

“Is Anything Profane?: The Gospel According to Rogers and Hammerstein”

Easter 6A (May 17, 2020) - **COVID-19 (Sunday 10)**

Scripture: Psalm 66:8-12; 1 John 4:7-12; John 13:34-35

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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

On Good Friday, March 27, 1964, Anchorage, Alaska was shaken by The Great Alaska Earthquake. In a recent article, writer Jon Mooallem describes the scene. “[A] used-car salesman, kneeling beside a vehicle that wouldn’t start, mistook the physical sensation of his body heaving from side to side for dizziness and figured that he was having a heart attack. A woman driving on Northern Lights Boulevard puzzled over why, as she put it, ‘the road wouldn’t stay still.’” The earthquake was a magnitude 9.2, writes Mooallem, and it “whipped the city of Anchorage around for a full four and a half minutes. Buildings keeled off their foundations, slumped in on themselves, or split in half. For two entire blocks, every storefront along one side of the city’s main thoroughfare simply dropped, plummeting into a long, ragged chasm that had ripped open underneath it; one theater marquee came to rest level with the street. Downtown looked ‘like the devil ground his heel into it,’ one witness said.”

What’s interesting about the Great Alaska Earthquake, writes Mooallem, is that it became a sociological laboratory to study human behavior during a crisis. In the 1960s, the U.S. government was studying how society would respond in the wake of a nuclear war if the Americans who survived had to live without basic services. The assumption was that society would become like *Lord of the Flies*: barbaric and brutal. One sociologist at the time said we would behave like “‘frightened and unsatisfied children.’” Natural disasters like the Great Alaska Earthquake became laboratories for government-funded researchers to test this theory. Once news spread of the Anchorage earthquake, researchers from Ohio State University were on a plane in a matter of hours believing they would find when they landed “‘a mass outbreak of hysterical neurosis among the civilian population.’” And they were eager to document it. “But when the disaster researchers started touching down in Anchorage, a mere 28 hours after the earthquake,” writes Mooallem, “they almost immediately began discovering the opposite: the community was meeting the situation with a staggering amount of collaboration and compassion.” One Anchorage resident told the researchers, “‘Everybody jumped right in [to help each other]. Everybody was trying to do a little bit of everything for everybody,’” he said. Instead of a laboratory of chaos, Anchorage was a lesson in shared humanity. (I’ll return to this story a little later.)

It’s interesting isn’t it that mid-twentieth century sociologists assumed that a crisis would uncover some innate barbarism inside of us; that our “true” nature as human beings is a *Lord of the Flies*-type nature, which would immediately surface after a tragedy. It’s interesting but it’s also wrong. Those great theologians of the 1940s and 50s, Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, had, I think, a better grasp of human nature. In 1949, their Broadway hit *South Pacific* talked about how we have to be taught to hate and fear. There is no barbarian within, no *Lord of the Flies* lurking beneath the surface. We have to be taught to see the world in “us” vs. “them” categories. Scholars of religion use the categories of “sacred” and “profane.” We have to be taught, said Rogers and Hammerstein, to see some people as profane.

South Pacific was a blockbuster.¹ It won several Tony Awards and later became a hit film. But it was also controversial in the 1940s and 50s. Oscar Hammerstein once described *South Pacific* as a story of two love stories. The one love story involved a white U.S. Marine and a brown Tonkinese girl. Their racial differences kept them apart in spite of their love. The other love story involved a U.S. Navy nurse and a Frenchman. When she found out that he had once been married to a brown Polynesian woman and had half-Polynesian children, she ran away. Later on she was filled with regret when she realized that her racial prejudice shouldn't have mattered as much as her love. There is no beast within, said theologians Rogers and Hammerstein. You've got to be taught, they said, to hate and to fear and to treat some human beings as "others." A moment ago, we heard their hit song "You've Got to be Carefully Taught" with its lyrics: *You've got to be taught to hate and fear / you've got to be taught from year to year / It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear / You've got to be carefully taught.*

When Jesus in today's gospel reading talks about love, he uses the language of "commandment." "I give you a new commandment," he says to his disciples, "love one another. Just as I have loved you, you ought to love one another." Rogers and Hammerstein say we've got to be carefully taught to hate; Jesus seems to say that we've got to be commanded to love. One of my clergy friends and I were discussing these words of Jesus this week, and we both wondered whether someone can be *commanded* to love. How can you *command* love? The Greek word translated as "commandment" in today's reading is legal language; it's a word used in official decrees in the ancient world, of someone in a position of authority *commanding* a subordinate. A commandment seems harsh to me. Commanding love seems strange. How can someone be *commanded* to love someone else? Maybe it seems strange to command love because the word "love" for us is so often equated with a feeling - an emotion or a passion that erupts from within, something we can "fall" into before living happily ever after, like in a fairytale. How can you command a feeling? But Jesus and our early Christian forebears had a radical idea: love is not just a feeling; love is also a verb. Love is not just something we feel but something we do. It involves action and choice, a decision to love regardless of how we feel. Maybe this is why Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies. We don't *feel* positive emotions toward enemies, but we can *choose* to love them by, as the biblical book of Proverbs says, giving hungry enemies food to eat, and giving thirsty enemies water to drink. They may be enemies, says Proverbs, but they're still human beings with hungry bellies and parched tongues.

