

December 24, 2018
National Presbyterian Church

One of Us

Christmas Eve, 2018

John 1:1-14, Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9

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As some of you know, the movie, *Mary Poppins*, has just been released in a new version, 54 years after the original movie came on the scene in 1964 and won 5 Oscars – as did *The Sound of Music*, a year later, in 1965. And while both movies are quite different in some ways (*e.g.*, London in 1910 *vis á vis* Austria at the outbreak of WWII; one movie made for children, and the other for adults), in other ways the stories are remarkably the same.

In fact the role played by Julie Andrews in both movies is almost the same role – but in different settings. She’s Mary, or Maria in both. She’s a nanny or governess in both. And in both she ends up not only loving and caring for children, but also fixing a home in which the spark of life is missing.

Somehow, whether it’s as Mary Poppins or as Sister Maria, Julie Andrews’ character makes her way into the lives of others so profoundly, so deeply, that people begin to trust her, as one of them; they open up to her; they lay their defenses down; and eventually they convey to her the power and right to *change the way they live*. And while in *Mary Poppins*, Mary has to keep on moving, and leaves the Banks family once her work is done, (she’s “*one of them*” for just a short while), in *The Sound of Music*, Maria actually becomes *one of* the Von Trapp family, permanently.

In fact, an explicit part of *The Sound of Music* is the theme that Maria *isn’t quite at home* in the convent (as Mother Superior realizes): she’s not quite “one of them” as a nun; while, on the other hand, *she’s immediately at home* with the Von Trapp family children (and they at home with her); and eventually with their father, Georg, as well, until she becomes inescapably a part of their lives for good. *One of them!*

And this is of huge importance – knowing whether someone else is actually “one of us” or not: whether a person is someone we can be at home with, or someone we can trust, or open-up to, or share our secrets with – not just in family musicals on the stage or screen, but, for example, in every good spy novel or movie as well – they all explore this kind of issue too:

- Who’s one of us and who’s not?
- Who can be trusted?
- Who’s on our side? Who’s on theirs?
- What secrets have we given away? Legitimately? Improperly?
- Is someone an agent? A double-agent? A double-double agent?

Come to think of it, for those of us who live here in Washington, this issue may not be *just be about books or movies but about real life*: our profession, or our neighborhood. Thinking about

your neighborhood, are you sure that you can really trust your next door neighbor?! Are they really *one of us* and not a spy?

Let me put it like this: do you live anywhere near Creek-Crossing Road in Vienna? Well, in the early 2000's, FBI agent turned Russian spy, Robert Hanssen lived there!

And in the mid-1990s, Aldrich Ames of the CIA, lived on North Quebec Street and Nelly Custis Drive in Arlington? Know it?

And what about here at the church? Right across the street from our entrance on Nebraska Avenue, was the home of British spy, Kim Philby, who betrayed the west to the Soviet Union! In the 1950s.

Sometimes you have to be vigilant in figuring out who's *one of us* and who's not: perhaps more on the phone or with email than with wondering who's a spy in your neighborhood!

I hate to tell you this, but if you get an email *claiming to be from me* asking you to help buy something for one of my relatives, delete it immediately! Don't trust it!

Or on the phone: be careful! Unless *you really know someone* NEVER EVER give out your personal information. Whoever is on the other end of the line may claim to be nice, doing you a service and having your best interest in mind, pretending to be "one of you," but don't be fooled. Sadly, some people out there are ready to suck the life – or the identity, or the bank account – out of you, *if you let them*.

It's complicated: knowing who to trust, who is really *one of us*, and who is not. **And the issue goes all the way up to the top: to our relationship with GOD.**

Some people, of course, wrestle with *whether or not there is a god at all*.

While others, who are sure that *there is a god*, are not so sure about *whether God can really be trusted*; whether God is really for us – "*ONE OF US*" – or not?

Which is one reason why what happened at a specific moment in time on that first Christmas two thousand years ago is so important . . . when out of the blue God turned up on our doorstep, as a baby: coming to us *hook, line and sinker*: as "*one of us*"! As if God was speaking through that birth, saying, "If you've got any doubts look at me now"

- taking on flesh and blood (that he made);
- taking on the limitations of a human body (that he himself created);
- exposing himself to utter powerlessness – as a baby

Going to unbelievable lengths to show that He was, is and always will be AS ONE OF US; demonstrating on a level *that every human being could understand* (not with theological or philosophical arguments, but with a specific comprehensible action) that God loves us enormously and unreservedly; that God understands us in the most profound way and can be completely trusted with our lives – we can open the door to our inner lives, share every bit of private information, expose every skeleton in the closet, with every weakness – and know that God will not take any of it and use it against us . . . but the opposite: for us! Always!

