

"The Musical and the Gospel"

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II Corinthians 5:16-21

Our passage this morning is from Paul's 2nd letter to the Church at Corinth. Corinth was and is a city in Greece, about 50 miles southwest of Athens. Paul uses a wonderful word here to describe the heart of the Good News of Christ. He says it's all about *reconciliation*. Let's take a look. II Corinthians 5:16-21:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

I'd like to talk to you this morning about the Broadway Musical and the Christian Gospel. Having the cast of Bye Bye Birdie here this morning sparked a memory of a conversation I had with my favorite professor in college, Dr. Nelvin Vos. Dr. Vos was the chair of the English department. I actually remember some of his lectures, and some of his insights about the books and plays we studied. Mostly I remember how much he loved the material we studied and how he taught every book, every play as if it was the greatest thing ever written.

One day after class I was chatting with Dr. Vos and I happen to mention that I was playing in the pit band for the college's production of Guys and Dolls. Knowing that I was planning on going to seminary, Dr. Vos said, "You know, the Bible and most Broadway Musicals have the same storyline." From what I had caught from the rehearsals of Guys and Dolls, I didn't instantly see the connection! But then he explained the overall theme of most musicals. It goes something like this.

Act I is "Boy meets Girl."

Boy meets girl, and they fall in love. Most musicals are love stories, aren't they? The great lyricist, Tim Rice: "Every story is a love story." And certainly that's true of most musicals.

- In "Guys & Dolls" it's Sky Masterson & Sarah Brown.
- Who can forget Captain Von Trapp & Maria?
- Or Don Quixote and Dulcinea
- Or West Side Story's Tony and Maria

And some of the greatest moments in musicals come when the love that someone is feeling gets put to music.

- "Maria, Maria, I Just Met a Girl named Maria."
- "Make of our Hands, One Hand, Make of our Hearts, One Heart."
- "I've Grown Accustomed to her face. She almost makes the day begin." - from My Fair Lady
- "As Long as He Needs Me." from Oliver
- "If Ever I would Leave You" from Camelot.
- "Til There was You" from The Music Man.

There were bells on the hill, but I never heard them ringing,
No, I never heard them at all, Till there was you.

In Bye Bye Birdie we quickly become familiar with two couples - Albert & Rosie and Kim & Hugo. Albert Peterson & Rosie Alvarez have been dating for 5 or 6 years. Kim MacAfee & Hugo Peabody have been dating for a much shorter time but their relationship had just taken a serious turn when

Hugo presents Kim with his pin. "Getting pinned" was a big deal in the 1950's. When a boy gave a girl his school pin, it was the sure sign of "Going Steady." And when Hugo gives his pin to Kim, it's time for a big song & dance number!

Albert and Rosie's relationship however is not near as exciting. They have been going steady for a long time now. Rosie's love is quite steady. Albert is not quite steady about much of anything. Bye Bye Birdie gives us two love stories in one.

You know, the Bible is a love story as well. Rabbi Harold Kushner from Natick, MA, wrote *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner says that Jews look at the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) as a love letter from God to humanity. That's why they cherished the scriptures. *"More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold,"* says Psalm 19:10. Soren Kierkegaard urged readers of the Bible to not look at it as a textbook, but rather as a *"letter from God with your personal name on it."* So when God walks with Adam in the garden it's an invitation from God to walk with us. When God creates Adam & Eve and says, *"It is good. It is very good"* - it's an affirmation of the God-given goodness within each one of us. When God says through Isaiah the prophet, *"Can a nursing mother forget the child she is nursing? So I will not forget you, O Israel"* - that's a personal word of assurance to all of us.

Act One in the Bible is the beginning of the Love Story between God and Humanity. Just like Boy meets Girl.

The Sistine Chapel as you know has the most well known ceilings in the world, painted by Michaelangelo. The centerpiece of it all is what's known as, The Creation of Adam. John Ortberg has an interesting interpretation of the painting in his book, God is Closer Than You Think. As you'll remember, God is reaching out, straining to touch Adam. Adam is reclining a bit, a little bit nonchalant about it all. And their fingers almost touch. The gap between them is ever so small. All Adam has to do is lift a finger to touch God. John Ortberg says the painting symbolizes

God's desire to touch us, to be with us. He puts it this way: *"The story of the Bible isn't primarily about the desire of people to be with God; it's the desire of God to be with people."*

The Bible is a love story about God's passionate, never ending love for us. And while that theme runs all throughout the Bible, that's only Act I. There is an Act Two in the Bible. And Act Two in the Bible is just like the musical - If Act One is Boy meets Girl,

Act Two is "Boy loses Girl."

"Adam, where are you?" "Who told you you were naked?" "Adam, what's happened to you?" "Did you eat the forbidden fruit?"

In Bye Bye Birdie it's, "Kim, where are you?" And Conrad Birdie slithers in as the Tempter And Kim sounds a bit like the conversation in the Garden of Eden - "Oh, Hugo, I won't even feel Conrad's kiss, and it'll be good for your father's undertaking business." And then to seal the deal the Tempter sings, "You've got to be sincere." Coming from him it should be, "You've got to be kidding me!" She's under his "Magic Spell," and can't wait for her lips to taste the forbidden fruit. Kim sings a song about having just "One Boy," but her heart is torn, much the way we are torn being serving God in this world and having it all. We've got a lot of living to do as well.

Most musicals spend much of the second act trying to answer these questions - will the boy get the girl? and will the girl get the boy?

- Can Maria & Tony have a relationship given the gang violence?
- Will Captain Von Trapp choose the chain-smoking Baroness Elsa Schrader or Julie Andrews? (that's not exactly a hard choice!)
- Will Kim choose Conrad Birdie's kiss or Hugo's pin?
- Will Albert see what a catch Rosie is, or will he just sing to her, "Put on a happy face"? - fun song, but not a love song

Boy meets Girl - they fall in love. Boy loses Girl - will he get her back? Will God get us back?

God has never stopped trying. Through people like Moses and David, through the Prophets like Isaiah and Hosea kept trying to get us back.

"What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early . . . for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:4 & 6) Hosea 11: *"My people are bent on turning away from me."* And indeed we are - "Prone to wander," says the old spiritual. "Prone to leave the God I love." Our love waivers, but God's love never does. God keeps on loving us even in our apathy and rebelliousness. Just like Rosie keeps on loving Albert, even when he's failed at everything he's tried. And Don Quixote keeps loving Dulcinea, even when she went back to her wild ways. In The Music Man Marion loves Harold Hill in spite of the fact that he's a con man. She sees the good in him. In Les Miserables, the Bishop keeps believing in Jean Valjean even when he doesn't live up to that trust and steals the silver from him.

God loves like that. God never gives up on us. God never stops loving us. Boy Meets Girl. Boy Loses Girl. Boy & Girl Reunite! That's the Finale!

III. It's Act Three in the Bible - Reconciliation!

II Cor. 5: 18 - *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*

John 3:16 sums up the love story pretty well, too - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

And Revelation 21 talks about living forever with our God:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.

- and they live happily ever after!

Let me close with this question: Why? Why do most musicals share the same storyline as the Bible?

Is it because we're helpless romantics? Is it because we're eternal optimists and we long for a "happily ever after" ending every time?

Or could it be that eternity is written on our hearts? Could it be that eternity is built into our DNA? And that often through great works of art we see and hear echoes of the Gospel?

Perhaps St. Augustine said it best: *"O Lord, You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You."*

Think about it.