

You've Got to be Carefully Taught
The Gospel Goes to Broadway: South Pacific
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Matthew 18:1-14

South Pacific opened on Broadway in the spring of 1949, shortly after the end of WWII. It ran for five years, winning a Pulitzer prize for drama in 1950 before being made into a motion picture in 1958. Rogers & Hammerstein packed it full of drama and music that sticks with you, but I decided early on that there were some songs, like *"I'm Gonna Wash that Man Right Out of My Hair"* or *"There's Nothing Like a Dame"* that are not quite appropriate for a church service!

The setting for the show is an island in the South Pacific in the early years of World War II. Among the residents there, in addition to the military personnel, is a wealthy French planter named Emile deBecque. Early in the musical, Emile becomes infatuated with Ensign Nellie Forbush, a Navy nurse stationed at the base hospital.

The attraction is mutual, Emile and Nellie fall in love at first sight. She sings, *"I'm in love with a wonderful guy."* And he sings, *"Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger, across a crowded room... once you have found her, never let her go"*.

Emile and Nellie come from very different worlds: He is an older, sophisticated Frenchman, she, a self-described *"hick from the sticks of Little Rock, Arkansas"*. But as they say in one of their songs, *"love has reasons that even wise men do not attempt to explain"*.

There's another romance in the show when Lieutenant Joe Cable falls in love with a beautiful young native Polynesian woman named Liat. Again, it's a beautiful romance, and Joe describes Liat in song as *"Younger than springtime, softer than starlight, lovely as laughter."*

I suppose love makes you say beautiful things like that.

Liat's mother, Mary, supported the relationship, because she really wants Joe to be her son-in-law. One day, as she was describing the wonderful life the two of them would have together on the island, she says *"The first*

moment I see you I know you are right man for Liat, and she is right girl for you, You have special good babies!"

Hearing that, Joe is gripped by fear and thrown into a panic. He says that he cannot marry Liat, and leaves. He struggles with his feelings and tells a friend *"If I love her, why don't I marry her?"*

In the meantime, the romance between Nellie and Emile falls into problems of its own. One night, Emile introduces Nellie to two Polynesian children. She assumes they belong to one of the servants, and she is enchanted by their manners and their beautiful, big, brown eyes.

But when Emile tells Nellie that he is their father, and that their mother was his Polynesian wife who died years before, something like panic grips her. Perhaps it's the voice of her mother in her head, whom she describes in an earlier scene, saying *"my mother is so prejudiced"*.

Nellie becomes overwhelmed and begins to cry. She then makes a hasty excuse about an appointment she has forgotten, and leaves, quickly and awkwardly. Nellie begins to avoid running into Emile.

A few days later, Joe Cable and Nellie are together, talking about life back home in the United States. Emile approaches them and tries to reconcile with Nellie and she responds, saying *"I can't marry you... It's because of their Polynesian mother. I can't help it. It isn't as if I can give you a good reason, it's emotional. It's something born in me."* And she runs away, again, in tears.

Emile turns to Joe and asks, *"What makes her talk like that? I do not believe it is born in you. It happens to you after you are born."* And he begins to sing the song we heard Bill sing:

*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.*

*You've got to be taught to be afraid of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade, you've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught, before it's too late, before you are six, or seven, or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate, you've got to be carefully taught.*

As he is singing, Joe begins to come to grips with why it is he can't picture himself raising a family with Liat, and it's the same reason that Nellie can't

bring herself to be with Emile: Their own prejudice has gotten in the way of their love for another. How tragic.

Maybe it's not entirely their fault. After all, both Nellie Forbush and Joe Cable have been taught some wrong things, and they had some unlearning to do. In the show, they eventually discover that each culture has gifts to embrace and celebrate, and that love is more powerful than prejudice. We love a happy ending, don't we?

I'd like to go back and focus, just for a moment on what it means to "be carefully taught".

When we read the scriptures, we discover that there are two things that make Jesus really angry. The first is when a person profaned something which is holy. The second was when a person intentionally hurt someone who was vulnerable (this is particularly the case with children).

Clearly, Jesus loved children. In fact, in the scripture Kate read for us, Jesus even used childlikeness as a quality essential for entry into the Kingdom of heaven.

He pointed out that there is so much we can learn from children: their willingness to trust, their openness, their energy, their desire to learn and have adventures. Yes. We would all do well to be a little more child-like.

But the very things that are so admirable about children can also be their weakness. We all come into the world as incomplete persons, as little bundles of potential. We have to learn, and grow, and mature. In the beginning, we are like sponges, eager to absorb whatever information, attitudes, values or behaviors that come our way.

And that's why Jesus says that we all have a responsibility to help each other grow up to maturity. We'd better help, and not hurt. We'd better ease their way and not put a stumbling block in their path.

In fact, in some of the strongest language ever heard coming from the mouth of Jesus, he said, *"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea"*.

It's true. Every person has to be taught. We will do much of the teaching, so we had better be careful to teach all the proper things. So much depends on that. So what about something like prejudice?

In her book, Waking Up White, Debby Irving talks about an interaction she had with her mother as a 5 year-old child. She asked her mom, after an excursion to the library and seeing a colorful mural depicting colonial settlers and first nation people, *"whatever happened to all the Indians?"*

She figured that if she, as a white girl, was descended from European colonists, then there must be kids that are descended from Indians, right? Maybe there was a place she could go and meet them. *"Oh, those poor Indians"*, her mother replied, *"they just drank too much, and it ruined them, really."*

Stereotypes, which drive our prejudices, are not so much incorrect as they are incomplete. And while it's true that alcohol and addiction issues have been a factor in the long-term health of indigenous communities across the Americas, there's more to the story.

What her mother didn't tell her was that alcohol was used by European colonists to weaken, subdue and coerce Native Americans into signing over lands and rights.

Or that the diseases transmitted from settlers to natives killed up to 90% of the population in some areas.

Nor did her mother tell her about the Federal programs that worked in cahoots with the institutional church to "civilize" the savage Indians into Residential Schools, separating them from one another and stripping them of the languages, customs, beliefs and human bonds that held them together for centuries.

Of course, how could her mother tell her those things, when she never learned about them herself? She didn't do so because she was evil or stupid or intentionally trying to be racist. Indeed, her mother was warm, compassionate and bright. But she spoke about events as she had learned them, even though the story was incomplete.

Do you wonder, as I do, what we are teaching our children and our grandchildren and other young ones in our lives? Not the things we teach when we are trying to teach, but the more powerful lessons we teach when we don't know they're even listening?

Every moment of every day our children are learning. They are learning what they think will make them happy and fulfilled. They are learning how to value or devalue people, and what behaviors are acceptable or

unacceptable. And they are learning it all from us. We'd better be careful about what we are teaching them. Jesus said, "Be Careful."

Those little sponges are watching us, learning the most powerful lessons when we least expect it. We teach by living our lives. And it's an awesome responsibility. We dare not attempt it without some help and guidance.

So, as we live our lives among those who are watching us, let us help and not hurt. Let us build up and not tear down. Let us humanize others instead of taking shortcuts which can lead to stereotypes. May we all learn to love and give as Jesus did. Amen.

Benediction

And now friends, we go out into the world knowing that we are not alone. We go out to love the world that God loves. While our hearts may sometimes be troubled and we may sometimes be afraid, may God's peace be always with us. Amen.