

Hairspray: Confronting Racism & More on the Dance Floor

Galatians 3:26-28

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Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael, CA

...in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:26-28

Today we continue our God on Broadway series. As I mentioned earlier in the service, *Hairspray's* setting is a teen dance show and it's set in a local TV station in Baltimore, Maryland in 1962. As a teenager, did any of you watch dance shows or music shows growing up? So depending on your age and place you grew up, it varies. I grew up watching American Bandstand. In fact since I grew up in Orange County not far from Hollywood, some of my friends actually danced on the show. I also loved watching Soul Train. The kids in youth groups I led were watching MTV. Now you can see music videos on YouTube and you can learn all the current dance steps on Tick Tock.

Our musical today “*Hairspray*” is set in the early 1960’s in Baltimore. Let’s think about that context. There were quite a few local dance shows that took place in the 50s and 60s across our nation. Many of the local TV stations had their own shows. Here are some photos of Teenarama Dance Party - in Washington DC in 1963-1970. (Pause) (1)

Here is a picture of American Bandstand from that same time frame. It started in Philadelphia, moved to Los Angeles. (Pause)

It’s fun to look back. Did you notice that in those dance shows people really dressed up? Guys in suits, girls in beautiful dresses.

You could also clearly see in just those two shows that it was a deeply segregated time. Teenarama Dance Party for African American young people that started on the campus of Howard University. And American Bandstand was for Caucasian youth in Philly. And beyond those two groups there was even less diversity found in those shows.

So I want us to think about what that means today because like many of the musicals we've looked out in this and previous series, “*Hairspray*” was written in response to some real life issues that were happening. Baltimore at that time had a teen dance show that was called the Buddy Dean Show. In an article in the Atlantic, Matthew Delmont wrote that from 1957 to 1963 only white teens were allowed to attend the weekday broadcast of The Buddy Dean Show, with the exception of one Monday a month when black teenagers filled the studio on the so-called Black Monday. In 1963 a student integrationist group from Morgan State

University challenged this policy by obtaining tickets for black and white teens to attend the show on the day reserved for black teenagers. After a surprise interracial broadcast on WJZ-TV received bomb threats, arson threats, hate mail and complaints from white parents. Facing controversy over the possibility of more integrated broadcasts the station canceled the show. They just canceled it. (2)

Hairspray's original composer and author is John Waters who is a Baltimore native and a film director. And in 1988 he took this story and gave it a new twist. "Hairspray" is about a fictional dance show called The Corny Collins Show. The music is fun and it is campy and the costumes are great and yet it also shows some deep deep troubles that were happening. In 2002, the film was adapted into a Broadway musical of the same name, which won eight Tony Awards, including Best Musical in 2003. A second film version of "Hairspray," an adaptation of the stage musical, was also released in 2007. Delmont writes that Hairspray has the chance to resurface a forgotten history of how discrimination in pop culture intimately shaped the lives of young people 50 years ago.

Let's look at the main characters. In case you're not familiar with the play, this is Tracy Turnblad. She is a plus-sized teenager who loves to dance. There is a vacancy on The Corny Collins Show groups of regular dancers and Tracy wants to audition. Her mother Edna is afraid that Tracy will get laughed off the set because of her weight.

At the auditions Tracy bumps into teen heart throb Link Larkin. All the kids were crazy about him. She also encounters a woman named Velma Von Tussell who is a racist producer of the Corny Collins show. Velma rejects Tracy because of her size and she rejects a younger girl who's known as Little Inez because of the color of her skin.

Now back at school Tracy is sent to detention because her hair style was so tall that the teacher said the students couldn't see around it and it was a distraction. And it's there she meets this young man whose name is Seaweed Stubbs. Seaweed is the son of Motormouth Maybelle who hosts the Corny Collins show on what is called "Negro Day" when it is open for black teens.

So Tracy and Seaweed and their friends bond over the shared love of music and dancing. Another lead character is Penny Pingleton. Her mother is very religious, does not like any dancing and is deeply prejudiced. Imagine what happens when Penny starts dating Seaweed.

At the time of the setting of "Hairspray," Baltimore is facing this time of great transition as it wrestles with issues of race and class and gender. There were many questions about what laws were right and must be followed and what laws and practices were wrong and needed to be changed. Not unlike the setting of Paul's letter to the Galatians. There were questions about how to live and act in ways that were in response to the deepest truths as followers of Jesus.

Paul did not have a grand plan for social justice. He was not interested in trying to reform all of the Roman laws, institutions, or culture with respect to slave-holding, gender roles, or religious observance. Rather, Paul was focused on creating communities that were outposts of “life in Christ,” assemblies of people relating to one another in a way that were in accord with Christ’s vision, kin-dom of God.

Paul’s mission was to prepare the people in his churches, gatherings, (*ekklesiai*) to relate to one another as though they were in the very presence of God, as indeed he understood them to be when they gathered in Christ’s name. He was calling for a moral urgency of this reordering of human relationships – no longer a hierarchy. A diversity where no one more favored by God than others.