Which, of course, is NOT how it had to be. God could have been like Ebenezer Scrooge in the *Christmas Carol*, or Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life*, or Mr. Dawes the banker in *Mary Poppins*.

God could have chosen to live in "splendid isolation," lost in his wealth and power, having no interest in, or mocking, those less fortunate, like us, who live "on the other side of the tracks."

BUT, thank God! That's not who God is at all. What happened on that first Christmas tells us that God is not like that: "one of them"; but like us: one of *US*.

It was the week before Christmas, 1966. Writer Mary Faith Russell had just moved to France, with her husband, Bill, transferred to an American owned plastic plant in Carvin, a small mining town in the north. She writes: . . . We pulled up stakes and moved from Massachusetts with our three children.

One Sunday the pastor of our little church drew me aside. "I've heard there are newcomers on your block," he said. "Madame Delplace and children have moved here from Strassbourg. She could use a helping hand. Perhaps you could drop by.

Drop by? I'd passed Madame Delplace one day on a narrow sidewalk in front of our houses. She carried herself proudly, and when I offered a timid "Bonjour," in my faltering French, she sailed past without a reply.

"Don't bother with her," a neighbor had called out from her window. Her husband has had trouble with the police.

"I just can't force myself on her," I said one day to my husband Bill. "I'm sure that she won't talk to an American, much less one who speaks such patchy French."

Bill lifted our six year old so that he could put the star on top of our tree. "Why not at least try?" he said.

The next day I walked down the block and knocked on Madame Delplace's door. She answered, wearing a heavy black sweater, her hair pulled back in a bun and lips pressed together tightly. "*Je suis Madame Russell*" I said. She hesitated, her gray eyes appraising me warily. I thought she might slam the door in my face. But she stepped back.

"*Entrez, s'il vous plait,*" she said.

I quickly realized the reason for the sweater. Her house was freezing cold. She motioned me to sit and brought me a cup of tea. The kettle hung over a small fireplace. I listened intently and was able to follow as she began to speak. "We have no money," she said, "to buy coal. You see, my husband broke a law and we've been forced into bankruptcy -- all our possessions sold -- to pay off the debt, except for a few chairs and our mattresses. We have a small social security stipend, and that's all. I went from being middle class to poverty, and no one will talk to me anymore."

"Madame," I said, choosing my words carefully in French, "I will talk to you."

I visited Madame Delplace every week.

One day Madame took out her needlework, a ball of thread and a hook.

"What are you making?" I asked.

She held up a circle of intricate flower designs, woven in shades of a warm, almost golden beige. Her work was exquisite.

"How beautiful" I exclaimed.

"A tablecloth for my sister," Madame said.

The winter softened into Spring. At every teatime as we talked in the soft afternoon light, her needle kept moving, transforming the ball of thread into a delicate cascade.

Before I knew it, it was only a week until Christmas again. Holiday lights bloomed on lampposts. Rich cakes shaped like Yule logs appeared in *pâtisseries*. The year had flown by. The next time I went to Madame's for tea, sprigs of holly were arrayed over the fireplace.

"I have finished the tablecloth" she announced.

"Please," I said, "I have to see it."

Slowly, almost reverently, Madame Delplace spread the cloth over the kitchen table. I caught my breath.

"This could go in a museum!" I whispered.

Then she did something unexpected. She folded up her treasure and held it out -- toward me. -- "It is for you" she said.

"I . . . I can't," I stammered. "You made it for your sister."

"YOU ARE MY SISTER," she insisted.

"In all our times together this past year, there is one thing I have never spoken about: the war. American planes bombed Strasbourg. Those bombs killed my father. In my grief and rage I vowed I would always hate Americans. **Then . . . you came to visit me, and be my friend, and my bitterness melted.**

No longer a faceless "one of them," but Mary Faith had become "one of us" – and the power of this knowledge in Madame Delplaces's life was enormous.

The first Christians understood this power in their relationship with God:

Writes the author of the Letter to the Hebrew (4:15).

"We do not have a high priest (a savior!) who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested (has faced real life) *LIKE ONE OF US*, yet without sin."

On that first Christmas, says St. John, writes,

The eternal Son of God became flesh, and "tented or tabernacle" among us: lived as one of us and among us, full of grace and truth.

THIS IS WHO GOD IS . . . this is how much he loves us and cares; **Always Has. And Always Will.** And there is no greater joy or purpose or power to help us change the way we live – to renew and refresh our lives – than can be found by opening the door of our hearts to welcome him in.

He's knocking.

- Like Mary Poppins on the front door of the Banks's house
- Or Maria, knocking at the Von Trapp's
- Or Mary Faith at Madame Delplace's

He really is "one of us," and can be trusted in every way, "for us" in more ways than we can imagine . . . never to leave us, forever.

Make sure you open the door, and let him in and discover this to be true, this Christmas.

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