

You Are Not Alone
The Gospel Goes to Broadway V: Dear Evan Hansen
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
August 25, 2019

Luke 15:1-7

For those of you who are visiting with us today, we are in week five of our *Gospel Goes to Broadway* sermon series – looking at the places where scripture, faith and popular musicals intersect. Already this summer,

We've set our hearts toward a hopeful future with Little Orphan Annie,
And pondered what it means to be really committed to God and
each another with Pippan,

We've set out on a quest to find the power of love and acceptance
with Don Quixote,

And faced the deep grief and incredible joy of a changing world
with Tevya.

This week, we focus on a contemporary musical called *Dear Evan Hansen*, which opened in May, 2016 at the Music Box Theater. Audiences and critics alike have delighted in this new production – nominating it for nine categories at the 71st Tony Awards. It won six awards, including Best Musical, Best Score, Best Actor and Best Featured Actress.

But the real reason why I chose it is that a number of our church's young adults recommended it to me quite highly. And before we go any further, let me say that the musical features some heavy themes which you may have encountered or struggled with. If you, or someone you know, is struggling with depression, anxiety or suicidal ideation, please reach out to a licensed professional. Asking for help is not a weakness – and no one should fight this alone.

Dear Evan Hansen is the story of a teen who hates his life and how lonely it is. He's socially isolated, anxious and depressed, and he's trying to find some reason for hope. His therapist has Evan write letters to himself every day, about what will be good that day. So every day he starts out, *Dear Evan Hansen*.

Dear Evan Hansen, he writes to himself, as he tries to talk himself into seeing something good about life, as if his words can change his reality. But one day is so bad, he just can't pretend anymore. That day, he writes about how he's given up hope, and that he wonders if anyone will ever even notice.

But when he goes to print his letter at school, another kid grabs it from the printer, and reads it, and won't give it back - this mean kid named Connor. Evan is terrified what Connor will do. Maybe Connor will publicly shame Evan by posting his letter. If he does, his life really will be over.

But that's not how it turns out, at all. What happens next is actually even more heartbreaking.

It turns out Connor has been struggling, too. It turns out that Connor's in even more pain than Evan. And, as Evan finds out, Connor takes his own life. When the authorities find him, Evan's letter is still in Connor's pocket. And naturally the authorities think Connor has written this letter to Evan. "*Dear Evan Hansen...*" A suicide note, Connor pouring his heart out to Evan... When it was Evan's own letter, all along.

The letter changes everything. Evan lets them believe it. He lets people believe that he and Connor were close. Tries to help them have compassion for Connor. Tries to honor his life. Because it *feels* like they were best friends now. Because they had so much in common - so much pain.

Evan wants so badly to help people understand Connor that he posts his own letter on-line as if it were Connor's. As if it had not been his own cry of pain. The one he was so afraid would be public. He posts it...

And it goes viral. It touches so many people! The outpouring of love and concern, it's incredible... The outreach, the compassion, the way people pour out their own pain, their vulnerability... It opens up a floodgate of feelings. Evan's words - the ones that he was so afraid people would see - lead to healing he never imagined.

Eventually, he has to come to terms with his deception; but he's in a different place now. Life is different. Even when it feels like words fail, he comes closer to the people he loves. And he knows his own words of pain, put out there because of Connor, had power - to heal and bring hope and bring people together. He knows there's a world where the hurting finally, finally felt heard, and seen, and understood.

It was worth it. He feels seen, and deeply rooted in community. And that's life-saving for Evan. Next, he offers up a promise to the world:

Have you ever felt like nobody was there?

You will be found

Have you ever felt forgotten in the middle of nowhere?

You will be found

Have you ever felt like you could disappear?

You will be found.

I give thanks for the reminder, sung so beautifully by Kelsey this morning, that we belong to a God who pursues us, even in the midst of our brokenness, reminding us that we will be found.

For a generally neat and tidy person, I have an unkeen ability for losing things. I've been looking for my wireless mic for four weeks now – still can't find it. I'm just about to bite the bullet and pay out of my pocket for a new one, which (of course) means the old one will show up.

Is that hope? I don't know.

The Parable of the Lost sheep begins with a simple but important question: *"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"*

The parable explains a lot about the nature of God. In the face of personal or national turmoil, we too might find ourselves asking, "are we worth saving?" Our minds may remember the names and faces of all the others in the world who need God's care more than we do.

In a universe with stars being swallowed into black holes,
and species going extinct,
and Amazonian forests burning,

how does one lost person stand in comparison?

In God's vast creation, what makes us so special?

Indeed, God tells us not only is humanity special, but each individual human is special enough to garner seeking them out to find them. And if God is willing to set aside the ninety-nine other sheep that need tending, to seek out one lost person, one lost species, one lost nation – shouldn't we try the same?

God, it has been said, is certainly a terrible gambler, willing to risk everything for the sake of a single something.

But what parent wouldn't?

Christ's ministry often seems more focused on the weak over the strong, the broken over the whole, the poor over the rich, and the lost over the found.

This parable is about what's lost being found, but even more importantly God's amazing, incredible love for us. This beautiful, courageous act of love that seems absurd to so many of us and is exactly what we need to hear and replicate in our lives over and over again.

Remember how Jesus was called out at the very beginning of our scripture reading, "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them*"? Jesus' hospitality is considered a waste of time by those who judge him, but he doesn't let that judgement stop him from loving.

In Jesus' telling of the parable, the Shepherd decides that it isn't enough to just find the lost sheep, he needs to celebrate once he's back by gathering all his friends and neighbors. This is a model of love that puts the marginalized in the center of redemption, one that is willing to risk everything for the sake of a single something.

We as a people, time and again, lose our way. We find ourselves lost in the woods of partisanship, racism, fear and hate. This may lead us to feel angry, overwhelmed, cynical, despairing, or even alone.

And we know what *Dear Evan Hansen* says is true: we need each other, and we need to know we will be there for each other when things get dark. We need to know we are not alone in this world.

May we continually be reminded that the ninety-nine problems we wrestle with on a daily basis does not relieve us of being responsible for one another. May we learn to venture out into the wilderness of the strange and fearful in order to hold ourselves responsible for the ones we cannot forget. May it be so, and may it be soon.

Amen.