

We're in the third week of our sermon series on God and Broadway looking at some theological themes in classic musicals. And today it's a little like shooting fish in a barrel. With the exception of the plays based on scripture which I'll talk about next week, and *Les Misérables* which we'll look at the week after that, few musicals are as explicit in dealing with spiritual themes as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *The Sound of Music*.

These two musicals have much in common.

Both plays end with the central families becoming refugees. *Fiddler on the Roof* has Tevye's family being forced out of Russia on the eve of WWI. *The Sound of Music* has the Trapp family escaping from Austria after its annexation by Nazi Germany on the eve of WWII. And though neither play shows it, both families will end up taking refuge in the United States.

In both plays we have distant villains: the Tsar's regime in Russia and Nazi Germany taking over Austria. But both plays also have more explicit villains: locals who cooperate with these oppressive regimes, who refuse to oppose evil orders given them from above.

And both works have overlapping theological themes which I want to discuss in more detail.

But first, a few words about each of these musicals.

Fiddler on the Roof was based on the works of the Russian Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem. Aleichem was often referred to as "The Jewish Mark Twain." Mark Twain famously replied, "Please tell him that I am the American Sholem Aleichem."

It is remarkable that Aleichem's stories about Tevye the milkman and his daughters can contain so much humor, since they are set in a pretty grim world. Thus the setting of *Fiddler on the Roof* is terribly bleak: poverty, persecution, expulsion from your country. And yet, this play still contains much humor. Life is lived joyfully even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

The Sound of Music is also set in grim circumstances, in Austria just before and after the Anschluss, its annexation by Nazi Germany. It is based on the true story of former submarine captain Georg and his wife, the former nun Maria who wrote her memoir, *The Trapp Family Singers*. But it's very loosely based on this story. We might say these days that the play was "inspired by the true story" of the real Trapp family. Because the play is so loosely based, none of the names of the children in the play match the real Trapp children. The play shows Georg as a stern and distant father, when in reality he was reputed to have been a very warm and loving papa. Also, the play has Georg and Maria marrying, and then having to escape with their children right when they return from their honeymoon. They had actually been married for a decade by this point. And the family didn't escape by dramatically walking over the Alps, but by taking a train from Austria to Italy, before moving on to the United States.

Both *Fiddler* and *The Sound of Music* share a number of theological themes. They both center on trying to discover the will of God, and then trying to live out the will of God in the midst of the changes of life.

In the beginning of *The Sound of Music*, Maria is a novice nun in a convent. She desperately wants to know and follow the will of God. She says so explicitly to her Mother Superior. The Reverend Mother and the other nuns suspect that Maria may have a different calling than living in a convent the rest of her days. The Reverend Mother even asks Maria point blank what she wants to do. And Maria gives an awesome answer:

"To find out what is the will of God and to do it wholeheartedly."

Wow. That's an almost perfect answer. To find out what is the will of God and to do it wholeheartedly. It's got two parts to it: discovering the will of God; and then living out the will of God. And neither one of those things is easy.

It's certainly not easy for Maria. She thinks she's got things figured out. She thinks she is supposed to serve God by staying in the convent and eventually taking the permanent life vows of a nun. And when the Reverend Mother asks her to temporarily leave the convent and serve as a nanny to the Trapp children, she initially balks.

But then after she meets the children and begins to fall in love with them, she has this spiritual insight. She prays,

"Dear Father, now I know why You sent me here. To help these children prepare for a new mother."

What she doesn't yet understand is that yes, God not only wants her to help prepare the children for a new mother. She is also called to be that new mother herself.

Maria falls in love with the children. She also falls in love with Captain von Trapp. But this proves to be spiritually overwhelming to her. And so she leaves the Trapps behind and retreats to the convent. Maria goes spiritually backwards to what is a safe place from her past. This is a common human reaction.

After the resurrection, in the 21st chapter of John, the disciples are not sure what to do. And so they go backwards, back to their old job. They go fishing. But they don't catch anything.

Going spiritually backwards rarely works in life, especially if God is calling us to move forward into something new.

And so the wise Reverend Mother tells Maria,

"These walls were not built to shut out problems. You have to face them. You have to live the life you were born to live."