Today's reading from the New Testament letter of First John softens the language of love from a commandment to an invitation. "*Let us love one another,*" says the writer. It's not a command to give enemies bread and water; it's an invitation. "God is love," says the writer of First John, and if God is love, then we human beings who are created in God's image are created to love. It's symbolic language that speaks of God's essential nature which has been woven into our nature as human beings created in God's image. We have to be "carefully taught" to hate, said Rogers and Hammerstein: we have to be taught to hate from year to year; it has to be drummed in our ears. We have to be taught to hate; maybe First John is saying we only have to be *reminded* to love - reminded of what Richard Rohr calls our "original goodness," based on the creation story in Genesis where God declares everything "good" long before Adam and Eve ate the fruit and the trouble began. I wonder if the

¹ See the summary in: <https://www.npr.org/2014/05/19/308296815/six-words-youve-got-to-be-taught-intolerance>

difference between hating and loving is that we need to be *carefully taught* to hate while we only need to be *reminded* to love.

Developmental psychologists have wondered for decades about where our sense of right and wrong comes from. Are we born with an innate sense of right and wrong? Or, do we have to be *carefully* taught? Or, is our sense of right and wrong a combination of nature and nurture? In his book *The Righteous Mind*, NYU's Jonathan Haidt highlights an interesting theory of one of his colleagues, Elliot Turiel of Berkeley.² Turiel has studied moral reasoning in children, and he's found that children - long before they're ever *carefully* taught to think differently - have an innate sense that doing harm to another human being is wrong. In one study Turiel told "children short stories about other kids who break rules, and then [he gave] them a series of simple yes-or-no probe questions." Turiel told a story of a "child who goes to school wearing regular clothes, even though his school require[d] students to wear a uniform." "Is that OK," Turiel would ask the kids? "Most kids sa[id] no." He would then ask the children "what if the teachers said it was OK for the [child] to wear regular clothes, then would it be OK?" "Turiel discovered that children as young as five usually say that the [child] was wrong to break the rule, but that it would be OK if the teacher gave permission." "But," said Turiel, "if you ask [children] about actions that hurt other people, such as a girl who pushes a boy off a swing because she wants to use it, you get a very different set of responses. Nearly all kids," according to Turiel, "say that the girl was wrong, and that she'd be wrong even if this happened in another school where there were no rules about pushing kids off swings." Children, said Turiel, "seem to grasp early on that rules that prevent harm are special, important, unalterable, and universal." "Children," he said, seem to "construct their moral understanding on the bedrock of the absolute moral truth that *harm is wrong*." Other psychologists like Jonathan Haidt have developed Elliot Turiel's findings, but it's interesting that children, according to Turiel, have an innate sense that doing harm to another human being is wrong. Children seem to know, innately, that pushing another child off a swing is wrong even if no one tells them that it's wrong.

Maybe, given these findings by developmental psychologists, we can see the commandment to love by Jesus as just a reminder instead of a new law. Maybe the exhortation to love another human being is not a "commandment" as much as it's a "reminder" - a reminder to live into the nature that the God of love in whose image we've all been created has built into the fabric of who we are. We need to be reminded that deep within us is not a Lord of the Flies barbarian waiting to surface. We need to be reminded from time to time that if God is love, and if Love created us, then woven into the fabric of who we are is love. We have to be carefully taught to hate; we only need to be reminded to love.

After the Great Alaska Earthquake, says writer Jon Mooallem, "ordinary citizens began crawling through the ruins downtown, searching for survivors, and using ropes to heave people out of the debris When Presbyterian Hospital [in Anchorage] started filling with gas after the quake," he says, "Boy Scouts who'd been distributing phone books in the neighborhood helped walk the hospital's 22 patients down three or four flights of stairs, and an armada of taxis and other civilian drivers pulled up outside to evacuate everyone to a second hospital, across town. Outside the crumbling J.C. Penney [store]," he says, "bystanders rushed to dig people out, and worked together to tow away a huge section of the

² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 11-12.

fallen concrete facade with their vehicles By daybreak the following morning, hundreds of volunteers had spontaneously converged on the city's combined police and fire station, similarly eager to pitch in. No one in the city government had anticipated this onrush or put any system in place to manage it. The conventional [Lord of the Flies] wisdom was that in a disaster, authorities had to worry about hordes of civilians chaotically fleeing the hardest-hit area. [But] here, everyone was piling in to help. Unlikely heroes were emerging from that scrum of volunteers, like . . . psychology professor, William E. Davis, who wound up running the city's search and rescue operation . . . , [and] Genie Chance, a part-time radio reporter and working mother, [who] stayed on [air] . . . all weekend, disseminating emergency information with her colleagues and passing messages over the air to help separated family members reconnect. . . . All over town," writes Jon Mooallem, "neighbors fed and housed the displaced. A brigade of teenagers . . . got to work salvaging belongings from the smear of houses that had careened off [a] cliff Downtown . . . [a] swaggering middle manager from the public works department had taken it upon himself to organize [volunteers], asking the police chief to hastily deputize the men, then tearing up bedsheets from the city jail, scrawling 'Police' on each one with a parking attendant's lipstick, and handing out those scraps of fabric as arm bands." Government-funded researchers were dumbfounded by the responses. They expected Lord of the Flies; what they found instead were human beings helping each other. "In the 56 years since the Great Alaska Earthquake," writes Jon Mooallem, "an entire field of sociology . . . [has] blossomed" Instead of finding barbaric chaos after tragedies, he says, "what sociologists have found . . . [in the places of disaster where they've studied human behavior is that] many of [the] ugliest assumptions about human [nature] have been refuted by . . . how actual humans behave [in a crisis]." What sociologists have found, says Mooallem, is that "human beings respon[d] to one another as human beings' [and not as "others"]."

... I think one of the primary missions of the church today is simply to remind our fellow human beings that love is who they really are. God is love; and God has created us to love. We have to be carefully taught to hate. We just need to be reminded to love. Amen.