

2022 04 03 – West Side Story

Philippians 2:1-5

Galatians 3:28-29 (The Inclusive Bible)

Before I talk about this week's movie, I want to point out that the Academy Awards took place last Sunday night. For the first time, in the seven years that we have had a sermon series based on movies, the winning film was not included. This year, the movie that won the Best Picture Oscar was *Coda*. We may still have an opportunity to talk about this film at another time. But for today, our fifth and last movie in this year's Lenten Movie Series is the 2021 remake of *West Side Story*.

West Side Story takes place in the mid-1950's when a ghetto on the West Side of Manhattan was being demolished to allow for the construction of a new upperclass neighbourhood. The movie begins with the sound and sight of wrecking balls tearing down old apartment buildings.

There are, of course, people still living beside this destruction. Their rubble-filled streets are also the battleground for two rival teenage gangs. The Sharks, led by Bernardo, are recent immigrants from Puerto Rico. The Jets, led by Riff, are a white gang who have long been in control of this neighbourhood. But, when the Jets try to stake their claim, Lieutenant Schrank, a local police officer, reminds them, "not according to the New York City Committee for Slum Clearance, which has decided to pull this whole hellmouth down to the bedrock, and you're in the way."

In the movie these teenage boys express their frustrations, their angry, their despair through song and dance. The Jets sing about their lack of parenting, their poverty and their need for belonging. They explain that being a part of a gang gives them a sense of identity and solidarity:

"When you're a Jet, . . .
You're never alone,
You're never disconnected.

You're home with your own --
When company's expected
You're well protected!"

The Jets are struggling with a sense of powerlessness that comes from having your world pulled out from under you. So what do they do? They take out their frustration on the one group that has even less power than they do, the newly arrived Puerto Ricans. Desperate to retain some power and dignity, they fight for turf that is disappearing before their eyes.

After the Jets deface a billboard depicting the Puerto Rican flag, The Sharks defiantly sing their national anthem in Spanish, in their own native language. Later, in a song called *America*, the Puerto Rican women sing the praises of their new country while their young men bemoan the problems:

Life can be bright in America
If you can fight in America
Life is all right in America
If you're all white in America

Here you are free and you have pride
Long as you stay on your own side
Free to do anything you choose
Free to wait tables and shine shoes

Their gang, the Sharks, is formed out of a need to survive in a increasingly hostile environment.

This story of prejudice, oppression, poverty, despair and the resulting conflict is not new. In today's scripture reading, Paul is writing to the fledgling churches in Galatia and Philippi. It is obvious from his words that both churches are experiencing conflict within their congregations. In Galatia, it seems that there are multiple reasons for division: first, the Jewish members are struggling with the idea that non-Jews, like their Greek neighbours, are also welcome as followers of Jesus; second, there are slaves who, despite their lack of citizenship, desire full membership within the church; and finally there are women, who despite the patriarchal society in which they live, are fighting for a voice within their faith community.

Paul responds to these divisive issues by saying, "In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus." Similarly, to the church in Philippi he writes, "be united in your convictions and united in your love... There is to be no competition among you, no conceit, but everybody is to be humble: value others over yourselves."

These are not easy directions to follow—not for the people of the early church, not for the Sharks and the Jets, and definitely not for us. In fact, our world seems more divided, more polarized, more conflicted that ever before. Who are the Jets and the Sharks of today? Who are the Jews and the Greeks? Is it the Russian and the Ukrainians, the maskers and the anti-maskers, the black and the white,

the Indigenous and the settlers? Who are the oppressors and who are the oppressed? How is it possible to reach any kind of unity in a world so full of conflict and violence?

In *West Side Story*, community organizers attempt to bring about a reconciliation by inviting both gangs to a dance. They are unsuccessful in their attempt at a mixer, but there is one ray of light. It is at this dance that we watch as Bernardo's little sister, Maria meets Tony, a former Jet and Riff's best friend. We watch as Tony and Maria fall in love at first sight. Their love songs contain some of the most beautiful music and images in the movie. And we wonder, is it possible that their love will be able to break through the barrier of prejudice, anger, hate and even violence?

Of course, this is not a new story, but one that was written over 60 years ago, and one that is based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. So I don't think it will come as a surprise that their love story ends in tragedy. But the fact that it happened at all is reason for hope.

Their love was able to kindle because they met before knowing each other's ethnicity or affiliations. Even as their differences became known, their love still flourished. Love is able to move past barriers if we give it a chance, if we allow ourselves to wonder. Valarie Kaur, author of *Revolutionary Love*, puts it this way:

Wonder is the wellspring for love... It is easy to wonder about the internal life of the people closest to us. It is harder to wonder about people who seem like strangers or outsiders. But when we choose to wonder about

people we don't know, when we imagine their lives and listen for their stories, we begin to expand the circle of who we see as part of us. We prepare ourselves to love beyond what evolution requires.

<https://valariekaur.com/learninghub/part-1-wonder/>

I wonder what it was like for the early church in Galatia and Philippi? How hard was it to get past the barriers of race and class and gender? I wonder about the Russian soldiers who are fighting in Ukraine. What have they been told? What are they thinking and feeling? What do their families, back in Russia, know and believe? I wonder about the black University students in Ukraine, the students of colour, who fled to the border with Poland only to be treated as second-class citizens? I wonder how the Indigenous & Metis people feel about their recent trip to Rome? I wonder about the truck drivers who drove to Ottawa in February. What are feeling now and why did they feel the need to be a part of that convoy?

We all have a need to be a part of something. We all have a need to belong. One of the final songs in *West Side Story* is called *Somewhere*. In this latest version of the movie it is sung by Valentina, the owner of the local pharmacy, an Hispanic woman, now a widow but previously part of mixed marriage. She sings with longing for a time when all will have a place they can call home:

Someday, somewhere
We'll find a new way of living
We'll find a way of forgiving
Somewhere, there's a place for us
Time together with time to spare
Time to look, time to care
Someday, somewhere

May it be so. Amen.