

The Beatitudes of Broadway Mary Poppins: The Sermon

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza
Sunday, August 5, 2018
Luke 6:27-38

As you may know, for the past two decades, I pastored congregations in the United Church of Christ, which, here in New England, is still known as the Congregational Church. More than a decade ago, that denomination came up with the marketing slogans, “God is Still Speaking” and “Don’t put a period where God has put a comma.”

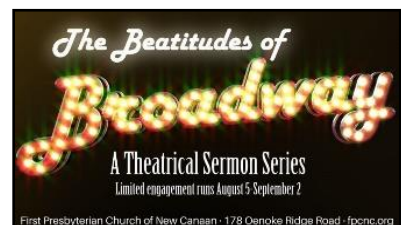


As marketing themes go, it wasn't the best, but, as theology for a Millennial world, it struck a resounding chord well beyond the Congregational Church. It reminds us that, while the Spirit still speaks through scripture, God didn't fall silent on the day the last word of the Bible was written.

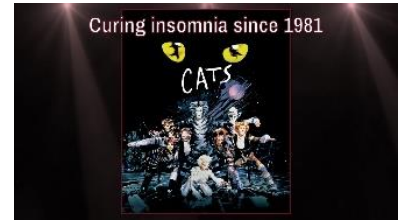
Since then, God has continued to speak through architects and artists, prophets and poets, and through ordinary saints like those sitting in this room. In fact, I dare say that I've heard the voice of God through those with whom I worship as often as I have through the Bible.



So, this morning, we begin a series, tuning our ears to Broadway musicals, because I figure if you can learn to hear God there you can hear God anywhere. I'm only slightly kidding because, despite my sexual orientation, I'm not Broadway's biggest fan.



Still, like you, I often have found myself moved, stirred, and inspired by the art form. (I also have found myself bored senseless, so we won't be looking at Cats.)



Today is a first, a premiere, the world debut of a sermon based on the Broadway musical “Mary Poppins.” Although the show ran for more 2,600 performances on Broadway, the story still is best known from the beloved 1964 Disney film starring Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke.

But that wasn't where Mary got her start. The magical English nanny was the creation of P.L. Travers, whose real name was Helen Goff. She wrote a series of 8 books based on the character that sold moderately well, until Walt Disney persuaded her to make the nannie who kept popping in and out into a movie star.



Mary Poppins was the first movie that I remember seeing as a child, and that is not a bad thing because I think the story contained in the book, movie, and musical offers some important lessons for children and adults.

Like, never judge by appearances. That also was the point of scripture lesson a few weeks ago when God sent Samuel to anoint Israel's new king, and then chose little red-headed David rather than his bigger and more physically imposing brothers. God explains to Samuel that, although people look on outward appearances, God judges what is in the heart. People look at what we do, but God looks at why we do it.

Mary Poppins also tried to teach the children in her charge how to handle things they didn't like to do. It was a lesson I tried to teach my own children. One of my daughters was complaining recently about her job, and I said, "You know, I've been a pastor more than four decades, and I love preaching. In fact, I'd do it for free. It's all the other stuff that comes with the job, like giving CPR to people every time we change something, that they have to pay me for."

I suppose, I could just have sung her a verse of "A Spoonful of Sugar (Makes the Medicine go Down)," or I could have used Jesus' approach and suggested that she consider the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and how they handle their worries and cares. Perhaps that is why a bird comes in from nowhere when Mary Poppins sings this song.

There is a long list of biblical lessons that Miss Poppins tries to teach her young impetuous charges, but the one that I think is most important is also the one humans, young and old, seem to have the hardest time learning:

It is better to be kind than be right.

In the film, Julie Andrews holds a snow globe as she sings this lesson, but, in the book, Mary Poppins accompanies the children to meet their father for tea. She takes them by St. Paul's Cathedral to introduce them to an old beggar woman who sits on the steps selling bags of breadcrumbs for two pence a bag. Their banker father had discouraged feeding the birds and giving handouts to beggars. He may have been right in some sense, but Mary understood that it was much more important for the children to learn to be kind. So, she sang the beautiful song that Allison sang for us as our modern lesson: "Feed the Birds."

Making kindness, mercy, and generosity a lifestyle is not a natural thing. It requires that the Holy Spirit rewire our hearts.

About some things Jesus' words take a bit of interpretation. The Bible is a 2,000-year-old book that was not written in English, so you sometimes need a preacher to help you understand what it means. THIS, however, is not one of those times. Jesus is painfully blunt about his expectations of those of us who call ourselves "Christian." This is one of the cases where I don't lose sleep worrying that I don't understand a passage; I lose sleep because I understand this all too well.

The paraphrase version of the Bible called *The Message* puts the Gospel lesson like this:

To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. ... Live generously. Here is a simple rule of thumb: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them! If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that's charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that.

Help and give without expecting a return. You'll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our God lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. God is kind; you be kind. Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment.

Don't condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you'll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.

Robert Sherman, who, with his brother Richard, wrote "Feed the Birds" recalled that:



On Fridays, after work, Walt Disney would often invite us into his office and we'd talk about things that were going on at the Studio. After a while, he'd wander to the north window, look out into the distance and just say, "Play it." And Dick would wander over to the piano and play "Feed the Birds" for him. One time, just as Dick was almost finished, under his breath, I heard Walt say, "Yep. That's what it's all about." This is the metaphor for the whole film.

Kindness to those who don't earn it, or deserve it and can't repay it, may be the metaphor for the Christian life itself. Oh, we talk a lot about love, but we usually mean something we FEEL. What Jesus is trying to teach us, and what Mary Pop-pins reminds us, is that ultimately what we **do** matters.

That is why Jesus keeps talking about how we treat our enemies. We are never going to feel good about them, but we still are expected to behave with charity, mercy, and compassion. It isn't how we FEEL about them; it is how we treat them that proves what kind of people we are.

The monk sat by the stream trying to rescue a scorpion who was in danger of drowning, but he kept getting painfully stung. A passerby looked at scene and said, "Old man don't you realize that it is the scorpion's nature to sting you?"



Continuing what he was doing without looking up, the old monk said, "Yes, but don't you realize that kindness is my nature?"

Well, kindness certainly isn't everyone's nature, but, according to Jesus, and to Mary Poppins, it is supposed to be ours. And THAT my friend is God speaking to us today.

Amen.

