

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
July 24, 2011
Matthew 13:54-58
“The Gospel of *Godspell*”

I'd love to tell you everything about John Michael Tebelak, a tall young man with roots here in Pittsburgh; a 22-year old Master's degree student attending Carnegie Mellon University who, just over 40 years ago, got inspired to compose *Godspell* – one of the most popular musicals ever produced on Broadway. But I only have time to share one anecdote. Tebelak, struggling to come up with a Master's thesis idea, had shifted from reading Greek and Roman mythology to reading the gospels. Struck by the joy in the gospel story, he decided to attend the early morning Easter service at St. Paul's Cathedral near campus. He was wearing his usual outfit of overalls and a t-shirt. It happened to snow that morning, which was odd, and it seemed to put everyone in a bad mood. Tebelak said that as the service began, an old priest came out and mumbled into a microphone and people mumbled things back, and at the end everyone got up and simply left. Instead of celebrating Christ's resurrection, it seemed to him that people had pushed Jesus back into the tomb. As Tebelak was preparing to leave, a policeman, who'd been sitting two pews in front of him, stopped him and asked to frisk him, thinking he'd only come to church to escape the snowstorm and wondering if he was carrying drugs. The absurd incident angered Tebelak so much that he went home and knew what he wanted to do for his thesis. He wanted to re-discover the simple, joyful message he had found in the gospels and recreate the sense of a loving, trusting community as described in the bible. By that fall, rehearsals for *Godspell* began at CMU – a version which moved to Off Off Broadway, then (in May 1971) to Off Broadway, where it had new songs composed for it by another CMU grad Stephen Schwartz; and then, as they say, the rest is history.

On that Easter day back in 1970, Tebelak commented that instead of rolling the rock away from the tomb, people in church were piling more on. That is not an uncommon criticism. Where is the joy in our worship? Where is the joy in our Christian lives today? And like we heard in the reading from Matthew's gospel, why do so many people take offense at Jesus, questioning how this carpenter's son from Nazareth could possibly be the son of God? These are big questions. To offer you a partial answer, I must first say something unpopular. But if you stay with me, it is something whose message is both at the heart of the gospel and the heart of *Godspell*.

Question: Can human beings achieve perfection? If we awake each morning and tell ourselves, “Each and every day I am getting better in every way,” is that a true statement? I believe that we can learn from our mistakes. I believe that we can improve our lot and grow in moral knowledge and self-control. But I don’t believe we ever come close to attaining perfection. I’m Presbyterian, for goodness sake. Calvinism, Puritanism, depravity, and sin, and all that are in my bones. So contrary to the mantras built around the power of positive thinking and a starry-eyed belief in the “perfectability” of the human race, I would offer a more chastened, realistic philosophy. I still welcome the dawn’s light of each new day, but note that we are, sadly, incapable of not doing wrong.

We are incapable of not doing wrong. That may not seem like a great slogan for church evangelism, but it’s still true. The apostle Paul put it this way: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do ... O wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:19, 24) Now, if you’re familiar with *Godspell* and Stephen Schwartz’s lyrics, its message is not all that upbeat or rosy. The musical begins with John the Baptist’s cry of repentance shouted out in the wilderness, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” It moves to prophetic words of warning: *I can see a swath of sinners settin’ yonder and they’re actin’ like a pack of fools. Gazin’ into space, they let their minds wander instead of studying the good Lord’s rules. You better pay attention, build your comprehension, there’s gonna be a quiz at your ascension. Not to mention any threat of hell, but if you’re smart you’ll learn your lessons well.* There’s the cynical tap dance about how some people seem to be born to live at ease, doing what they please, richer than the bees are in honey, pulling pots of gold from thin air – and how for everyone else, there’s only the promise that in heaven you’ll be blest, since here on earth, this type of economic imbalance is, well, all for the best – or so sing those who benefit from it. (This could be the theme song of the current budget talks where some wrongly insist that raising tax revenues on the wealthiest is an affront to God and nation.) And interspersed with these songs is pointed dialogue about light and darkness, and how we are to turn away from evil and choose what is good.

What is distinctive about *Godspell* is not so much its message, which on the whole is fairly conservative, but rather its medium. The gospel is acted out by a group of young people, who painted their faces as if in a circus; who juggled, who carried hand puppets, who danced and sang and splashed in fountains, freshly baptized and swept along by the spirit of joy at the heart of Jesus’ story. Unlike Tebelak’s memory of people bundled up on Easter morning, who hurried into church, murmured their lines, and exited back out onto the snowy streets, stopping only to frisk an unsavory character who happened to wander into their midst, *Godspell* is about sunlight and color, laughter and ensemble pieces. Mostly it’s about thanksgiving, about attitudes of gratitude. No, we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. We are sadly incapable of not doing wrong. But the good news is that we are not alone when trying to do what is right. We human beings are not the sole source of truth, beauty, or love in this fragile world. Far from it. We are the recipients of a world made by God. We are all loved, blessed, parented, disciplined and forgiven by God. As the *Godspell* song says: *All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all God’s love.*

That's what is so ironic about the passage from Matthew 13 in which Jesus is teaching in his hometown synagogue. Here's the local boy who made good, the carpenter's son whose reputation has preceded him and who is now known as a teacher and miracle-worker. In the string of questions in this gospel story, notice which one is asked twice: *Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't Mary his mother? Aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?* The people in Nazareth, in Jesus' hometown, know his story and recognize that he is able to do wondrous things. But they don't go to the next step; they don't draw any inferences from the information before them. They asked twice, "Where did Jesus get all his wisdom and power and authority?" but they refused to accept as an answer that it came from God. That the Creator of life had broken into the world in a life-transforming way and that a new gospel was being proclaimed for all people. Instead of responding with joy, they responded with anger. They took offense. They refused to believe.

The presence of Jesus Christ causes us to ask fundamental questions about the world, about good and evil, about what it means to be the church and to live in community. We may tell ourselves that our human reason and intelligence and resourcefulness mean that each and every day we are getting better in every way. But there is much to remind us of the folly of such selfish optimism: the shooting in Oslo, the arguing in Washington, corrupt Marcellus Shale negotiations, democracy movements being squelched in Syria. So we move to the other end of the spectrum and acknowledge that we do not always do what is best for ourselves or for our world. Yet, having said that, we also affirm that Christ came to us as one of us. He appeared in our world; he has drawn near to each of our lives. We read the gospel testimony about his life and death, about a cross and a tomb, and we consider it in our hearts. Then we, too, pause and ask ourselves, "Where did this man get this wisdom and power and authority?" By grace, we are moved to answer "From God the Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer of all." In that moment, we see the difference between "life" and "capital-L life". We see the distinction between church and capital-C church. We see how our world is actually God's capital-W world.

That realization turns us all into *Godspell* cast members. We know that we are loved, saved by grace, and that sin and violence and brokenness do not have the final word. That insight leads us to smile, even paint our faces, juggle, dance, splash in fountains, sing praises, gather for prayer, and go out into the world as fools and jesters and prophets and *Godspell* gospel messengers.

Jesus was teaching one day when he was interrupted by someone who told him, "Hey, your mother and your siblings are outside wanting to speak with you." Jesus graciously, generously said, "Here are my mother and my siblings. Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:46-50) That's the invitation for today. It is an invitation to be part of this *Godspell* cast of characters. It is a call to be part of the grand musical drama of this life. *Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all God's love.*

AMEN