



Proper 11, Year C – June 13, 2010

“You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught”

A Homily preached by the Rev’d James Popham

Let’s start with a bit of trivia. Who was the only person named Oscar to win an Oscar? In fact, he won two Oscars. And his name was Oscar Hammerstein. He wrote the lyrics and book for the musical *South Pacific*, for which he won a Tony, not an Oscar. One of the less well-remembered songs in *South Pacific* goes as follows:

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 diff'rent 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!¹

The underlying premise of these pointed lyrics is one is a most hopeful notion: Human beings are not by nature hateful or fearful of people who are in some way different. Different skin color, different national origin, different religion, different caste, different class, different education, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera (if you’ll pardon my allusion to another award-winning Oscar Hammerstein musical – *The King and I*.) Despite our differences, at a very base level, we are more alike than different. Indeed, current theories of quantum physics suggest that we all are connected. In fact, all creation is connected. And how can you hate or fear something that you are a part of. Well, history proves you can ... but you have to be carefully taught.

Someone mentioned to me the other day that in the so-called Korean conflict in the 1950’s – we do seem to be lost in the 50s this morning – , someone told me that only 15 per cent of the United Nations infantrymen actually aimed their rifles at specific, individual enemy soldiers. But by the time the next conflict in Southeast Asia erupted in Viet Nam, infantry had been better trained, more carefully “taught.” So that 70 per cent of the soldiers then actually aimed at the enemy. I have no idea what the statistics might be

¹ From *South Pacific*, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein 2d.

today in Afghanistan, but we do know that the incidence of post traumatic stress disorder and suicides among returning fighters is staggering. In killing other human beings, we are defying who we really are ... and it is killing us... literally.

Each of the readings today offers an elixir, an antidote to the careful teaching to fear or hate and thereby become willing to harm others who are different. They provide lessons in crashing through barriers and loving in the face of differences.

Consider Ahab, king of Israel, the northern kingdom. He was actually a rather good king. His foreign and domestic policies were admirable and served his people well. You would not know that by reading the Bible. Ahab was rather shabbily treated. Why? Because he had crossed a line. He maintained a regime of religious tolerance and even went so far as to marry Jezebel. She was Canaanite – and to make matters worse, a high priestess of another religion. She was different. So Ahab's reputation among the Israelite writers of scripture went to the dogs ... so to speak.

Paul's letter to the Galatians, however, offers a theological rejoinder to making too much of religious differences. There was conflict in the church – how new and different was that! The hot button issue was whether Gentile Christians should abide by Jewish law. Not so much the ethical commandments, but the purity laws and other rules that functioned to maintain Jewish identity, something that became quite important at the time Jews were exiled from their homeland and Jerusalem. Paul's response.

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not
Gentile sinners;[ouch] yet we know that a
person is justified not by the works of the
law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now we most often hear and think of this phraseology as setting the debate spawned by Martin Luther whether we are "saved" by believing in Jesus Christ or by doing good works. But by considering the context in which it was said and in going back to the original Greek, we can derive a whole new meaning. Then it translates as, "We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through [the] faith [of] Jesus Christ." In other words, we are not rectified, reconciled, made in right relationship with God, by what we do in abiding by the Jewish purity laws, but through Jesus's faith, his trust in God, even to death on the cross. Paul's conclusion supports this interpretation, "for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." What Paul is saying is that Christ reconciled Jew and Gentile alike. We all are the beneficiaries of this seminal act of reconciliation. The Jewish followers of Christ, therefore, had no reason to think themselves different – meaning better – than the Gentile followers of Christ. This diversity in religious practice was, as lawyers say, a distinction without a difference.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus draws the line more clearly in the sand. He chides his Pharisee hosts for faulting him for allowing a sinner to touch him. In essence,

for thinking himself better than this woman who deigned to express her love for Christ in tangible and quite beautiful ways.

These readings remind us that different is not synonymous for either better or lesser. This is so easy to say. But life conspires against us. We form relationships based on affinity. We gather with and make friends with people like ourselves. We go to church with ... people like ourselves. Look around. Now there's nothing intrinsically wrong with that. But ... some years ago, I was part of a very Christian group – actually a group of groups of a dozen or so people who shared and prayed and ate together once a month. The groups were named after the community in which they were formed. Mine had been the first group formed in Alexandria, Virginia. So we were known as Alexandria One or A-1. A-1. We were grade A; we were number one. And we began to believe it. Even though we knew better. Though in many ways we really were...better. See what I mean?

And then as Oscar Hammerstein reminded us. So often we have been carefully taught. And just as often so subtly we do not even realize how our fabric has been carefully woven to believe we are better – and “they” are inferior. We might well ask how the milieu in which we were raised and culture and strata in which we live have ingrained us with a subconscious understanding that we are ... better.

Another astounding aspect of war that I stumbled on last week comes from a book called – appropriately enough – *War*, by Sebastian Junger. He embedded himself in a fighting unit in Afghanistan for an entire year. He made a surprising – but maybe not so surprising discovery. However carefully taught they might have been, what motivated the men in that platoon to place their lives on the line was not love of country. It was not some exalted principle like freedom or democracy. They were ready to give up their own lives rather than let their brothers in arms down. It was very simply the bond and the love among the 30 men in the platoon that motivated them. Somewhere deep inside themselves they understood that whatever their differences, they were all human and equally deserving of each other's love and protection.

We, too, know better than we have been taught. We know that none of our differences should speak more loudly to us than our inner sense – a God-given sense, I would submit – our inner sense that we all are God's children, that Jesus' reconciling act was not limited to people like us, that we all are connected as part of the same divine creation – and worthy of human love that parallels God's same indiscriminate, unbounded love for everyone. Everyone.

Amen.

Allow me an epilogue to an already lengthy homily. This past week the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada concluded its triennial meeting. Two actions in particular demonstrate an understanding that our unity as a church and a human beings trumps our differences. First, the Synod took up no motions or resolutions that would have required taking

sides on the controversial issues surrounding human sexuality. Instead, it passed a resolution submitting these troublesome issues to holy conversation, acknowledging our differences but embracing our unity. Second, it affirmed the call for greater participation of the church in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada. Again, the church stepped to the forefront in seeking not to exploit or exacerbate differences, but to reconcile them. And again, I say, "Amen."

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