

March 27, 2011
The Sound of (Joyful) Music
1 Corinthians 12

The Sound of Music is the story of a lonely, rather miserable retired - and widowed - naval officer, Captain Georg Von Trapp. Captain Von Trapp has been through a "long line of governesses," the twelfth and most recent of whom is Maria, a young lady from the local abbey.

Captain Von Trapp is quite convinced his life is in order. And he insists upon that order: the Von Trapp children don't play, they march. On a regular basis they march about the grounds, breathing deeply. He has a specific whistle signal with which he summons his children - and his governess. Discipline and decorum are the keys. He is courting a sophisticated lady, Baroness Schraeder, but it is more a relationship of social propriety, rather than any romantic attachment. It's just the order of things.

If the situation were changed but a little - take away the seven children (who really aren't an important part of his life anyway) - place him in the American West - make him a former Texas Ranger rather than a retired Austrian naval officer - and you would have the Lone Ranger, the quintessential North American hero. He is brave. He is noble. He is disciplined. He stands for truth and honor. And he is a very lonely, miserable so-and-so. (Just ask Tonto!)

For some reason we put such fierce independence and self-reliance as prime virtues - alongside truthfulness, moral purity, courage, and self-sacrifice.

I find it interesting that the Bible - although it does encourage self-improvement and self-reliance to some extent - insists that we see ourselves as complete, only in the context of relationships. Lone Rangers are not celebrated. The Jonahs and Elijahs - off on their own - are not lionized as heroes. Rather it's David-with-his-men, Jesus-with-his disciples, Paul-with-Barnabas-and-others who are celebrated.

Our culture puts tremendous pressure on us to be "successful" in terms of our careers, our homes, our cars, our appearance, our sense of humor, etc., etc. What our culture doesn't seem to value is the success of our relationships. The hard lesson the Lone Ranger never seemed to learn - and Captain Von Trapp struggles to learn - is that relationships (with a spouse, children, friends, neighbors, colleagues, etc.) are of paramount importance in our lives. We can have our whole house in order - just ask Captain Von Trapp, if anyone was obsessive-compulsive about order it was he! - but still be miserable if we neglect our relationships.

We need each other! We were not created to ride solo, but to complement one another. We are not completely self-sufficient. We cannot be complete without others. So the quality of those relationships is critical. 1 Corinthians 11-14 are all about relationships, particularly relationships

in a church, like ours. They are also about worship, because worship, in the Bible, is corporate (yes, people do worship individually, but always also together with others). If we're worshipping together we need to work on our relationships with one another!

Paul uses the image of a body to help us understand how we all work together ... My Mom, a nurse, often said that she was amazed any of us is ever healthy because our bodies and systems are so complicated and delicately balanced. Given how some of us treat our bodies (thinking about diet and exercise [or lack thereof]) it is truly amazing we're as healthy as we are! When we think of all the different people involved and all the interconnected relationships/ministries/activities, etc., it may be amazing that our church is relatively healthy, too!

Paul reminds us that each and every one of us is critical to health of the church. It's all about relationships ... There are some dangers that come from neglecting those relationships. And there are some tremendous joys that come from living and working together.

Three Dangers

The danger of low self-esteem (v.15-20). Some people underestimate their own worth, and so lack the confidence they need to use the gifts God has given them. This may be because there is either a climate of insecurity, or a climate in which only "perfection" is good enough.

We all probably have stories of perfectionists who drive us crazy! The net result is often that we simply give up that particular activity because we feel we just cannot compete.

Not feeling self-confident, however, does not alter the reality - we are still fully a part of the body (vs. 15-16), for it is God who has made us who we are (v.18). And the church needs us. There are no little people in the Kingdom of God. Each one of us is vitally important to the overall health of the body.

The danger of pride (v. 21-22). No one person or group in the church has all the gifts (although some pastors/leaders might like you to believe so!). This means that none of us really is a Lone Ranger! We can never be truly content on our own! And the church is not complete without us.

An old Simon and Garfunkel song goes "*I am a rock, I am an island, I touch no one and no one touches me ...*" That kind of philosophy may sound wonderful but it's a lie! It just doesn't work. It is in fact an indicator of what the Bible describes as one of the most serious - and most subtle - kinds of sin ... the sin of pride. Pride tells us that we don't need anyone else. That we're fine all on our own. Pride was what kept Von Trapp from recognizing his true feelings of love for Maria. And pride often "comes before the fall" of many of us. I have had Christians tell me they don't need to be part of a church, that they don't need anyone else. They have fallen into the subtle trap of pride - they think they know it all and can do it all. They refuse to recognize

they have needs. And they do not use their gifts to serve others. They are poorer because of their rugged individualism. And the church is poorer. No one wins. Everyone loses.

