

“*Across a Crowded Room*”

1 Samuel 23:1-7, John 18:33-39

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“Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger,
You may see a stranger across a crowded room.”¹

I have always loved the musical *South Pacific*. How about you? Set in the Second World War, it is the story of a group of naval officers and nurses stationed on an island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. There, romantic love and friendship blossom—transcending racial lines; but eventually relationships are challenged, even torn apart when racism rears its ugly head.

South Pacific is a sermon in itself. Rogers and Hammerstein were putting this story to music back in the 1940s, amidst a deeply segregated America. This was a time when marriage across racial lines was still illegal in most states, Japanese Americans were being forced into internment camps, black and white folks drank from separate fountains, and “No Dogs or Jews allowed” were still signs you could see hanging outside local country clubs.

Rogers and Hammerstein’s melodies served as mirrors, reflecting back the truth about who we are and the scars we bear from being entrenched in American systems of oppression. As you can imagine, when the show premiered in 1949, it received a wide range of reviews, everything from “this is the work of genius” to “this is the work of communism.”

But no song in the show was more controversial than the tune “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught.” It is sung in the Second Act, just after an American named Nellie is unable to accept as her own her fiancé’s Polynesian children from a previous marriage. When confronted about her racism, she defends herself by saying, “I can’t help it. It’s born in me.”

Her friend responds, “I do not believe these things are born in you. It happens after you’re born.”² And then he sings: “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught.” This provocative song made theater-goers and even legislators so uncomfortable that there were campaigns to have the tune removed from the show entirely. Hammerstein responded to his critics by saying something akin to “We can’t remove the song from the show—it *is* the show.”³

What I love about the Bible is that it is like a musical we know by heart. Psalms and stories have been passed down through the generations, shared across tables, taught in classrooms, preached from pulpits—stories of freedom and struggle, and of a God whose love for us is boundless and unending.

There are those passages that we know we can rely upon: the ones that offer us miraculous answers, direction, hope, the ones that teach of Christ’s sacrificial compassion and majesty, that bring us healing when we are most vulnerable, that offer strength when we think we can go no further.

But every once in a while, we encounter passages that fill our bellies with discomfort, or cause our hearts to ache, or leave us wide-eyed with more questions than ever

before. What do we do with difficult passages, passages that make us uncomfortable, passages that have been used to denigrate, even harm?

Sometimes it feels easier to read through such texts as quickly as possible, or to skip over them entirely, or when no one is looking, cough loudly and rip the pages out. For how can hurtful texts ever be reflections of God's good news?

This morning's passage is one that I did not want to face. I confess I looked at all of the other "Christ the King" lectionary options, longing to preach on *anything* but this. This is a text that makes me feel uncomfortable, one that hurts, one I wish could be taken out.

Pilate is eager to wash his hands clean of Jesus's charge and guilty verdict, and so throughout the trial he again and again places blame on "the Jews." *The Jews*. Today, as a synagogue in Pennsylvania still feels the absence of murdered loved ones, and a sprayed swastika is being scrubbed off a public sign in Black Mountain, it is hard to face a text like this. But maybe that is why the Spirit is calling us to do so. Perhaps on this Christ the King Sunday, this text is meant to serve as *our* mirror, reflecting back an imperfect image of ourselves, but one hungry for Christ's glorious truth and world-shaping direction.

Are you king of "the Jews"?

When Jesus stands trial before Pilate, Pilate's first question out the gate is about Jesus' lordship: his lordship over a community that Pilate has been taught to believe is inferior, and one the Roman Empire wants to maintain its power over—no matter what.

When John writes the words "the Jews," it feels like he is describing a faceless angry crowd—a group of bullies out for blood, who bear no resemblance to Jesus *or* his disciples. But we know that Jesus and his friends lived and died as Jews, and the Gospel writers were Jews writing for a predominantly Jewish audience. So, what's going on here?

Let's not forget that the Gospel of John wasn't written down until nearly sixty years after Jesus' death. At the time, the world was shifting. Tensions were brewing within the Jewish community. A number of Jews were Jesus followers, while others were still awaiting the Messiah.

Now, we know all too well that families are complicated. And the Jewish family of faith was no different. They were struggling to live and worship in harmony, moving further and further apart because of their differences. It was an agonizing divide, brother pitted against brother, sister against sister.

The Gospel of John was not written with an anti-Semitic heart, but rather from a place of grief. Jesus followers felt no longer welcome in their community of faith. And so, in an attempt to speak into their pain, John makes a distinction between those who follow Jesus and those who do not. "The Jews" became synonymous with "the other," and in today's passage, all are lumped together as Christ's adversaries and accusers.

