

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HAMMERSTEIN

by Kenneth Anderson

A Jazz Vespers at St. James Westminster, May 3, 2009

Text: Philippians 3: 17- 4:1

**Rogers and Hammerstein had few, if any, equals
in writing joyful, light-hearted musicals.
I was reading an article about Oscar Hammerstein
that struck a responsive chord with me.**

**The article explored some of the basic philosophy of Mr. Hammerstein
and the beliefs that inspired his songs.
He expressed the heart of his beliefs when he said:
“I can’t write anything without ‘hope’ in it.”**

**People often pointed out to him that he was unrealistic in his approach to life
because the world has evil and ugliness in it.
It’s the breeding ground for recessions, famines and wars.
Hammerstein’s response was that he knew about that side of life
and he did not consider himself a stranger
to pain and suffering in the world,
but he chose to “align himself to the hope side of life”.**

**In 1943 amidst the ugliness of being a Jewish person during
World War II he wrote the lyrics to “Oklahoma”.
Remember the opening scene?
The curtain flung open and we were looking
at a magnificent Oklahoma sunrise.
Then the chorus sang, “O what a beautiful morning,
O what a beautiful day.
I’ve got a wonderful feeling... everything’s....”
I bet most of you can finish that, can’t you!!**

**In 1945 when the war had reached the peak of its destructiveness,
Hammerstein wrote the words to “Carousel”.
In it was “You’ll Never Walk Alone”.
Remember the lines:
“When you walk through a storm
hold your head up high
and don’t be afraid of the dark”.**

Finally, after the war,
after the first Atomic bomb had been dropped,
millions were looking toward the future with nothing
but anxiety and dread.

It was then he wrote the words to the musical “South Pacific”.
Remember “A Cockeyed Optimist”?
(Corny words, but good words, too.)
“I’m stuck like a dope with a thing called hope
and I can’t get it out of my heart....”.

Oscar Hammerstein couldn’t write anything without hope in it!

I would like to suggest for all of us gathered here in St. James,
that to be a Christian means that *we* have chosen
to align ourselves to the hope side of life.

I have what is sometimes called “The Holy Week Equation”.
It goes like this:

Whatever life can bring in terms of disappointments,
injustice or tragedy
on one side
God always tips the scales more positively on the other side.

Our passage of scripture was from that positive 4-chapter book of the Bible:
Philippians.

Paul is saying (let me read the key verse):
Forgetting those things which are behind me
And straining forward to what lies ahead
I press on towards the prize of
The heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

With Christ we don’t need to be always looking backwards
over our shoulders
to our sins and failures.

With Christ we forge ahead with hope
towards the prize.

Two weeks ago, a young man from Fed-Ex delivered a package to St. James.
He popped his head into my office and asked if could speak to me
about the baptism of his yet-unborn child.

The man was about 30, clean-shaven, well groomed, handsome, even.
The only clue that belied this perfect-model-citizen look
were a huge number of tattoos.

The conversation with Sean went something like this:
Congratulations. When are you expecting?

About mid August.

Is it you and your girlfriend, your fiancé, your wife who's pregnant?

Well (and he broke into a big smile) last week I would have said my
fiancé, but we had an argument, so this week she's my girlfriend.

What led you to St. James?

This package I was delivering.

Do you have a faith background? A denomination?

I've never been in a church in my life.

In fact, I haven't been a very good person.

I hung around with the Hell's Angels. Was in jail a couple of times. But
that's all in my past. I cut all those ties and want to make something of
myself.

Well, Sean, welcome to St. James; I hope we can join you in your journey.

(And I was thinking in the back of my mind,
if he comes to St. James. Will he feel at home? Will the worship speak
to him in a language he can understand? I know. I'll invite him to
come to the Mother's Day service. It's always very powerful.)

And I made an instant decision.

Come to Mother's Day, 10:30 a.m. I'm going to be telling a story.

It's a children's story, but it's really for adults. There is this Canadian
author, Robert Munsch, who wrote a wonderful little book called, "Love You
Forever".

Well, his eyes lit up. That's the story about a mother who loves her son,
he said, but when the mother gets really old he cares for her.

That's the one.

My mother always read that to me when I was a little boy.

And he started to tear up.

I hope I'll see him again.

I guess I'm stuck like a dope with a thing called hope
and I'll have an eye out for him on Mother's Day.

I can tell you, if he and I and you don't live with hope,
we're already half dead.

**A colleague of mine tells of a road in Colorado State
that he took during one of his vacations.
It leads through William's Canyon to the Cave of the Winds.**

**He said it is a very narrow, winding road
and one spot is appropriately called "The Narrows".
Extremely narrow, he emphasized.
He described the feeling in the pit of his stomach as he approached that spot.
He said,**

**"The road is so narrow that I was sure I wouldn't make it".
But just as I reached that spot appropriately called "The Narrows"
I noticed a small hand-written sign that read
"Yes you can. A million others have".
So he drove on, with a new and bold confidence.**

**You see there are times in our life
when we come into sections that we call "The Narrows"
And we're not quite sure if we're going to make it.**

**The narrows for Jesus was that critical time between Palm Sunday
and Good Friday.
You know what the narrows is for you.**

**And the Easter message hasn't faded so much that it can't
still whisper to us:
"Yes you can! Yes you can! Yes you can!
Countless millions of other Christians have.
Christ has."**

May the Lord bring strength and courage and hope into your life.

**In the words of Oscar Hammerstein
may you be "stuck like a dope with a thing called hope" ...
so much so that you can't get it out of your heart.**