

“The Gospel According to *Oklahoma!*”  
Jeremiah 23: 1-6 and Luke 1: 68-79  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
Longview Presbyterian Church—November 21, 2010

As most of you know, I’m in the production of *Oklahoma!* that some will be going to today for a fellowship event. In a way, I’ve been in *Oklahoma!* for the last two months or so, definitely the last two weeks. So last week when a friend told me “remember, the farmer and the cowman should be friends. There’s a sermon in that,” I realized that he had a good point. Not only about different people getting along, but throughout the show, there are messages consistent with Christianity. Throughout the show there is good news, there is a Gospel of *Oklahoma!*. Spoiler alert: if you don’t know the story of *Oklahoma!* and if you are planning to see it today... I’ll try not to ruin anything for you and if I do... I’m sorry...

When the play first opened in 1943, it was revolutionary in many ways, one being simply the way it started. Rather than opening the show with a big flashy, full cast number as musicals always did, *Oklahoma!* opens with a solo a capella voice singing, “There’s a bright golden haze on the meadow/There’s a bright golden haze on the meadow/The corn is as high as an elephant’s eye, /An’ it looks like it’s climbin’ clear up to the sky.” “Oh What a Beautiful Morning” is one of the best known songs from the play. I see the song as downright Psalmic, with lines like “Oh, what a beautiful mornin’, Oh, what a beautiful day,” and “All the sounds of the earth are like music,” reminiscent of the scriptures that glorify God for God’s Creation and reminding us that “this is a day that God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” And that “beautiful feelin’/Ev’rything’s goin’ my way” is surely spiritual, a gift from God.

We have all these gifts from God. What are we supposed to do about it? As the Westminster Catechism teaches, the chief end of humankind is to “glorify [God] and enjoy [God] forever.” This means not only appreciating God’s creation but leading lives as God intends, in right relationship with God and with neighbors. We are to love the Lord God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds and our neighbor as ourselves as both the Old Testament scriptures and Jesus teach.<sup>1</sup> But it’s just so tempting to do otherwise. And *Oklahoma!* provides a wonderful illustration of temptation encountered and not overcome. The character Ado Annie, is a flirtatious girl who has only recently become attractive to men and doesn’t know how to deal with the attention she gets from them. Or more to the point, she knows how she’s supposed to deal with it, but doesn’t particularly want to deal with it as she should. She sings, “It ain’t so much a question of not knowing what to do, I knowd what’s right and wrong since

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22: 37-40, Deuteronomy 6: 5

I been ten..." she goes on to say, "When a person tries to kiss a girl,/I know she orta give his face a smack./But as soon as someone kisses me,/I somehow, sorta, wanta kiss him back!" She says that she tries to act refined and cool, a sittin' on the velveteen sittee/ and then she remembers that old golden rule, and do for him what he would do for me! Like Ado Annie, when faced with the temptation of doing what is easier, more fun or otherwise more appealing than what we know God would want us to do, too often, we "just cain't say no." Often, like Ado Annie, we use "I cain't say no" and "how can I be what I ain't?" as convenient, but weak, excuses for giving into temptation and going against what God would have us do.

Ado Annie, is caught between two main suitors. Will Parker is a cowboy who's in love with her and will do anything to marry her. She says she loves Will "alright, I guess" but she also likes the travelling peddlerman who happened to be in town while Will was out of town. She can't decide between the two. When Will finally wins her over for good (more or less) he gives her a little lecture "with me it's all 'er nuthin'." He calls her on her unfaithful behavior to which she responds, "I only did the kind of things I orta, sorta, To you I was as faithful as c'n be, fer me." A lot of times, we're like that with God, aren't we? We only do the kinds of things we orta, sorta. To God we are as faithful as can be, fer we...

But we're also like Will. He tells Ado Annie, "I go and sow my last wild oat! I cut out all shenanigans. I save my money, don't gamble or drink In the back room down at Flannigans! I give up lotsa other things A gentleman never mentions, But before I give up anymore, I wanta know your intentions!/With me it's all er nuthin'./Is it all er nuthin' with you?/It cain't be 'in between'/It cain't be 'now and then' /No half and half romance will do!" Like Will, we want to know that it's going to "pay off" to behave as God calls us. We want to know God's intentions before we give up too much or commit ourselves completely. Of course, we're told time and time again throughout the scriptures what God's intentions are and we see God's faithfulness to us throughout the scriptures and our lives but sometimes, we still don't feel all that sure. God calls us to a relationship that's all 'er nothin'. Can't be in between, can't be now and then. No half and half will do. With God, it should be all 'er nothing'. God calls us to a relationship of giving God our all. But none of us can live up to that expectation completely. Only Jesus Christ was without sin and no one before or since has lived an unblemished life. But unlike Will, God doesn't say, "it's all 'er nothing'." Fortunately for us, God gives us chance after chance to give up our shenanigans and be faithful. God gives us chance after chance to be in relationship with God.

