

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The Rodgers and Hammerstein musical hit “South Pacific” is fun with a lot of wonderful music, but it also deals with a topic that is still troubling us today: that of racial prejudice. Of course, the setting for this musical is the south Pacific, and so the racial tensions on display are not exactly what we’re struggling with right now.

In a climactic part of the musical, Lieutenant Joe Cable tries to explain to Emile De Becque why Nellie Forbush can’t marry him, even though she loves him. She said it was because of something born in her, but De Becque rejected that answer, and Cable agreed. He sang: “You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear; You’ve got to be taught from year to year; It’s got to be drummed in your dear little ear; You’ve got to be carefully taught. ¶ You’ve got to be taught to be afraid Of people whose eyes are oddly made And people whose skin is a diff’rent shade; You’ve got to be carefully taught.”

Who is right? It’s probably a bit of both — we are born with a corrupt heart out of which “*come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness*” (Mark 7:22-23), and there is the corrupting influence of the devil and the world that teach us to hate and fear others — social media is rife with it these days.

We need to be reborn of God; we need to be taught rightly of God’s ways. Thus, Peter had to be shown that God shows no partiality, but that “*everyone who believes in [Jesus Christ] receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*” Peter had to be taught that “*in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to him.*” Peter had to be taught the extent of God’s love was not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles.

The disciples had to be taught to love and trust in Him, that they might gladly do what He commands. And His command is to “*love one another as I have loved you.*” This is a Godly love that does not focus on the self, but is outward looking to others. It is ἀγάπη love, “a giving, active love on the other’s behalf.”

The kind of love that Nellie Forbush was feeling toward Emile De Becque wasn’t ἀγάπη, marked by rational choice, “a free and decisive act” by the subject — at least, not yet. It was a romantic love void of reason. Ms. Forbush admitted as much: “I can’t help it,” she said. “It isn’t as if I could give you a good reason. There is no reason. This is emotional.” If you know the musical, however, you know that a different kind of love was forged in the furnace of war. She was taught a love that in the end could embrace both De Becque and his children.

Even greater is the biblical love that Jesus talks about in the Gospel. It is an action word. It does something for others. Thus when you think of this kind of love, what do

you think of? On this Mother's Day, perhaps this is what you're thinking of: the love of a mother, their unconditional love, that loved you when you were both bad and good, that loved you through failures and successes, that loved you when you were a precious infant, that loved you when you were going through your terrible two's, that loved you when you started to push away her hugs and kisses, that loved you when you started to rebel against her and thought you were wiser than she, that loved you when you sought your independence and left home, etc.?

We think highly of our mothers, rightly so. But that view can be skewed and used in an unbiblical way. It's this view of a mother's love — at least as I've talked to Roman Catholics — that moves them to seek consolation in the Blessed Virgin Mother of Jesus, and to run their prayers by her, that she might intercede with Jesus on their behalf. But this is wrong-headed. As much as we Lutherans honor the Blessed Virgin and give thanks to God for her humble faith, we do not go to her or through her, that she might soften up the heart of our God — neither the Son nor the Father.

I mean, where does love truly begin? It begins with God. We heard it last week in John's Epistle: "*God is love,*" and "*love is from God,*" and "*we love because he first loved us*" (1 John 4:7-8, 19). And in the Gospel today, we hear this love begins with God, with the Father: "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.*"

Martin Luther got this and expressed the Father's outward-looking, self-choosing love so well in the hymn we just sang. "But God had seen my wretched state Before the world's foundation, And mindful of His mercies great, He planned for my salvation. He turned to me a father's heart; He did not choose the easy part But gave His dearest treasure" (LSB556:4). Yes, the Father's love for His fallen creation extends back long before the virgin mother was around. He expressed it before the foundation of the world in choosing to send His own Son as the Christ — "Of the Father's heart begotten, ere the world began to be," we sing — sent to be the One who would crush the serpent's head, who would redeem fallen mankind by His blood, who would restore the perfection of paradise to us.

This is love expressed in action: the Father said to His beloved Son, "It's time to have compassion" — it's time to put that love into action. "Then go" — here's the action; here's how God loved the world. He gave His own Son to be lifted up on a cross. "Bring to all salvation." Set them free from sin and sorrow. "Slay bitter death for them that they May live with You forever" (st. 5).

This is how the Son abided in the Father's love: He willingly did what the Father commanded and gave Him authority to do. As we heard Jesus teach recently, He laid down His life for us. No one took it from Him — He laid it down of His own accord. We see it by the loud voice by which He cried out as He gave up His own spirit (Matt. 27:50). This is Jesus' love for us in action.

And in fact, this is a greater love than we're accustomed to seeing. We know and laud a mother's love that will sacrifice for her child. It's magnificent, but it's also mostly expected. We know and laud our country's heroes for their selfless heroics, risking life and limb for the sake of their buddies. They deserve our accolades and the medals they wear. But neither of these is sufficient to understand the Son's expression of love for us. It does take courage for a soldier to save his buddy in face of imminent danger—and not everyone can do it. St. Paul says it this way, "*For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die*" (Rom. 5:7).

We understand risking one's life for buddies, and for our children. But what of our enemies? Would you risk your life for an enemy? What of the one who stole your identity, your good name, your life's savings? Would you risk your life for him? What of the one who hurt your child? Would you risk your life for him? What of the one who burned down your business, wrongly accused you, maimed you for life? Would you lay down your life for him?

I think we are repulsed by the thought, but that's the kind of love our God is, and that's the kind of love He shows us. It's the kind of love that called us friends when we were still enemies. For this is who we are with our minds too often set on the things of the flesh — and that is death. "*The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God,*" says St. Paul (Rom. 8:7) — enemies. Yet, "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Rom. 5:8). It's the kind of love that reconciled us to Him by the death of His own Son — while we were still enemies. It's the love that gives us salvation in His life — eternal life with Him, having chosen us in Him and having chosen to call us again friends.

For that's what this verse is all about: "*Greater love has no one than that He lay down His life for His friends.*" Jesus calls us friends as we are born of Him, and now as friends, He calls us to a kind of love that overcomes the hate that finds such fertile ground on social media today, to a kind of love that overcomes man-made divisions based on oddly made eyes or skins of different shades, to a faith that overcomes the world with love, to a faith that is built up as we "*abide in [His] love,*" and are filled with His joy.

Indeed, rejoice in His love. Rejoice that you have been born of God by water and the word. Rejoice that He has brought you to faith in Him by the Spirit, the water, and the blood that bear witness to Him. Rejoice in the forgiveness of your sins, and life, and salvation. Rejoice that He has chosen you and appointed you to bear the fruit of love also to one another. Rejoice that He has taught You by His own example what this love is and gives you in the Word and Sacraments all that you need for your faith and your love. Rejoice and be glad in these ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.