

**Is Anybody Out There?**  
***The Gospel Goes to Broadway: Oliver***  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**September 1, 2019**

*1 Corinthians 13:1-8a; 1 John 4:7-12, 19*

So, we've come to the final installment of "The Gospel Goes to Broadway", and although I didn't plan it this way, I can't think of a better musical to feature on Labor Day weekend than "Oliver". Although it's set in Victorian England, Oliver reflects the same horrific labor conditions that led to the Labor Rights movement here on this side of the pond.

It's based on a novel written by Charles Dickens called "Oliver Twist". The title character is an orphan, whose single unmarried mother passed away shortly after giving birth to him in a workhouse. The people in charge, Mr. Bumble and the widow Corney take in the baby and raise him under what we would consider harsh conditions with other orphans and abandoned children.

As soon as he is old enough to take direction, Oliver is put to work. He and the other children are fed scarce amounts of gruel, just enough to keep them alive but not enough to actually thrive. One day, after this sparse meal was consumed, the boys at Oliver's table draw straws to see which of them would seek out a second helping. Oliver lost the bet, so he was the one. With great trepidation he gets up from his seat and approaches the intimidating, authoritarian people in charge. Extending his bowl, Oliver says, timidly "Please sir, I want some more!" Mr. Bumble explodes in anger: "More!" he says "You want some more?" Then, taking Oliver by the ear and leading him out of the room he begins to sing "Never has a boy wanted more!"

Of course, Mr. Bumble was wrong. Oliver and the other workhouse kids always wanted more, they were just too afraid to ask. Can you imagine living a life like that? Always being too tired and weak and afraid to even ask for what you so desperately need?

Well, things did not turn out well for Oliver after that small request. As punishment, Mr. Bumble decides to sell Oliver into slavery, walking him up and down the street shouting "Boy for sale!" Eventually, after some haggling and lowering his price, Oliver is sold to an undertaker. But the sale was conditional! If Oliver didn't do a good job as a laborer and coffin follower, he could be returned to Mr. Bumble for a full refund.

As the story unfolds, an older boy in the undertakers house has some pretty harsh things to say about Oliver's mother so they get into a fight. Mr. Bumble was called, and Oliver was returned to the home for paupers and orphans, put into solitary confinement, in a basement room with bars on the windows.

Just look at what Oliver has experienced in his brief life: worked too hard; fed too little; offered for sale; discounted in value; passed from person to person. And now he waits, locked in a room all by himself with no one else in the world to even care. What he wants more than anything is to be loved, even if it's something he's never experienced. So he begins to sing. **Let's listen... (Jake sings)**

The words of Oliver's song are important because they express the deepest longing of every human being. Every one of us longs to feel special, not lost in the crowd, not just cared for as part of a larger group. We need to feel loved, that there are those who are so close to us they laugh when we laugh and cry when we cry – it's a universal human longing!

Recently I heard about a young mother who was having a really bad day. She began it with an argument with her spouse about something trivial. Then she found out that her washing machine had leaked all over the laundry room floor. Then the sink backed up. As she was trying to deal with all of this, her phone just kept ringing with sales pitches from telemarketers. Her head ached, and the mail carrier brought the first bill for an expensive medical procedure she had the month before that her crappy insurance didn't cover. Almost to the breaking point, she lifted her one-year old son into his high chair, leaned her head against the tray and began to cry. Without a word, the baby took his pacifier out of his mouth stuck it in his mother's mouth!

That's the way we want to be loved, we want someone to be so in tune with us that they experience what we experience. They care, and they will do whatever they can, even at great cost, to help. We want to know that there is somebody out there – just one person, even, that cares.

But sometimes, the drive to find that kind of love can present a problem: We want it so much that we can be taken in by that which claims to be love but is in fact something else. Sometimes we encounter people in our lives who want to use us while claiming to love us. And because we want so badly to be loved, we get taken in by a counterfeit version.

I wonder how many of us settle for less than love? Let me tell you what love is. Paul writes "Love is patient and kind, love does not insist upon its own

way." In other words, love does not use another person. It cares enough to do what is in the best interest of the loved one.

Love does not always do what I want, love does what I need. When love has grown to the full measure of maturity, you don't always do what one person wants, you do what they need: you listen, you care, you respond with sensitivity, but you don't just give what is asked of you, you give what is best.

We're at the start of a school year, so this is a good time for parents and grandparents to remember what love really is. I've had so many parents say to me over the years, "Jenn, I love my kids so much that I want to give them everything I never had. In fact, I struggle saying no to them!"

But wise, strong love does not just give what is asked. Sometimes when we simply give what is asked instead of thinking about what is best, it's not because we love them so much. Rather, it's because we want them to love us, and we're afraid that if we say no they won't love us anymore. And that's a really skewed image of what love can be. The wisest, strongest love does what is in the best interest of the one who is loved, even if it causes them to hate us for a little bit!

Real love, strong love, wise love, calls forth the best from the one who is loved. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote of her love towards her husband Robert, saying "*I love you not only for what you are, but for what I am when I'm with you.*" Isn't that beautiful? Love calls forth the best from each of us.

There is not time or space to tell Oliver's entire story, but after running away and spending some time with a petty thief and his band of merry misfits, he was reunited with his mother's family. The family, you see, always thought that his mother ran away because she was jilted by her boyfriend. They never knew that she was pregnant and had a child. His mother's uncle, a man of great wealth and influence, encounters Oliver, takes him in and raises him as his own. There, in his family's care, Oliver has a room of his own, plenty of food to eat, books to read and school to attend. He feels, for the first time in his life, safe and secure. There were people who cared enough to do what was best for him.

Would you like to be loved like that? Would you like to be able to love like that? Listen: Whoever you are, whatever you have been or done, you are loved by God. When a person truly believes that, can trust in that, they can do nothing else other than pass it on. You love others in the same way God has loved you. That's the way it works. Amen.