

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ

Sermon: The Sound of Music

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, August 27, 2017

A reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew 16:13-20.

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Creator in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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

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She was only supposed to be at their home for only ten months. The Reverend Mother of the Abby had assigned Maria to be the tutor and caregiver for little Maria Van Trapp, who was recovering from Scarlet Fever. The plan had been that, after serving as tutor, she would return and enter the convent as a nun.

Maria herself had been an orphaned child and was raised as an atheist by an abusive relative. While attending the State Teachers' College of Progressive Education in Vienna, Maria accidentally attended a Palm Sunday service, thinking it was a concert of Bach music.

"Now I had heard from my uncle," she said, "that all of these Bible stories were inventions and old legends, and that there wasn't a word of truth in them. But the way this priest talked just swept me off my feet. I was completely overwhelmed."

With her religious awakening, she entered the Benedictine Abbey of Nonnberg in Salzburg as a novice. She did indeed struggle with the unaccustomed rules and discipline in the Abbey. So the assignment to be a tutor to a young girl was a way for Maria to figure out whether the religious life was her calling. Instead, as we know, Maria fell in love with all seven Von Trapp children.

"Instantly", Maria writes in her autobiography. "It was love at first sight; I fell in love with the children instantly." Within a year, the widowed Captain Georg von Trapp had fallen in love with Maria and, at his proposal, he asked Maria if she would become the second mother to his children. Maria later reflected, "God must have made him word it that way because if he had only asked me to marry him I might not have said yes."

When the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938, the von Trapps realized they were in a dangerous situation. Georg had refused to fly the Nazi flag on their house, he had declined a naval command and also declined a request to sing at Hitler's birthday party. They were also becoming aware of the Nazis' anti-religious propaganda and policies, the pervasive fear that those around them could be acting as spies for the Nazis, and that their children were at risk of being influenced by the rabid anti-semitism turned genocide turned into Holocaust.

There were many enticements offered by the Nazis—greater fame as a singing group, a medical doctor's position for Rupert, the oldest son, and a renewed naval career for Georg.

The alternative was leaving behind everything they knew—their friends, family, estate, and all their possessions. Maria had given birth to two more children – so this was a decision that affected a family of nine children, two adults and two of their closest friends. That was their choice. Everyone must go. Leave it all behind.

Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it."

Twenty years ago, the 9-year-old daughter of an old friend of mine met Miep Gies, the Gentile friend who helped hide Anne Frank and her family in the small attic apartment in Amsterdam until they were caught and murdered by the Nazis. This encounter was huge for this little 9-year-old girl.

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Ms. Gies was in Cleveland to deliver a speech. My friend, Beth, is a journalist and she had the opportunity to interview Ms. Gies earlier in the day. When she found out Beth had a young daughter, she asked whether she could meet her, so Beth took Caitlin to her speech that evening.

Caitlin was mesmerized by this tiny but mighty hero, and the next day she asked to read Anne Frank's diary. An ever-hovering single mom, Beth was worried that Caitlin was too young to hear this frightening and horrible part of our history. So she asked Caitlin's teacher, who said that Caitlin could handle the harrowing account of the bright, idealistic girl whose only crime was to be Jewish in a Nazi-occupied country.

Now, Beth and Caitlin are not Jewish, but they have many Jewish friends, including three generations of a family who, for years, included them for the Seder meal during Passover. Gloria and Lawrence were the grandparents, and Caitlin always felt like one of their beloved grandchildren at the table, which tells you everything you need to know about this wonderful family.

For weeks, young Caitlin pored over Anne Frank's diary. One evening, shortly before bedtime, she ran into Beth's bedroom, her hair still wet from her shower, her eyes wide with fear. "We would hide Gloria and Lawrence," she said. "We would hide them, wouldn't we?" When Beth looked at her like she wasn't quite following the question, Caitlin raised her voice. "From the Nazis, Mom. We would hide them from the Nazis if we knew them back then?"

Beth pulled her close. "Of course, we would."

"And Jeff and Joan and Peter and Lia, too?" she said. "Even though we could be killed, right?"

"Yes," Beth said, hugging her close.

Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it."

Over and over again throughout history, there are moments in history and in life, when Jesus turns and says "If the gates of hell are not to prevail, then you must become the kingdom of heaven; you will build my church." And throughout history, people have responded to this call – they have resisted the wave of political oppression, the onslaught of cultural and even religious injustice. How do I know people have resisted and responded out of love and sacrifice?

It's an underground railroad that provides safe passage from slavery to freedom. It's a women's shelter that provides safe haven from domestic violence. Two weeks ago it was a community pooling together their resources to replace the windows in the synagogue that had been shattered by thugs.

Or just last week, neighbors in Tenino, Washington, had a painting party to cover up the hate-filled graffiti that had been scrawled across their neighbor's home. They repainted the outside of the entire house while the family was away on vacation so they would return to a safe place and never have to see the hate.

It's a food pantry at the church down the street so that children do not go to bed hungry. It's a candlelight vigil of hope, building a community that dares to cross the differences of culture, religion,

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sexual orientation, economic class and language and claim the night as holy and to claim each person as a child of God.

This story of “The Sound of Music” has, as its backdrop, the invasion of the Nazis into Austria. But this story is not about the Nazi’s. It’s not about the fascist regime or the rising tide of hate and racism or even about war. This story is about what we risk – it’s about those moments when we risk everything for love and family and for justice and truth.

For the von Trapp family, they risked love and family to leave their homeland and travel to a new country and start over again. Today there are thousands of refugee families fleeing violence in their homelands. It doesn’t mean they don’t believe in their country or don’t still love their homeland. Indeed, it likely means they have exhausted all possibilities for themselves and this is a last-ditch, risk-everything moment. A moment when the calculation is not a question of “shall I get involved or shall I stay in the comfort of my home?” Those choices ran out a long time ago.

The options now are to risk everything because your priorities are clear, your faith is true, your sights are set on the love of God and you know there is only one choice – and that choice is to love. There is no room to be an innocent bystander. Or as I read the other day, the choice is to be a bystander or to be an upstander. That’s the choice – to be an Upstander.

When Peter tells Jesus that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Jesus turns around and yes, “okay, great, now, show me.” Jesus said, “you are the rock upon which I build my church. So, show me. Do something. Risk everything. If the gates of Hell are not going to rise and prevail, then you had better get busy bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven.”

So I think of it like this: either we are the church or we are not. There is no sorta-kinda being the church. Either we welcome everyone or we have a litmus test for membership in order to keep people out. Either we strive to represent the kingdom of heaven or we allow for hate to take root and grow. If we are not marching against hate then surely our lack of action is allowing hate to march on. Make no bones about it, Jesus is challenging us. Jesus is convicting us and challenging us.

What do you do? What do you risk? How will you bring about the Kingdom of Heaven? What will our church become?

Will you hold a candle and pray? Will you give safe haven to a refugee? Will you look out for your elderly neighbor? Will you treat each person with respect? Will you feed and serve and share and build and love? Will you march and resist and carry a flag of peace?

You may never be faced with the choice to walk across the Alps to protect your family, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t mountains to climb. Will you be the light in the darkness? Will you be the Gospel in the world?

I think you will. Yes, I think you will.

Amen.

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A Prayer after Charlottesville, based in part on St. Francis' "Peace Prayer."

Lord God, we pray that you would arm us with courage and compassion sufficient to the challenges of these days and make us heralds of your grace and instruments of your peace.

Where is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is harm, let us bring healing;
where there is prejudice and intolerance, let us offer understanding;
where there is enmity, let us be agents of reconciliation;
where there is despair, let us speak hope;
where there is doubt, let us spark faith;
where there is fear, let us kindle courage;
and wherever there is darkness, let us offer the light of your mercy that enlightens the whole world.

Meet us in our fear, Lord God, and embolden us to side always with the defenseless. Protect all who put themselves in harm's way to keep others safe. Thwart the plans of those who harbor hatred and plot violence. Grant our elected leaders the wisdom to know what it is right and the courage to do it. And bless this nation and people that we might be a blessing to the world you love so much.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.