

Facing Change: "Fiddler on the Roof"
The Gospel Goes to Broadway
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Ephesians 5:15-17

Finally we've come to the place in our Gospel Goes to Broadway Summer Series that we're featuring a musical I've actually been in! Participating in Daniel Hand High School's 1987 production of "*Fiddler on the Roof*" is one of the most wonderful memories I have of my teen years. One of my very close friends, now a professional opera singer, played the lead role of Tevya. My best friend and I were cast in the company but we also helped with creating sets, gathering costumes and doing the stage makeup. The boy who played in our regional orchestra's first violin, first chair position was cast as the fiddler. I never did get around to telling him that I had a crush on him!

"*Fiddler on the Roof*" is a delightful story about Tevye, a Jewish milkman, and his wife Golde, who live with their daughters in the little Russian town of Anatevka just after the turn of the last century. They are poor, hardworking people. Tevye talks regularly with God about his problems. Life in Anatevka is hard, but it is sustained by faith and by tradition.

The book on which the musical was based was written by Russian Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem. Aleichem was often referred to as "*The Jewish Mark Twain*." Upon learning of this nickname, the actual 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.

As I said, the setting of *Fiddler on the Roof* is terribly bleak, depicting many of the difficulties of living as a religious minority in Czarist Russia: abject poverty, persecution, and finally, expulsion. And yet, this play still contains within it so much humor, which reminds us that life may be lived joyfully, even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

The musical centers on one man's struggling with discerning God's will in the midst of the unexpected change. Tevye thinks he has the protection of tradition when dealing with the world. His Orthodox Jewish community has a tradition for everything: "*How to eat, how to sleep, how to work, even how to wear clothes*." Tevye says, "*Because of our traditions, everyone here knows who he is, and what God expects him to do*."

Tevye soon discovers this is only partly true, because not all traditions are created equal. Some are human customs that have grown up over the years, we don't know why they are there in the first place, but they are important enough to be repeated. Others, we may believe, come about from deeply held revelations from God, our task is to determine which is which.

Tevye has to wrestle with his traditions. His main struggle seems to be over the ways in which his daughters are falling in love. These young women want to be able to choose their husbands, and not marry the man that the town matchmaker would suggest to their parents. Tevye and Golde themselves are the product of an arranged marriage, so we might understand why it is so difficult for them to imagine not just one, but three daughters wanting to marry for love alone!

Their oldest, Tzeitel, is the first to challenge the way things always have been. She falls in love with Motel, a poor tailor who doesn't even have his own sewing machine! Although Tzeitel had been matched to another, and Tevye and the prospective groom had even shaken hands on it, she begs and pleads for permission to marry her preferred beloved.

Tevye wrestles within himself. For generations, they have lived and died according to their traditions – it is the thing that defines who they are as a people.

I don't think we can blame him for his first knee jerk response, which is to say, "No." Later 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.*" Finally, Tevye relents and gives his blessing. After all, he really does love his family and he wants them to be happy.

One of the most moving scenes in the musical is the wedding. The music is lush and memorable. Tzeitel and Motel stand beneath the traditional Jewish wedding canopy facing the rabbi. Tevye and Golde look lovingly at these two people about to be married as they begin to think back over the years leading up to this moment.

I seldom hear the song *Sunrise, Sunset* without it bringing a tear to my eye, because what it states is so painfully true – the years fly by so swiftly. When we are young, time seems to drag on slowly. Christmas never seems to come. The birthday which qualifies us for our first driver's license seems like an eternity away.

But as we grow older, time begins to pick up speed until the days and years seem to fly away. Our two biological children are adults now, but it feels like just a few weeks ago we were showing Zack how to balance on his first bicycle, and helping Cady remember the steps of her dance routine for the spring recital. Days pass much more swiftly than we'd like. And once that time is gone, there is no bringing them back or living them over. What is done is done, for good or for ill.

That is why Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, cautioned Jesus' followers to make the best use of our time, especially when thinking in terms of our relationships.

Just as a tall sunflower germinates over time from a tiny seed, we don't come into this life as complete and total human beings. We are born as little packages of potential. Our task over the years is to develop that potential and become all that we are capable of becoming.

Each one of us is unique, thanks be to God. That's an important truth to realize as we help one another grow. And since each one of us is "different", nothing good ever comes from trying to compare one person to another. What we asked to do is to look carefully and gently at those we love so that we might find the unique, buried gifts and tenderly coax them out of hiding.

Those of you who appreciate flowers may know that when the sun shines brightly outside, sunflowers turn toward the light – they do that because they are soaking up the sunbeams, converting them into chlorophyll – plant energy. When the sun goes down, those same sunflowers turn toward each other. Perhaps they do so to share each other's energy. We, to, can be like sunflowers, turning toward each other in those dark and shadowy moments to foster one another's growth and potential.

While we're talking about growth, let us note that there is growing to be done at every stage of life. We never compete the process. Here, we might take a page from the young at heart among us who continue to stay informed about current events, who read novels in their spare time, whose hands are busy working on prayer shawls, who attend classical music concerts – there will never come a moment in this lifetime that we will say *"that's it! I've learned all that I need to now. I've grown as much as I need to grow. I've become all I need to become."*

The good news is that every stage of life has its own beauty and meaning, even though it comes with some change. Whatever stage of life you are in, take the time to enjoy it because it will be over before you know it.

Make time for love. In *"Fiddler on the Roof"* there are some disappointments and disagreements in Tevye's household, but it is abundantly clear that their love for one another permeates it all. When love is there, and family members know it, hurts can be healed, mistakes forgiven and failures overcome.

Discerning God's will is not easy. God doesn't send me a to-do list in my email in-box every morning and there's not a hard copy of Jesus' orders for the day waiting on my desk. Tevye has to struggle, really struggle to discern God's will in the midst of changing circumstances in his life, the life of his family, and the world around them.

And at the end of the musical, Tevye's Jewish community has to leave their homeland. They are 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 requires struggling to discern God's will and the courage to act on it. And it may require us to leave behind what is familiar and comfortable. This can be a daunting proposition in the midst of a changing world. Staying true to our values of love and service may not always be easy. Figuring out what God would have us do can be difficult at times. Ultimately it requires trust. In New Testament terms, it requires faith.

At the University of Connecticut, where Clark and I went for undergrad, we had a tradition, one that I know other colleges have as well. There was a big rock in the center of campus, and different groups would make a bonding activity of painting it late at night. Different groups would either sign their names in paint, or decorate it with their group's colors, or do something more creative, like add symbols.

But I've always been curious: how big is that rock, really? I'm not sure how long the tradition of painting the rock has been around. But it's been a long time. And if you peeled away all the layers, chipped away all the paint, would that rock be so small you could actually just carry it with you? Jesus told us what the greatest commandments were: to love God with our whole selves, and to love one another. Have we added so many layers to these two straightforward tasks that we've made them into boulders that no one can carry? I wonder.

I want to be clear. Having traditions isn't bad. I love some of ours, both old ones and new ones. Jesus himself participated in the traditions of his time

and place and culture. But the traditions we employ to carry out our mission, following Jesus, can never become more important than actually following Jesus. After all, it is not the things outside ourselves that make us who we are. Who we are is what is inside of us, and God hopes that what is inside of us is a heart that is seeking after the way of Christ. Amen.