

West Side Story: Us, Them and Choosing Another Way

Romans 12:9-21

August 20, 2023 *God on Broadway*

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Today we look at this iconic Broadway musical *West Side Story*. It came to Broadway in 1957 with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by the young and new on the scene Stephen Sondheim in his Broadway debut. That production was nominated for six Tony awards it won two for best choreography and best scenic design. But believe it or not as popular as it has been since its debut, *West Side Story* actually did not win best musical that year. *The Music Man* won best musical that year 1957. Today's musical has so many memorable numbers like "Tonight" and "America" and "I Feel Pretty," which I really wanted to sing, but I knew Cooper had already planned on two numbers, so that is enough.

West Side Story has been part of American popular culture for over 65 years now. The 1961 film version was a smash hit. The original film is the iconic version starring Natalie Wood as Maria. The film version won 10 Oscars including best picture, best director, best supporting actor and best supporting actress for Rita Moreno who's also in the recent remake. Steven Spielberg did an excellent remake of this musical, a first from him who usually makes big action movies. He started in 2019 and it was released in 2021. So 60 years after the original.

It is a good story. A modern story and an old story. It takes place over the course of two days. It is set in New York City in the 1950s and it's set in a neighborhood being contested by two rival gangs. The Sharks are a gang of recent Puerto Rican immigrants. The Jets are a gang of white kids from the neighborhood. The Sharks are led by a guy named Bernardo and the Jets were co-founded by two guys named Riff and Tony. Riff is the current leader. Tony has left the gang and is trying to change his life.

In this video clip from the 1961 movie, you can see how the music and dancing reflects the intensity of the rivalry and hate between the gangs.

Show video clip https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20myPs_-E1I&ab_channel=TwoWordsOneStage

Very early in the show at a high school dance, Tony meets and immediately falls madly in love with Bernardo's sister Maria. Head over heels in love. Here are two photos. This is from the movie 1961 is on the left. 2021 is on the right. Young love between rival groups.

This is a musical and there are emotions that must be expressed in a very compressed amount of time. Maria and Tony are in love. The next day the Sharks and the Jets meet in this pre-arranged rumble for control of their territory. It's supposed to be just a fist fight but in the heat of the fight, knives come out and Bernardo kills Riff. Tony who had only gone there at Maria's request to stop the fight, in a moment of rage, kills Maria's brother Bernardo. So there

is a dilemma for Tony and Maria who have just pledged their eternal love for each other the night before is what to do next.

The animosity between the Sharks and the Jets is because they're in rival gangs. In the story the gangs are broken down along ethnic lines and so racism certainly shows up as one of the plot points in *West Side Story*, a bit more in the remake than in the original I would say. But the musical itself is not really about racism. If it really was about racism I doubt it would have been as popular as it's been for the past 65 years. That is a different sermon.

What else is going on here? You may know that *West Side Story* is based on Shakespeare's famous tragedy Romeo and Juliet. That Elizabethan play has two warring groups, but they're not teenage gangs separated by ethnicity. Instead it is about two rival families in Italy – the Montagues and Capulets.

One way to see the main theme of *West Side Story* is that it is about really about the groups that define us - groups that we're either born into or that we choose for ourselves. The groups that that sustain us and nurture us and give us our identities. That's the good, but then there are groups that also categorize us and divide us from each other and maybe even destroy us.

The list of groups that define us and that shape our identities is quite long. It's different for all of us of course. It probably starts with family, our birth family or chosen family or adoptive family. It includes nation, ethnicity, maybe religion, schools we went to, political party. The list goes on and on. And it's from these groups that we get our sense of self. It's from groups or tribes that we get our values and our understanding of right and wrong, and our loyalties.

I am a native Californian and that has been important to me. My family roots are mainly Scottish so that has shaped me. I grew up in a Presbyterian Church and have chosen this expression of spirituality. I went to the University of Oregon and have been a proud Duck, although I am not proud now that they are leaving the Pac-12. And when it comes to baseball there are questions about my loyalty and my team that may affect my ability to serve you, so I will not be talking about baseball today.

