

The Beatitudes of Broadway
My Fair Lady: The Sermon

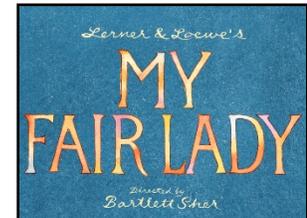
Rev. Kathryn Kibbie Laird

September 2, 2018

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

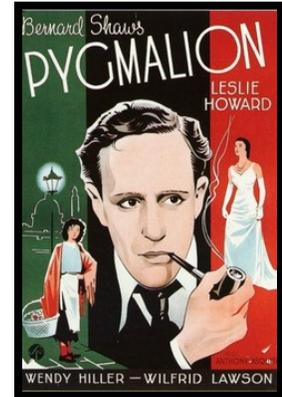
Let us pray: Holy and Gracious God, you speak to us through common words and through every day experiences. Today I pray that you might speak to us through the words and songs of "My Fair Lady" that express struggle and joy and hope in what might be. O God, I ask that you might pour through me the gift of preaching, that these ordinary words somehow will speak to us and bring us a vision of the future. We know that they will, for we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Whenever I have mentioned "My Fair Lady" recently, people immediately have quoted the lyrics back to me because they are so well known: "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain." Just this morning, several people asked me what songs I was going to use in this sermon, and then broke out into song. Women who are romantics sing, "I could have danced all night," and, of course, everyone's favorite and our offertory for today: "Wouldn't it be lovely?" One man even sang to me, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" and then quickly said, "but you wouldn't." I replied, "Oh, wouldn't I?"



So much fun, so much wonder about how I ever am going to relate this musical to the Bible. Let's begin with the history of George Bernard Shaw's play "Pygmalion," which later became the musical, "My Fair Lady."

George Bernard Shaw is considered by many people as the second most famous English playwright ever to have lived, behind only William Shakespeare. He lived from 1856-1950. In his 90-plus years, he penned 62 plays. He won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1925 and was nominated five more times. Thirteen years later, in 1938, George Bernard Shaw became the only person ever to have won the Nobel Prize in literature and an Oscar for best adapted screenplay for the same work: *Pygmalion*. To this day, he is the only one to hold that distinction.



Here is the Cliff Notes version for those who do not know the story of “*Pygmalion*,” which later became “*My Fair Lady*”:

Professor Henry Higgins, an aristocratic phoneticist and unbelievable snob, meets a fellow linguist, Colonel Pickering, after the opera late one night at Covent Garden. They knock over a common flower girl with a strong cockney accent named Eliza Doolittle. Professor Higgins boasts that he can pass her off as a duchess at the Embassy Ball in less than six months time using his science of speech.

The next day, Eliza Doolittle, the common flower girl, shows up at Higgins's house. She asks to be given speech lessons. Professor Henry Higgins makes the following offer to her:

Eliza, you are to stay here for the next six months learning to speak beautifully, like a lady in a florist's shop. At the end of six months you will be taken to an embassy ball in a carriage, beautifully dressed. If the king finds out you are not a lady, you will be taken to the Tower of London, where your head will



be cut off as a warning to other presumptuous flower girls! If you are not found out, you shall be given a present of ... uh ... seven and six to start life with in a lady's shop. If you refuse this offer, you will be the most ungrateful, wicked girl, and the angels will weep for you.

Eliza Doolittle, who has spent most of her life at Covent Garden selling flowers, warming her hands around a fire, struggling to survive, is desperate for a better life, so she agrees. Colonel Pickering agrees to pay for the experiment. For months, Prof. Higgins teaches her to speak and act.

At three months, they take Eliza to the races at Ascot, all dressed up. She fails miserably, but, at six months, they take her to the Embassy Ball. She is truly changed. The common flower girl becomes a duchess at the ball. (slide of Eliza at Embassy Ball)



Eliza is so fine that she is mistaken for a Hungarian princess, and the Prince of Transylvania asks to dance with her. After the triumph at the ball, Higgins takes all the credit. Eliza is mad. She walks out.

What surprised me most as I researched this play is, throughout its 100-year history, the play has had several different endings depending on the director. I had no idea. In Shaw's original version of "Pygmalion," the ending is purposefully vague. Eliza walks out, but what will become of her? Will she marry Freddy Eynsford-Hill, an admirer? Will she work in a flower shop, as was her original dream, to get off the street? Will she come back and marry Professor Henry Higgins? We do not know. All we know is that she is a different woman than when she started. George Bernard Shaw loved that the possibilities were endless for Eliza, but his directors did not.