"I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me."

In Pilate's second statement he seems eager to wash his hands free from guilt. He blames not only the chief priests, but the entire Jewish nation: "The Jews" are the ones who have brought you to trial, "the Jews" are the ones who will demand crucifixion.

Again, this passage calls for our community to read these words with a critical eye. The Jewish people as a whole were living as second-class citizens under the Roman Empire. They had virtually no power to demand anything, to condemn anyone. Theologian Mary Boys writes that even if a crowd of Jewish locals were present the day Jesus was sentenced to the cross, they never would have had the authority to demand his crucifixion (or anyone else's for that matter).⁴

The Gospel writer knew this truth and yet wrote the words down anyway. But surely John never could have imagined the dangerous impact this would have on history. By seemingly blaming the Jewish nation for Jesus's death, countless generations of Christians would be carefully taught to believe that the Jewish people are un-trustworthy, crooked, dangerous, "Christ killers." All of this, spurring centuries of racism, segregation, violence and genocide. So, why do texts like this one remain a part of our Bible? If they've caused so much hurt and pain, why not cut these passages out?

The truth is, we cannot afford to ignore what is most troubling. Theologian Amy Jill Levine writes that to do so "erases the memories of both the victims of those texts and those who have struggled against them."⁵

When our instinct is to distance ourselves, or to turn a blind eye, facing this passage serves as a reminder that Christ calls us to engage more fully with urgency and boldness. We must face what is challenging, ask the hard questions, wrestle with discomfort—even in ourselves—in order to make way for God's truth to be carefully taught and embraced.

Please close your eyes.

Imagine the curtain goes up and we find ourselves in today's scene: Jesus is standing before Pilate in a hot, stuffy room. Pilate is asking question after question. Jesus is responding with calm and care. Just outside the window a crowd is gathered. There is shouting and crying and lots of conversation. Confusion and tension and worry fill the air.

Where are you in this scene? What role do you choose to play? Are you one of the crowd, seeking answers down below? Are you Jesus, offering compassion in the face of terrible judgement? Or are you willing to step into Pilate's shoes, standing face to face with Jesus?

The truth is, as much as we do *not* want to see it, there are times when we take on this unsettling role.

Who do we find ourselves quick to judge these days? Who do we treat as "the other"? Who are the ones we call "the Jews"?

Please open your eyes.

Pilate's final question to Jesus is: What is truth? It is the most critical question of all, and yet Pilate never waits for a reply. Pilate cannot even see the answer standing right before him. For too long, his vision has been crowded by all that he has been taught to believe and hate and control. He is not willing to look closely at holy truth standing before him and open himself up to the possibility of transformation.

This makes me think back to South Pacific, to the song many people so badly wanted to see eliminated from the show. What truths about themselves were they too afraid to face? And what could a song like this teach us about our need for Christ, for this unlikely King?

“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!”⁶

In a world where we are taught to hate, Christ comes teaching a new lesson about infinite love and grace. Christ comes as a different kind of King who does not sit high on a throne, but accompanies the vulnerable. Christ comes as the embodiment of holy truth— truth as revelation, as a stimulant for justice, truth that demands equity and dismantles systems of oppression, truth that celebrates difference and offers radical compassion for all.

Our passage today calls for us to look in the mirror and question the ways we are limited by our contexts, by what we have been *carefully taught* through the years. When we recognize what crowds our vision, we are able to see Christ standing before us, and open ourselves up to living anew. May we have the courage to be this vulnerable with our God, and with one another; and may we have the faith to embrace Christ’s wondrous, world-changing truth.

Notes

1. Oscar Hammerstein & Richard Rogers, “Some Enchanted Evening,” *South Pacific*. Columbia Masterworks, 1949.
2. Oscar Hammerstein & Joshua Logan, *South Pacific*, Williamson Music Inc., 1949.
3. James A. Michener, *The World Is My Home: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1992), 294–295.
4. Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, “The Thing I Never Want to Hear Again on Good Friday,” *The Huffington Post*, April 17, 2014.
5. Amy Jill Levine, “Holy Week and The Hatred of the Jews: Avoiding Anti-Judaism at Easter,” *ABC Religion and Ethic*, April 2, 2015. <<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2015/04/02/4210266.htm>.
6. Oscar Hammerstein & Richard Rogers, “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught,” *South Pacific*, Columbia Masterworks, 1949.