You have to live the life you were born to live. You have to live into the purpose you were created for. You have to use the gifts God has given you in the way God is calling you to use them.

And so Maria moves forward in life. Maria leans that her calling is to serve God not by staying in the convent and becoming a nun. Rather she is called to marry and to be a mother to her 7 step children, and later in real life, to 3 of her own biological children as well.

Maria sums it up with this recurring line,
"When the Lord closes a door, somewhere He opens a window."

Which brings us back to Maria's initial statement of intent. She said she desired,
"To find out what is the will of God and to do it wholeheartedly."

In the play, she finds some doors have closed for her. But other things have opened. And she finds herself serving God in ways she never expected.

A similar theme plays out in *Fiddler on the Roof*. It also centers on struggling with discerning God's will in the midst of the changes life brings.

And Tevye initially thinks he has a trump card for dealing with the world, Tradition! His Orthodox Jewish community has traditions for everything:

"How to eat, how to sleep, how to work, even how to wear clothes."

And Tevye says,
"Because of our traditions, everyone here knows who he is, and what God expects him to do."

But Tevye discovers this is only partly true. Because not all traditions are created equal. Some traditions are mere human customs that have grown up over the years. But some traditions are deep revelations from God about God's core desires for us. And so tradition is not an easy trump card.

Traditions require discernment. Are our traditions merely human customs, or are they core, bedrock principles?

My liturgy professor in seminary used to say this:

There are three things we often get confused in the Episcopal Church:

- 1. The faith once delivered to the saints.*
- 2. The doctrine, discipline and worship of Christ as (the Episcopal) church has received them.*

- 3. The way we've always done things around here.*

The way we've always done things around here is about our local customs in local congregations. But we get in trouble if we assume that all our local customs are equal to the bedrock principles and core beliefs that have been handed on to us by God.

Should we use purple candles or blue candles during Advent? That's local custom and not of central importance.

Is Jesus Lord? That is a core question, and central to the faith.

And so Tevye has to wrestle with his traditions.

And Tevye's main struggles occur when dealing the ways that his daughters are falling in love. Tevye's daughters are wanting to choose their mates, to be married without having arranged marriages chosen through the auspices of a matchmaker and their parents.

With one of the daughters, Tevye is wrestling within himself. The couple's request to marry because of love is certainly against tradition. Tevye's first knee jerk response is to say, "No. But then he says,

"On the other hand, our old ways were once new, weren't they? On the other hand, they decided without parents, without the matchmaker. On the other hand, did Adam and Eve have a matchmaker? Ah, yes they did."

And he points to God and says, "And it seems these two have the same matchmaker."

Tevye wrestles with his community's traditions. But he also appeals to their core traditions. What does scripture say? In Christian terminology, is it part of the faith once delivered to the saints? Or is it just the way we've always done things around here?

Discerning God's will is not easy. God doesn't send me a to-do list in my email inbox every morning. And there's not a hard copy of God's orders for the day waiting in my sock drawer.

In both of our musicals this week, Tevye and Maria have to struggle, really struggle to discern God's will in the midst of changing circumstances in their lives and in their families, and in the world around them.

And at the end of both movies, both the Trapp family and Tevye's Jewish community have to leave their homelands. The Trapps are able to make a hard choice—Captain von Trapp will not serve the Nazis, will not join the German navy, and thus he and his family will voluntarily leave behind their home and their country to journey to a new land of freedom.

Tevye's community is not given much of a choice, just an ultimatum. Leave in 2 days. One of them asks the Rabbi, "Rabbi, we've been waiting for the Messiah all our lives. Wouldn't this be a good time for him to come?"

And the wise Rabbi answers, "We'll have to wait for him someplace else. Meanwhile, let's start packing."

Following God is not always easy. It requires struggling to discern God's will. And it requires courage to act on it. And it may require us to leave behind what is familiar and comfortable.

Following God can be a daunting proposition in the midst of a changing world. Staying true to God's values and our values may not always be easy. Discerning what God would have us do can be difficult at times.

Ultimately it requires trust. In New Testament terms, it requires faith. In Maria's words it requires us to believe that,

"When the Lord closes a door, somewhere He opens a window."

In the midst of rapid changes, stick close to God. Lean into God. Seek his will. And follow where he leads.