So we can consider all of the groups which we claim or feel an affiliation with. Both groups that we're born into and the groups that we choose for ourselves are vitally important in our lives and how they shape us. They help form our identity. They nurture us. They sustain us. They give us our values. They help us make our way in a world, a world that is designed for us to navigate in community. Because going it alone is no way to live.

However, there is a connection, a community that can inform all the other groups. One that can guide the others. The group of those seeking to follow the ways of Jesus and being connected to a spiritual community, for us is church. As followers of Jesus, we see all people

are all part of God's family. As part of that group, there are expectations that should carry over into other the groups that we claim for ourselves.

One of those lists of expectations shows up in Romans 12:9-21.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve God.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

*Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are.*

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the righteousness of God; ...

*"If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink;
for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."*

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

That is hard to do. That is not how we usually see the world work. But it is the world I want to live in. I want to live into that vision.

In the original film version of *West Side Story*, there's a poignant moment after Bernardo and Riff have been killed. Doc's drug store is considered neutral ground by the two gangs. And so consequently Doc has a relationship with both the Sharks and the Jets. After the senseless deaths of these two gang leaders, two kids who have not even graduated from high school yet, Doc mournfully confronts the Jets. He says, ""When do you kids stop?"

So there's the good about being part of a group that defines us. And there's a downside, a bad side as well. Sometimes the more fervently we hold our specific group identity, the more we dismiss or even disdain members of other groups. Sometimes the more deeply we come to love "us," the more suspicious or even belligerent we become about "them." This is the shadow side of the good in the groups that we choose. That we sometimes feel as though in order to be committed and loyal to "us," we must dislike or even hate "them." The bad side of the groups that we choose is that they can they have the power to become incredibly divisive like we see in *West Side Story*. Groups can turn ugly through bigotry or hate or violence. Over the past few years we've seen rising tension, sometimes violence in our country driven by differences of race and religion and politics. I am very concerned with reports I read about in terms of acts of anti-Semitism. And acts of Asian hate.

And I want to notice when hate rises in me. Notice the “us” vs. “them” rises in me. It's one thing to disagree about public policy. That's been that way since the beginning of our republic. It's quite another of course to target people who hold opposing views with harassment or hate or violence.

The invitation of *West Side Story* and the description of the ways of Jesus in community Paul gives us is to see the importance of not living with us vs. them. To take a step back when we see someone as an enemy. Paul says - outdo one another in showing honor. He says bless those who persecute you. He says live in harmony with one another. Live peaceably with all. Never avenge yourselves. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

The Sharks and the Jets do not play by Paul's rules. We see where that leads. The cycle continues.

In the end, Tony and Maria try to escape. But it is a tragedy like Romeo and Juliet. In the end in a scene of confusion, Chino shoots Tony and he dies in Maria's arms, surrounded by members of both street gangs. Maria sobs and says, “All of you, you all killed him and my brother and Riff. Not with bullets or guns but with hate.” Holding the gun in her hand she says, “Well now I can kill too, because now I have hate.”

Shakespeare wrote a tragedy. It seems to me that that it's a tragedy anytime anyone hates another simply because they don't like the group that they're in or fears another or suspects another or discriminates against another because of the groups that we choose or the groups that were born into. In a world with too much hate and too much fear and too much suspicion and too much discrimination, the group that defines our identity as followers of the ways of Jesus and other spiritual paths insists that we model a better way. Christ calls us into community and in this kin-dom there is no room for hate.

The iconic song “Somewhere” is a duet with Tony and Maria. The lyrics reflect a dream of the time when this young couple is no longer constrained by their restrictive group identities. “We'll find a new way of living. We'll will find a way of forgiving.” Yes. A deeper awareness of God's divine love for each person offers them and us both of those paths. It takes inner work and outer actions.

May we choose this new way of living. May it be so. Amen.

Resource for parts of today's sermon

Rev. Chris Dowd, “The Bible on Broadway – West Side Story,”

Christ United Methodist Church, Plano, Texas July 17, 2022

Link [Worship Service July 17, 2022](#)