In the version I saw recently on Broadway, Eliza says goodbye to Professor Higgins. She puts her hand on his face and walks out the door forever. The ending most of us know is the Hollywood version in which Eliza comes back to Higgins, and they somehow end up together as a couple. After he sings, "I've grown accustomed to her face ... her ups and downs are second nature to me now, like breathing out and breathing in," are we supposed to believe that Higgins also has changed and that he loves her as best as he can? It is important to note that George Bernard Shaw hated this ending, but producer Gabriel Pascal held his ground, saying, "You are a fool; this is what sells tickets in Hollywood." Romance.

Pascal bought the rights to "Pygmalion" and changed the title to "My Fair Lady" after Shaw died, but he had trouble finding someone who could write the lyrics. Cole Porter and Irving Berlin both turned him down. Finally, in 1954, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, took on the project.

The original Broadway version of My Fair Lady opened in 1956 with Julie Andrews (####) and Rex Harrison playing Eliza Doolittle and Professor Henry Higgins. It won 11 Tony Awards including Best Musical, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Costumes. It was deemed, "the perfect musical."



In the play, Eliza Doolittle the common flower girl with a strong Cockney accent, had to learn to speak like a lady. In real life, Julie Andrews, who grew up in Surrey England, had to learn a Cockney accent. Rex Harrison, an actor not known as a singer, used a talk-on-pitch singing style. Pascal thought he was so perfect for the part that it didn't matter. Although there have been a number of different Elizas, it is interesting to note that Rex Harrison was

not so easy to replace. Harrison played the role of Henry Higgins on stage in 1956 with Julie Andrews, on screen in 1964 with Audrey Hepburn, and again on Broadway periodically until 1981.



When it was time to make the movie, Hollywood passed over Julie Andrews, who certainly had the singing voice and was known for playing Eliza, and chose Audrey Hepburn who was at the height of her career, having just filmed "Breakfast at Tiffany's," "Roman Holiday," and "Sabrina," because Hepburn had the box office star power, if not the voice. (### slide of Audrey in Ascot Hat)

Supposedly, if Audrey turned them down, they were going to offer the role to Elizabeth Taylor. (Elizabeth Taylor? Can you imagine?!?) Audrey's singing voice was quietly dubbed over by the well-known opera singer Marni Nixon, which was quite common at the time. Word inevitably got out, and Hepburn took a lot of heat for it. In 1965, "My Fair Lady" took home eight Academy Awards including Best Movie, Best Screenplay, and Best Actor, but Audrey Hepburn was not even nominated. Ironically, the lesser known Julie Andrews won Best Actress that year for her role in "Mary Poppins."

"My Fair Lady" has been revived on Broadway in 1976, 1981, 1993, and 2018. I saw it two weeks ago at Lincoln Center with Lauren Ambrose (####) and Henry Hadden-Paton. Delightful! So to those of you who think there is nothing biblical about "My Fair



Lady," I disagree. It speaks to us about our common desire to change for the better. Every person in this room wants to change something about themselves ... except for Mary Poppins who is practically perfect in every way. Our Christian journey is about growth. We are always evolving. (####) Life keeps changing,

so we must change with it. Spiritual growth and development are about working with God in the most honest way that we know how to change what is going on inside of us.

Our Scripture this morning, which comes from the lectionary, is a poignant reminder that what we most need to change is our interior life. In the same way that Professor Henry Higgins looks fine on the outside, what he needs to change are the thoughts in his head and what comes out of his mouth. Truth be told, that is one of the things I am working on, too. Maybe you can relate.

We also are working on our interior and exterior life as a church. Change is everywhere. Folks occasionally ask me if I am staying. Let me say this just once. I am proud to be a minister here at First Presbyterian. This is my family's church. This is our spiritual home. You are my extended family. You are my people. This is my tribe. Even when we have a tough time and disagree, I still choose you as my family, because we are family, and families go through tough times together.



Friends, the times, they are a changing. Today was my first time ever to use multimedia in a sermon. It was a hard to create, but it was fun, and I know I will get better if I stick with it. Because I am a visual learner, I appreciate that this is the next step for us. Many of my minister friends around the country have been serving churches that have used multimedia for years. They think we are way behind the times.

Change is a constant theme in the Bible. It is a basic Christian principle. The early church believed in growing spiritually through small groups for fellowship, sharing, praying, and breaking of bread. Every church around the world has learned this secret. We will grow closer to God if we grow closer to each other. A

while ago, I told you there would be a time to lean in. This fall is the time to lean in. Everyone will be invited to join one of our small groups. Eight or 10 of them. You can choose your group. The goal is to talk openly and honestly with your small group over a series of sessions about what this church means to you and what you want it to be. Come; be a part.

Now is the time for dreamers and visionaries. Put on your dreaming glasses, strap on your vision goggles. Ask yourself this one question: How good can we make it here at FPC? I am not asking how nice or how fancy we can make it. I am asking, how much good can come from this place? In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.