

The Beatitudes of Broadway  
Hello, Dolly! The Sermon

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

Sunday, August 12, 2018

Philippians 4:4-13/Luke 6:36-46

Dolly Gallagher Levi has “zunch.” Now, I didn’t invent that word. It was coined by Paul Taylor, the founder of the Paul Taylor Dance Company. In an interview in “Time” magazine, Taylor said he expects all his dancers to have zunch. He explained:

**ZUNCH**

*Zunch is opening up. Zunch is turning up the burner. It is going beyond what you think you can do. Zunch is what makes a dancer out of a pedestrian.*

I love that. Zunch is a mixture of courage and commitment; a blend of audacity and faith. Dolly Levi had zunch, but where did she get it? The short answer, of course, is she found it within, which is the same place we must find it. So, what would it look like for us to live with Zunch, that combination of audacity and faith? Perhaps it is the audacity OF faith?

Last weekend, we went to the South Norwalk Arts Festival. At the Humanist Association booth, guys were calling people over to talk about becoming what they called “free thinkers.” David observed that they made it sound like anyone who didn’t believe they way they do are **not** free thinkers.

We are all free to trust God or not. Either we trust God enough to live all our days by **faith** fully, or we choose merely to exist, investing our energy in fear,

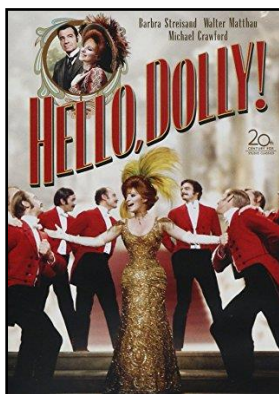
succumbing to the fearmongering manipulation of our leaders, the media, and, yes, some churches.

Grief and loss had caused Dolly to let the parade pass her by. I understand that. Loss can make you afraid to love or live again. Life might just crush you again, so you withdraw to a safe place of passive existence and resist making changes or taking chances. Truthfully, part of my being here in New Canaan was a conscious decision to rejoin life like Dolly did.

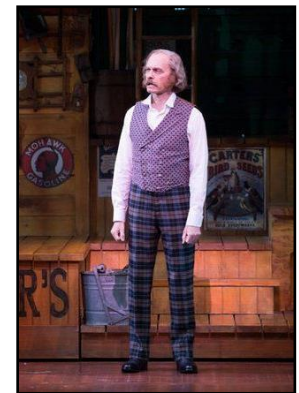


Just like people, churches that are afraid for their future play it safe, resist change, turn away from the possibilities for new life. Instead, they cling to the old, and, hence, they slowly fade away.

"Hello, Dolly!", the 1964 musical with lyrics and music by Jerry Herman, is based on Thornton Wilder's 1938 farce "The Merchant of Yonkers." The musical follows the story of Dolly Levi, a strong-willed matchmaker who travels to Yonkers to find a match for the miserly, "unmarried, half-a-millionaire"



Horace Vandergelder. "Hello, Dolly!" won 10 Tony Awards, including best musical. The original cast recording reached number one on the Billboard chart on June 6, 1964 and was replaced the next week by Louis Armstrong's album "Hello, Dolly!" The show has had four Broadway revivals and was adapted into a 1969 film that was nominated for seven Academy Awards, winning three.



In addition to the song "Before the Parade Passes By," which Allison sang so beautifully for us, the scene in which Dolly returns to the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant after a long absence is one of the most beloved in all Broadway history. The theatrics and musicality of Dolly, a role played by some of our greatest divas, certainly is impactful, but there is something else here that is more important for our purposes today.



It isn't simply that Dolly has decided to return to life, but, before her husband Ephram's death, she apparently lived with such zunch, such audacious enthusiasm, that her spirit infected all of those around her, even the waiters at her favorite restaurant, who were filled excitement to see her again and welcome her "back where she belongs."