But God also calls us to be in relationship with one another. With our neighbors and with our enemies. Our Jeremiah scripture today states, "Woe to the

shepherds who scatter the sheep and have driven them away, and...have not attended to them....” God says, “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold.” It is God’s will that the flocks be together and safe, not scattered and isolated.

Jud is a lonely farmhand living in a smoke house. He has a song, “Lonely Room” in which he sings about his miserable life in the smoke house where “The floor creaks,/The door squeaks....And I sit by myself/Like a cobweb on the shelf/By myself in a lonely room.” Because he’s so unhappy, his romantic rival is able to have a conversation with him in which he plants the idea of how wonderful it would be to be dead and have people say nice things about him and the idea is actually appealing to Jud. In his lonely room, he dreams about the company of the woman he loves. Jud yearns for meaningful relationship with another person but is unable to attain it. He ends the song resolved, “I ain't gonna dream 'bout her no more!/I ain't gonna leave her alone!/Goin' outside, Git myself a bride,/Git me a womern to call my own.” We see here and throughout the play, the destruction that isolation from community and fellowship brings. Jud is miserable and his isolation leads him to harmful, violent acts against others.

The importance of community, relationship with neighbors and making friends with enemies is emphasized most in the song “The Farmer and the Cowman.” In the territory of Oklahoma, farmers and ranchers didn’t get along all that well. Ranchers didn’t appreciate the farmers’ messing up the cattle ranges by putting up fences and the farmers didn’t appreciate the cattle messing up their fields. But in the play, there’s a social event, a fundraiser to build a schoolhouse, that brings the two types of territory folk together. Unfortunately, fights keep breaking out at the party so this song is meant to help make the peace, “The farmer and the cowman should be friends,” a farmer sings, “One man likes to push a plough, the other likes to chase a cow, /But that's no reason why they cain't be friends.” These days we might not have a problem of incivility and violence between farmers and cowmen, but in every age and time, there seems to be plenty of “us and them” unrest between groups of people. And usually for reasons not much more important than “The cowman ropes a cow with ease, the farmer steals her butter and cheese. But that’s no reason why they cain’t be friends.” The chorus of the song says, “Territory folks should stick together,/Territory folks should all be pals./Cowboys dance with farmer's daughters,/Farmers dance with the ranchers' gals.” And I think this goes for all of us. Rather than fighting over insignificant differences we should be getting to know each other, spending time together, maybe even dancing together. With neighbors and enemies alike. The scripture calls us to community and relationships.

There’s a line in the song, “And when this territory is a state, and joins the union just like all the others, the merchant and the farmer and the cowman must all

behave themselves and act like brothers.” I’m amused by the idea of waiting for Oklahoma to be a state in order to start getting along. Why wait? Do it now! But actually, they don’t wait to become a state to get along. They start that very night by all coming together to raise money to build a schoolhouse for the benefit of ranchers’ and farmers’ children alike. Then, at the end of the play they all come together again for the wedding of a cowboy to a farmer girl. They all come together in a time of crisis and they all come together to celebrate.

Finally, at the end of the play comes the title song, “Oklahoma,” which is sung right after the wedding, prompting my friend’s young son to ask, “when I get married, will I have to sing a song about Washington?” Yes, it is a little odd for them to break out into song about their territory/soon-to-be-state at their wedding, but hey, it’s a musical. And the song reflects a hope and optimism for the future which is actually quite consistent with Christianity. Our belief in the resurrection, in life after death, in God’s activity in the world can be encompassed in the term “Christian hope.” Christian hope isn’t Pollyanna naïveté. Christian hope acknowledges that life can be hard, things can get bad, but ultimately, by the grace of God, all will be well. Theologian Shirley Guthrie states, “Christian hope for the world is hope that God will overcome inhuman and unjust social, political, and economic structures.”<sup>2</sup> The song begins, “There’s never been a better time to start in life-/It ain’t too early and it aint too late!” and goes on to describe Oklahoma as a place with “Plen’y of air and plen’y of room,/Plen’y of room to swing a rope!/Plen’y of heart and plen’y of hope.” This optimism and hope for the future which brings the play to its end is reflected by the entire community and is also found in the song of Zechariah from today’s scripture lesson. As Zechariah prophesied about the Messiah singing, “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

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<sup>2</sup> Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 375.