From the point of view of a twenty-first century democracy, Paul’s radical reordering of human relationships before God does not now seem nearly radical enough. To understand ourselves as clothed with Christ, is to apprehend our full responsibility as heirs of God, people with both the grace and the responsibility to live into Paul’s vision in ever-widening circles. We are called to live in ways that reflect the fullness of God’s presence. God is in the business of resurrection and reconciliation. The Spirit is on the move:

- to call people into dynamic relationship with God;
- to invite us into communities of well-being beyond constricting gender norms;
- and to effect freedom, full agency, and respect for all people. (2)

In the church of Galatia, Jewish and Gentile members came with their very different cultural and religious backgrounds and this caused all kinds of problems, both in Galatia and in Corinth. There were class differences among the members of the church. There was conflict around who had to follow the Mosaic, Jewish laws and who did not.

So the invitation to the church in Galatia and I would say in Baltimore was the invitation to figure out how to integrate all of those people into one body, into the body of Christ. All are needed. All can function together. All are valued.

The same as the message from “Hairspray.” There is a phrase “Run and Tell That.” It’s commonly found in African-American spirituals and other music. “Run and Tell That” is the phrase means that you should go and spread the word. Go quickly and share the news. Let it be known to everyone – “run and tell that” declares to your adversary that you will succeed in the near future. So Seaweed and the other students of color who are routinely marginalized at school and at the tv station are together in a classroom. The authority figures continue to advocate for racial segregation, but Seaweed declares that a new day is coming. “Run and Tell That” he says and in this song with the same title Seaweed boldly proclaims his worth as a person of color.

Let's watch a clip from the 2007 movie version of Hairspray.

Video clip – Run and Tell That. <https://youtu.be/izGLqVgr5AA>

I love that song “Run and Tell That.” Tracy has her own “run and tell that” message. People who are different - their time is coming. People who are different could describe her African-American classmates. It also describes Tracy herself. She is a plus size person and is constantly receiving all these messages that she is not okay and that her body is not okay. Certainly many teenagers struggle with body image and being accepted and attractive. Tracy Turnblad, like Seaweed, and little Inez – it was and is time to “Run and Tell That.” Their time has come.

Amidst all of these happy peppy dance numbers in “Hairspray,” there's an important thread that runs through the whole show. That is the thread of racial injustice and the need to address systemic racism and efforts for reconciliation. In the 2007 movie version, Tracy wants to lead a protest at the tv station in order to integrate the Corny Collins Show. The protest is based on that real life protest I told you about at the Buddy Dean show. It led to the show being cancelled.

In the movie, Motormouth Maybelle is played by Queen Latifah. She is Seaweed's mother and the DJ at the tv station on Black Monday or Negro Day. Also she owns a record store. Tracy, Link and Penny start hanging out at the music store with Seaweed and the other students. And through these relationships, through conversations with Miss Maybelle, through dancing together, things are transformed for them. The white students begin to see the depth of pain and the injustice of segregation, and it comes through being in relationship with others.

Now Tracy naively thinks that one protest will turn things around. Motormouth Maybelle talks to her before the protest begins. She tells her that the road is long and there's a lot of work yet ahead. Maybelle sings about a dream in the future and a hope.

Let's watch a clip from the movie as Maybelle, Queen Latifah, sings “I Know Where I've Been”

Video Clip “I Know Where I've Been”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLwSg2b6NQk&ab_channel=ZviadKvaratskhelia

Powerful isn't it? Written for the Broadway musical version in 2002.

In 1988 in the film version, John Waters wanted his musical movie to end differently than the real life cancellation of the Corny Collins Show. Waters said, “I gave it a happy ending that it didn't have,” so the 2002 musical ends with the Corny Collins Show becoming integrated and topped off with a big dance number “You Can't Stop the Beat.” Times must change for the better, and no one can stop these characters. Everyone is dancing - black students, white students, young adults of all ages all dancing. I think if we're honest we'd say we would prefer

a John Waters ending to the complicated issues of racial injustice. And if we're honest, we'd probably admit that we're often naïve like Tracy Turnblad. We will protest, write letters, work on legislation and unjust laws. But we continue to learn that in anti-racism work, the road is long and the work is hard. There is still so much inner work that each of us must do and times we together take a stand against racism and injustice.

In closing, I want to read one more section from The Atlantic article. Delmont writes - Still, as an historian of the television era that “Hairspray” so lovingly recreates, I believe the story also presents a more nuanced vision of how popular culture helped to educate white and black teenagers about racial hierarchies. Seeing “Hairspray” as more than simply a post-racial American fantasy requires taking the story’s teen dance show setting seriously. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to what it meant for young black people to be excluded from entertainment spaces like the Buddy Deane Show. In a long list of reasons why “we find it difficult to wait” for freedom, King writes:

When you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown amusement park is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky ... then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

Liberation theologian James Cone in his book Black Theology and Black Power writes this “If the church is to remain faithful to its Lord, it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become prophetic demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society.”

In the church we have a prophetic role to play. Art has a prophetic role to play. That's part of the reason for the God on Broadway series because it combines those two prophetic roles. “Hairspray” takes a difficult part of our nation's history and makes it accessible to millions of viewers through fun-to-dance-to music and crazy colorful costumes from the 60’s. My hope is that this show gives us something serious and weighty to think about and talk about and that act on. Amen.

1) Rev. Karen Bruins, “God Goes to Broadway – Hairspray,” 7/24/22, Lake Harriet United Methodist Church <https://www.lakeharrietumc.org/sermons/god-goes-to-broadway-hairspray/>

2) Matthew Delmont, “Hairspray’s Revealing Portrayal of Racism in America,” 12/7/16 The Atlantic <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/hairsprays-revealing-portrayal-of-racism-in-america/509741/>