

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: "South Pacific"

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, August 6, 2017

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew 14:22-33.

²² Right then, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray. Evening came and he was alone. ²⁴ Meanwhile, the boat, fighting a strong headwind, was being battered by the waves and was already far away from land. ²⁵ Very early in the morning he came to his disciples, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified and said, "It's a ghost!" They were so frightened they screamed.

²⁷ Just then Jesus spoke to them, "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid."

²⁸ Peter replied, "Lord, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water."

²⁹ And Jesus said, "Come."

Then Peter got out of the boat and was walking on the water toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when Peter saw the strong wind, he became frightened. As he began to sink, he shouted, "Lord, rescue me!"

³¹ Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him, saying, "You man of weak faith! Why did you begin to have doubts?" ³² When they got into the boat, the wind settled down.

³³ Then those in the boat worshipped Jesus and said, "You must be God's Son!"

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.

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What's not to love about a Broadway musical with both a love story and a message of social justice? *South Pacific* delivers on both counts. This musical offers to us two classic love stories. It asks the question "What happens when "boy meets girl" becomes "all-American boy meets Asian girl in a wartime setting"?"

During an interview with Mike Wallace, Oscar Hammerstein years ago said "both of these love stories concern, in a different way, racial prejudice." If you remember, one of the love stories involves a plucky American woman named Nellie Forbush. Nellie is a Navy nurse and she falls in love with a Frenchman – who also falls in love with her. However, when she finds out that he was once married to a Polynesian woman and has two Polynesian — no, half-Polynesian — children, well, she runs away.

She is shocked that these children are of mixed-race. Then she is jolted to the core when she fears this man may be dead. Suddenly she realizes how unimportant her prejudice was, and how important it was that she loved him and how much she wants him back, no matter what kind of children he has.

As Hammerstein told Wallace, "What we were saying was that ... all this prejudice that we have is something that fades away in the face of something that's really important".

So, love wins. But you knew that. You know that love wins.

Or maybe you know that love wins only sometimes. Because the other love story in this musical is about a young Marine who falls in love with a Tonkinese girl on the island. And -- spoiler alert -- Despite the burning desire between Lt. Cable and the island girl, named Liat, their differences keep them apart.

Can you imagine – or, better yet, perhaps you actually remember the uproar created by this musical. At the time of *South Pacific's* release in 1949, its theme of racial and romantic tolerance was just too much for some. Some members of the military complained that the song "You've Got to be Carefully Taught" ruined the flow of the musical. Which, frankly, I think is a thinly veiled attempt to say it hit a little close to home and made them uncomfortable.

When the show went on national tour in the 1950s, two Georgia state lawmakers were repulsed after seeing it, and said a song justifying marriage between races was offensive. One of them, Rep. David C. Jones, wrote in a letter saying, "We in the South are a proud and progressive people. Half-breeds cannot be proud."

Larry Maslon is a Broadway scholar and historian who teaches at the graduate acting program at New York University. He has always thought of Oscar Hammerstein as a preacher. He said, "In the way that I think of Abraham Lincoln as a preacher, or Leonard Bernstein as a preacher. Lincoln used the White House, Bernstein used the conductor's podium, and Hammerstein used the theater," he says. Indeed, Hammerstein knew he would strike a nerve and he did it anyway.

He went on to say: "And all of his shows offer a kind of choice, it seems to me: that tolerance is probably better than prejudice; that enlightenment is probably better than ignorance. I think he

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appealed, in the way that Lincoln did, actually, in his second inaugural address, to the better angels of our nature."

Or as Jesus said to his disciples "sometimes, you have to get out of the boat." That's what Jesus told his disciples in today's scripture reading. I know it's a big risk and that many of you, and myself included, are completely risk-averse. I know it's hard to leave the safe cocoon. But sometimes you have to get out of the boat. Sometimes it is our calling and our work to step up, step out, step in front of the prejudices within ourselves and within society.

Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Do you find that strange? It's a weird scenario in the gospel this morning. Jesus has told everyone to get in the boat and go on ahead. He'll catch up with them later. And there he is, walking across the water toward the boat. And Peter stands up and says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Sounds like he's asking for trouble.

"Lord, if it is you, command me to risk my life, to tempt death, to walk out across 6,000 fathoms of dark, swirling, threatening sea. Lord, if it is you, command me to stick my hand into the fire. Lord, if it is you, order me to jump off a skyscraper. That is, if it's you."

Don't you find it strange that Peter was uncertain that the voice from the waves was the voice of Jesus until, unless, that voice commanded him, "Come on out, the water's fine. Just get out of the boat already"?

But that's how you will know it is Jesus. Jesus is the one who extravagantly, recklessly, commands you to leave the safety of the boat, to step into the sea, to test the waters, and show what your faith is made of. That's Jesus. He's the one who tells you that a society that teaches hate and bigotry and racism is not a society built on the foundation of love and redemption. For new teaching, you have to get out of the boat.

You see, I wish I could say that racism is over. I wish I could say racism is a history lesson. But the only thing that would be true about that statement is that racism has a very long history. Racism is very, very old. It has been practiced to some degree by every society on the face of the earth. In fact, it is still practiced today in every society on the face of the earth.

We all have our blind spots. No one automatically thinks of themselves as prejudice – that is, in bondage to racism and prejudice. Not even the fiercest member of the most radical white-supremacy group would admit to being a racist. No, he's just fully aware of the differences in people, he would probably say, and proud of his own identity.

In 2012 I read a newspaper article about a woman named Tonya Battle. She was an African-American nurse with 25 years of neonatal experience. After one baby's father saw her attending to an infant, he asked to speak to her supervisor and requested that no black personnel treat his child. He also showed the tattoo of a swastika on his arm; he was a white supremacist.

The hospital's response? A note on the baby's file, stating no African-American nurses were to care for the infant. Ms. Battle sued the hospital for discrimination and settled out of court. But it got me

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wondering, *What if?* What if that black nurse had been the only person alone with the infant when something went grievously wrong? What if she had to choose between following her supervisor's orders and saving the infant's life? What if, as a result of her actions, she wound up on trial, with a white public defender who — like me — would never consider herself a racist yet has lived a life of privilege and opportunities and open doors?

Or, a couple of years ago, I got a call from Pastor Toni Dunbar. Pastor Dunbar is on the ministerial team at City of Refuge, a United Church of Christ in Oakland. She was at the Grissom Chapel and Mortuary over on Lewelling Boulevard. She calls me one afternoon and asks if I might be available to come to the Grissom Chapel right now and officiate a memorial service for a family. She goes on to explain that the family, who did not have a church home themselves, had asked the Chapel to call upon one of their known pastors; and the good people at Grissom Chapel had called her. She cleared her schedule that same day and went immediately to the Chapel. Upon meeting Pastor Dunbar, the family said to her "we would prefer a white pastor, please. After all, this was a sacred moment."

As a testament to her faith and fortitude, Pastor Dunbar said to me, "I have no hard feelings toward this family. They need pastoral care and the presence of God; and if they believe they can get that from someone other than me, then I am going to step aside and let Jesus do what Jesus does."

Jesus says, "you got to get out of the boat." What's the phrase we hear in Black Lives Matter movement – Stay Woke. That's what Jesus tells us. You have to go beyond the comfortable and known. In fact, you have to walk into the uncomfortable and unknown.

Love wins, except when it doesn't. And when love doesn't win, you have to get out of the boat, walk across that stormy sea and be an ally for those who choose love and those who need love. Our job is to support and defend love at all cost.

There may be differences among us as humans, but there is no difference in the eyes of God. Friends are friends; neighbors are neighbors; lovers are lovers. To God we are simultaneously unique individuals and we are all the same as children of God. Or as Lin-Manuel Miranda, the author and composer of the musical, "Hamilton," said in his acceptance speech at the Tony Awards:

"And love is love is love is love is love is love is love is love cannot be killed or swept aside."

But to make that happen, sometimes you have to get out of the boat.

Amen.