We need to recognize that needing others is NOT a sign of weakness (as the dominant worldview suggests) but is a fundamental part of who we are and how we are created.

The danger of division (v.25). Disagreements over spiritual gifts are never God's will! It's rather ironic, then, that they seem to cause more disunity and division than almost anything else! Those inside the church family can be hurt. Those outside the church go along mumbling - "*If that's what Christianity is about, forget it!*"

Paul suggests a radical solution: treat those who might otherwise be thought of as less honorable as special in the sight of God (v.22-23). What does that say about the way we value those who have different spiritual gifts from ours?

Three joys

The joy of being accepted (vs. 12-13). The Holy Spirit draws us together as a community in which, as far as God is concerned, all distinctions of race, class, and gender cease to be important (see Galatians 3:28). There is a radical equality in the church. This should set the church apart as positively different from practically any other organization on earth. Most organizations exist as a hierarchy. The church is a "theocracy" in which God alone is the head, and everyone else is equal under his lordship.

Going back to *the Sound of Music*, one of the things Captain Van Trapp had to learn was all about love and acceptance. He had to learn to love and accept each of his children, with their unique personalities and abilities. And he also had to learn how to receive love and acceptance.

One of the most difficult things Lone Rangers have to learn is how to allow themselves to be appreciated. We may (or may not) feel comfortable giving a complement, but we certainly feel uncomfortable receiving one!

The joy of sharing success and hardship (v.26). If a church takes joy in the presence of the Holy Spirit, practical differences which improve people's lives inevitably follow. One is the success of one person brings happiness to all (instead of jealousy or resentment, which so often happens in the world). Another is that in times of difficulty, the community rallies to share the hardship (rather than being embarrassed by it and avoiding the person who is suffering as so often happens in the world).

One of the most precious gifts the church can offer our world is a genuine community - where joys are shared, and pain is shared; where victories are celebrated, and pain is cared for, where we feel like we really truly belong. In the words of the old *Cheers* theme song, "*you want to go*

where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came," There aren't too many places like that in our world. The church ought to be one of them.

The joy of complementing each other (v. 27-30). The Spirit gives to each church the skills needed to do His work in His way. We don't all get the same gifts, but by sharing our talents and our lives, something truly good, truly wonderful can be let loose in the world.

The wonder of the Von Trapps is, of course, their singing. The seven children, the stodgy old naval captain, and the beautiful former nun, make an incredible singing group! The wonder of any singing group is how they complement each other. In this case, nine separate voices blend to make the hills come alive with sound of music. Individually they all could sing, but it was their harmony together that won them the prize at the Salzburg Festival.

What about us? There are far more than nine of us! Individually we all have special gifts and abilities which we can use to serve the Lord. But together ... together we can be so much more than the sum of our parts. Together we can be salt, we can be light, we can be everything the Lord desires us to be!

You are a vitally important part of the church! Even though you may feel like you don't have much to contribute, you are essential to the overall health of the body. Perhaps your gift can be as small as just coming to worship on a Sunday morning: your presence may be the bit of cheer that someone else needs. Perhaps you can call someone: that call may make their day! Perhaps you can email/facebook someone you haven't see in a while (a call or a visit is better, but this ok, too). Perhaps you can volunteer in the nursery, decorating for Easter, singing in the choir ...

There are no unimportant people in the church. No person (or gift) is "better" or "less important" than another. But we all have something to offer. All this variety is designed to work together to create a dynamic unity. The Holy Spirit is the One who builds the church. Our challenge is to take the opportunities He sets before us and be faithful in serving Him. He will supply the gifts and resources we need.

***The challenge we can take with us this morning is this:** What unique gift, skill, or ability has God given to you? No matter how humble (remember the humbler, the better). How are you using that ability or gift? If you aren't, how could you do so?*

***And this:** do you know someone who has an incredible gift or talent, but isn't using it? Could it be they don't recognize it or they feel unworthy? Encourage them! Build them up! You will be building the church. And you will be building your relationship at the same time.*

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