meeting Bianca for the first time — shock, puzzlement, the latter over how they should react. To the credit of the people, those who know and love Lars play along, overcoming any objections that others who are skeptical raise. Margo (Kelli Garner) a co-worker at the office who has some neatness issues, defends Lars, and if he were not so shy, would have gone out with him. Like his family, she accepts Bianca as a real person. This is the advice that Dr. Dagmar (Patricia Clarkson) had given to Karin and Gus when they brought Lars (and Bianca) to her for examination.

The physician, obviously trained also in psychology, announces that Bianca's blood pressure is very low, so she suggests to Lars that he bring her in for treatment on a weekly basis. This ruse allows her to talk with Lars, a good tactic, as she learns how hugs, and even touch such as in a handshake, are painful to him, and it provides Lars with the opportunity at last to talk about himself.

Meanwhile, as word about Lars and his companion spreads throughout the village, a group from the church gathers to decide what they should do. The always-ready-to-help Mrs. Gruner (Nancy Beatty) declares that they should accept and welcome both Lars and Bianca at church on Sunday. When they all turn to and ask their minister, Rev. Bock, for his opinion, he falls back on the old question, "What would Jesus do?" The next scene shows us what the good reverend means — there sitting in the pew with his brother and sister-in-law are Lars and Bianca. (Earlier we had heard a brief portion of his sermon in which he declared that God is a God of love who calls us to love one another.)

Those who love Frank Capra's sentimental films extolling the decency of people will certainly enjoy this one. Ryan Gosling plays Lars straight, and the filmmakers resist any temptation to obtain a laugh at his expense — no campy scenes, but certainly some bizarre, funny ones. If every small town were as supportive as this one, who would want to move to the city? The unusual outcome will cheer the heart and leave you feeling good for a long time. There's no question that God is very much a presence in this film.



For Reflection/Discussion

1. When you first heard that a love doll is at the center of this film, what did you think or feel? How do the filmmakers and actors achieve the right balance throughout the film?
2. Are there any characters with whom you identify? Whom that you have met or known is like Lars? Does your church have a good number of Mrs. Gruners and the “church ladies”?
3. What do you think of the physician’s agreeing with Karin that they should continue to indulge Lars in his fantasy? Of her comment to the reluctant Gus that Bianca “is real” to Lars and that “she is in town for a reason”? Of her method of “treatment” by first getting Lars to talk about Bianca and then himself?
4. What do you think of the scene involving the group of church members? How is Mrs. Gruner’s response typical of her, from what we see of her in other scenes? How is the minister’s WWJD response appropriate? What does he do at the end of the service when the people are leaving? What does Mrs. Gruner do out in the parking lot?
5. How does Lars change because of his delusion and the support of almost everyone? Whom does he begin to notice at the office? Do you think his attraction to Margo contributes to his “argument” with Bianca?
6. How might Karin’s telling Lars that everyone is paying attention to Bianca because they “love you” contribute to Lars’ change? Here’s her little speech, given in response to Lars’ saying that she doesn’t care (about him): “That is just not true! God! Every person in this town bends over backward to make Bianca feel at home. Why do you think she has so many places to go and so much to do? Huh? Huh? Because of you! Because — all these people — love you! We push her wheelchair. We drive her to work. We drive her home. We wash her. We dress her. We get her up and put her to bed. We carry her. And she is not petite, Lars. Bianca is a big, big girl! None of this is easy — for any of us — but we do it. ... Oh! We do it for you! So don’t you dare tell me how we don’t care.”
7. Another good exchange is between Lars and his brother, Gus, when the latter responds to Lars’ question about what is right — that it is “like when you decide what is right not just for you, but for everyone. Even when it is hard.” He goes on by saying how their father took care of them “even though he had a broken heart” (over the death of their mother). He apologizes for leaving home as soon as he could because of the melancholy that had settled into their household.
8. How does Lars reach out to Margo at the office? How is this a sign that he is moving toward “wholeness”? When he tells Margo that he will be free because Bianca has been elected to the school board and must attend a meeting, how did you feel? What does this show about the level of support the townspeople have been giving him?
9. At the bowling alley when the newcomers saw Lars, Margo and Bianca, what did you expect to happen? Did you think that they were about to intrude and upset matters? How does this instead become a lovely little moment of solidarity, of celebration?

10. What do you think of the way in which Lars begins to change his relationship with Bianca? What do you think was the filmmakers' intention by inserting a portion of another of Rev. Bock's sermons? What do St. Paul's words have to do with Lars? How is the doctor again an important factor in supporting Lars when Karin and Gus come to her and ask, "How can you let this happen?"

11. What is it that Mrs. Gruner and her two knitting friends say when they come to Lars' home during Bianca's "illness"? How is "just sitting" often the best ministry of the church to those in need, especially those grieving?

12. How does Lars' "solution" to his problem of relating to Bianca and to Margo seem appropriate for his condition, as well as satisfying for the story? How are the minister's words appropriate and true? Can you see this little story as one more of the "mysterious ways" in which God reaches out "his wonders to perform"?

13. How might this film contribute to a deeper awareness of the nature and role of your church? Look over the seven marks of congregational vitality in the article "Building Congregational Vitality." Which ones can you see in this church?

14. We do not see a great deal of Rev. Bock, but from what we do see, what seems to be his view of the role of a pastor? How would you characterize his preaching? How is the pastor a vital part for changing a congregation?

