

June 4, 2017 The Gospel According to (Off) Broadway
Acts 1:1-5; Joel 2:28-29

I was born in the last year of the Baby Boom and missed out on the Summer of Love because I was only three years old. My husband, on the other hand, was twenty, so let me tell you a little of his story, because there's a connection to *Godspell*.

When Hank was at Reed College, he was an evangelical Christian, pretty conservative, studying classics. But his junior year, 1968, he studied abroad in Germany and there he got acquainted with some radical Christians and got involved in the anti-war movement. He came home and after graduation went to work for two social justice outfits: Radio Free People and American Documentary Films. Fun job, but they paid him in revolutionary currency. That's how he met Jane Fonda, twice. The second time he was at the Winter Soldier investigations in Chicago and Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland came to his hotel room to dub a tape. Hank has a lot of these stories,

which is why I started calling him "Forest Gump" when we were dating.

In 1972, Hank went to Carnegie Mellon to get a masters in play-writing. He found out when he arrived that *Godspell* had gotten its start there just two years before. John Michael Tebelak wrote *Godspell* as his masters thesis. The scenes were enactments of parables from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and most of the lyrics to the songs came from the Episcopal Hymnal.

Godspell was first performed at Carnegie Mellon and then at a little theater in New York, where it caught the eye of Angela Langsbury's brother, who hired Stephen Schwartz, another recent Carnegie Mellon graduate and composer of *Pippin* and *Wicked*, to write a new score. *Godspell* opened Off-Broadway in 1971.

It got some flack because Jesus was in a clown costume and his disciples looked like flower children, but other than that,

the whole production was pretty orthodox, unlike *Jesus Christ Superstar* which took a lot more liberties with the story.

Growing up, I loved them both, and I want to tell you why. My parents were dyed-in-the-wool Methodists, but they were very liberal. They were from small town Nebraska but they had both gone to Nebraska Wesleyan in the big city of Lincoln where they took religion courses from a professor who taught them how to think and ask questions. So, when I began to think and ask questions, I didn't really feel the need to rebel. In fact, I sort of rebelled in reverse. Unlike my parents, I didn't skip over the parts of the Bible or church history that didn't make any sense to me. I wanted to understand them before I dismissed them.

And so I went off to college as a premed religion major and I began to study how theologians understand the concepts such as sin and grace and forgiveness, and it started to make a bit of sense to me.

But I still had a problem with Jesus. When I read the Bible and listened in church, he didn't come across as a very approachable kind of guy. He was too pious, too perfect. He didn't really seem like a human being.

What's more, I didn't like the part about God sending him to die. Who would do that? And why? Anyway, what does Jesus' death have to do with my life? Maybe the idea of a sacrificial death made sense way back when people regularly slaughtered animals to say they were sorry for their sins, but that kind of thinking didn't and doesn't make sense to me now.

So I didn't know what to make of Jesus. I could admire him. I could try to follow his teaching. But I didn't know how to love him. That's where *Godspell* and *Superstar* come in. Long before the internet and iTunes, we had LP's, but they were too heavy to lug around. So I made cassette recordings of the soundtracks of *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* and took them to college with me. The more I sang those songs, the

more Jesus meant to me. More than reading the Bible, these songs gave me a grasp on his humanity. And I could begin to think that there was a chance he might even love me.

The Jesus in *Godspell* or *Superstar* is not an overly pious or impossibly perfect projection but a Jesus who is fully immersed in our human situation. Putting Jesus in a clown outfit or having Mary Magdalene sing love songs to him were just ways of telling the audience that Jesus was really human. He wasn't just a stick figure in a Bible story. So *Godspell* helped me to put flesh on the Gospel. Then *Superstar* helped me understand the sacrifice he was making.

Singing the songs from these musicals over and over, I came to believe that God didn't send Jesus to die. *Godspell* taught me that God sent Jesus to live and to usher in a kingdom of love. At the same time, *Superstar* taught me that Jesus died because his love was an existential threat to the powers that be and their kingdoms of hate.

Well, my friends, fifty years after the Summer of Love, hate is on the rise again. We are living in a world of hurt. We are living under a regime of fear and intimidation. Peace and justice, compassion and mercy, truth and integrity, humility and decency—so many of our values are taking a beating; so many of our hopes seem to be receding. It's a good thing that *Godspell* came back to Broadway a few years ago and *Superstar* is going live on NBC for Easter 2018. But we have a dire need to dream some new dreams, see some new visions, find a new language and write some new songs to teach a new generation about the radical love of Jesus.

We don't need sex, drugs or rock 'n' roll. All we need is the Holy Spirit, acting on an old promise by pouring out in a new Pentecost, so we can show the tyrants of this world who Jesus is and what his love can do. Even if the politicians never get it, this love is very powerful stuff. It not only conquers the hate in the world, but I'm living proof that it will conquer the

self-hate in your heart. Whereas Jesus used to seem distant and unapproachable and intangible and unbelievable to me, thanks in part to the Spirit speaking to me through these songs, I now know he is right by my side. [Prayer song: "By My Side"]