That is one of life's truths that we miss all too often. Enthusiastic and hopeful people have the power to lift others to become their best selves. People like Dolly enliven others. Conversely negative, critical people are like energy vampires. If we are honest, we must admit that we all are a bit of both. The powerful lesson of Dolly, and of Jesus, though, is that we get to choose.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus said:

*Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be poured into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.*



The idea that life uses the **same measure** that we use to give to others to give back to us can be good news or bad, depending on how we live our lives: extravagantly or miserly, passionately or dourly, joyfully or anxiously. With enthusiasm, grace, generosity, gratitude: ZUNCH! Or with criticism, fear, judgment, negativity? Jesus says we get to choose the size of our life's measuring cup by deciding how we will treat others. Is that good news or bad for you most days?

Someone came to me recently with "constructive criticism." I wasn't at all surprised because people had warned me that this person attracts negative people and is their self-appointed spokesperson. I listened patiently, affirmed some of the things the person said, and corrected others. When they finished, I expressed my sympathy for how it must be difficult to carry so much negativity in life.

I wasn't being sarcastic. I've come to understand that, although criticism is the only way I can learn and grow, **being critical** takes a huge toll on a person's joy. Tragically, it seems to be the only way some people know to feel better about themselves.



The trouble is it doesn't work. Darkness cannot cast out darkness, which is why Jesus warned us so often about judging. Judgment, criticism, negativity **rebound** on us, but then so do forgiveness, grace, and encouragement.

Dolly's vociferous welcome home to the Harmonia Gardens wasn't just about **who she is**; it also was about how she made everyone else feel about **who they are**.



How many of you have seen "Hello, Dolly!" live? When I was in Dallas, Carol Channing came to headline an AIDS fundraiser. As one of the hosts, I got to spend some time with her. Although she is now 97 years old, when I met her, I had to keep reminding myself that she isn't actually Dolly Levi. It was confusing; they both are people who live with zunch.

Last December, David and I got the chance to see the current revival of "Hello, Dolly!" with Bette Midler. We had great seats, but, as we sat down, I think both of us had a moment of melancholy because we were so aware of how much Bill would have loved to have been there. He loved Broadway *and* Bette Midler.



As I confessed last week, I didn't get the Broadway gene, but, as I watched Bette Midler perform, her energy and audacious enthusiasm radiated over the audience. Even though she is 72 years old, her zunch infected us all.

At one point in the performance, Dolly sits at a table downstage at the Harmonia Gardens. Horace comes over and sits with her, and, soon, the dour, miserly, old bachelor finds himself entranced by his own matchmaker. In the end, Horace decides that Dolly is what he needs or the parade is going to pass him by.



That scene that night, became my all-time favorite Broadway experience. As Dolly is talking to Horace, Bette picked up a turkey leg from her plate and begins to gesture with it. Perhaps because both Dolly and Bette have so much

zunch, she gestured a little too passionately and tossed the leg into the orchestra pit.



What might have thrown a lesser actor who would worry about what the critics might say, became a comedic opportunity for Bette. Soon Horace, played by David Hyde Pierce, is face down on the stage, reaching into the orchestra pit to retrieve the leg.

Bette and David were so tickled, and the audience was howling, so neither could figure out where they were in the script.

I thought, "Never before has a show gone off the rails and gotten a standing ovation for it."

But that is how it should be with people who live their lives with gusto, with passion, and with zunch! As Jesus says, life **can** come to you in *good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over into your lap.*

We too often equate "abundant living" with financial prosperity, but the people I know who live with zunch are those who are not constrained by the fear of losing what they have. Their overflowing life comes from having the *audacity of faith*. Their zunch has made dancers out of pedestrians because they willing to pour themselves out in full measure, trusting that God will do the same to them.



That night, when Dolly tossed her turkey leg into the orchestra pit, was, I think, the first time I'd belly laughed since Bill died two years ago. In that moment, I began to know he is with me still and it is time to try living again with zunch.