Proper 25, Year A

True story: In World War II, the Allies were preparing to launch an invasion of Sicily in order to liberate it from the Axis powers. But about 100,000 Germans with guns guarded the beaches: enough to overwhelm the Allied forces. Clearly, muscle alone wasn't going to win the day. So to increase their chances of success, the British turned to trickery. They decided to convince the Germans—through an elaborate hoax—that they planned to land in Sardinia instead of Sicily. They reasoned that if the deception worked, the Germans would likely mass their troops there, far from the actual target. So, less opposition, fewer casualties; a freed people. The deception's code name: Operation Mincemeat.

Now, some of you may be one step ahead of me here.

Because, for some obscure (to me, anyway) reason, a number of folks decided that this 1943 hoax would serve as perfect fodder for a musical comedy of the same name: Operation Mincemeat. And, wonder of wonders, they were right. It received rave reviews and won multiple awards in London's West End, migrated across the pond to Broadway, and then began a national tour at PPAC. That's where, about a month ago, I saw it with a friend.

Let's drop in on Act 1, Scene 1: a fairly bare set with almost no props. First one, then four more nattily-dressed individuals in button-down shirts and dark pants—some with suspenders, some in ties—proudly strut on stage and introduce themselves as members of MI5, the British Intelligence Agency. They are, they claim, the greatest minds of their time, the clever men who hold the reins. The ones tasked with crafting the hoax that will confuse the Germans and ensure victory for the Allied forces.

"Well, let the navy lads get soaking," they sing. "We'll all stay nice and dry. We shout to all the soldiers, 'Jump!' and hear them shout, 'How high?' For

we were made to give the orders, while lesser men take heed. For some were born to follow, but we were born to lead."

Sound familiar?

In this morning's gospel, we meet another group of equally confident men engaged in trickery: the Pharisees. I mostly visualize them as wearing metaphorical if-not-black-at-least-gray hats, because they are narrow-minded legalists who emphasize to-the-letter faithfulness to the Torah-–the first five books of the Hebrew bible. But they also founded synagogues and encouraged every Jewish person to participate in prayer, Bible study, and regular worship. So not evil, per se, but focused on their own interpretation of scripture, and, as do many who revere knowledge over humanity, sought to impose their interpretations on everyone else.

Had the Pharisees been in need of a slogan at that time, I am confident that "We are born to lead" would have been welcomed by most.

We're reading these verses in October, not long before the first Sunday of Advent. But Matthew historically places them at another moment in time: a few days prior to the feast of Passover, when Jesus would be crucified. The gospel writer first records three of Jesus' parables, and then three of the religious leaders' riddles or trick questions. We heard one last week, when they asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. The Pharisees and Sadducees, it seems, have been tag-teaming each other, seeking to entrap and discredit Jesus.

Both sects were hopeful that they could present proof that this Jewish teacher and preacher who practiced an itinerant rural ministry was a threat to those in power. And it's no secret that those in power wished then—and wish still—to remain in power.

As a practicing and faithful Jew, Jesus undoubtedly knew that there were hundreds—613 in fact!---of laws meant to both guide and trip up the citizens of Palestine. Laws ensured conformity and conformity ensured a

more easily controlled citizenry. The Pharisees (perhaps sarcastically) address Jesus as “Teacher.” By asking Him to choose just one law, the Pharisees likely thought to showcase their own knowledge; to perhaps make Jesus lose face in front of his followers.

Jesus knew the laws. He simply rejected their lens, instead quoting Deuteronomy: “’You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ Then He added a second commandment, a derivation from Leviticus—‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ —and context: On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus is claiming to fulfill, not abolish, the law and the prophets. And sets forth a new lens through which all else should now be interpreted: “We were born to love.” Not like, not love in the romantic sense, but love as an active, powerhouse verb that encompasses all creation as well as the creator. An overwhelming, unscripted response to the love that was first shown us.

I see that same lens reflected in this year’s stewardship campaign: “Together we grow in generosity.” I trust that by now you’ve heard of it. But it’s easy to view it only in a narrow sense—being generous with dollars, with pledges, with treasure. Or, widening our lens a little: being generous with time and talent. Certainly, providing the funds that enable Trinity Church to keep the lights on and grow its mission is important. As is offering back the gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit. All are vital to our worship here and our outreach into the community.

But I’d like to touch on generosity of another sort: generosity of spirit. A type of generosity that is not so much something we *do*, but something we *become;* something we eventually *are.*

What does that mean? Well, lots of things. Listening without judgment, being a safe place. Noticing the gifts and achievements of others, and reflecting them back to them, recognizing that their accomplishments do

not diminish ours. Paying attention and then undertaking what the Spirit is guiding us to do. Celebrating the rights of others aloud or in our hearts. Smiling at those who seem alone or unsure or unloved. Volunteering to make meals or visit the sick or drive a friend or ensuring that a relative's life is more peaceful and manageable.

Or maybe after careful thought and prayer, arriving at a sacrificial decision that benefits someone else even though it makes our life—perhaps temporarily, perhaps long-term—more difficult. I've had to do this one over and over. It never gets easy.

You may not know that my hubby used to be a bank vice president with a well-paying job. But then bank consolidations became an everyday occurrence, and when the bank he was working at was bought out, his job became redundant. A staffing agency assigned hubby to drive substance abuse clients from detox to a recovery agency while he applied for another "real" job. Problem is, he grew to love those clients, so when his next "real" job appeared, he was conflicted. He volunteered at that agency on weekends, finally understanding that working with clients with drug and alcohol abuse issues was his true calling. But with no formal training in that area, he started at the bottom while he earned the necessary certifications. Meanwhile, our family's fiscal bottom line suffered by easily 60%. He was nervous but excited. I was devastated. It took months of anguished prayer and conversations with individuals I trusted before I could grow into sufficient generosity of spirit to fully embrace that calling.

I'll bet many of you could share similar stories. None of us reaches a certain age unscathed. But, hopefully, we work at it. Like a muscle, generosity of spirit needs to be exercised in order to grow.

How does this tie into our stewardship campaign? It's not one-to-one. We don't necessarily expect that focusing on spirituality will produce more revenue. But, then, we're Trinity: more than simply a bottom line.

Maybe you can't, right now, raise your pledge or even give anything monetarily at all. Maybe your time is such that being asked to volunteer at the church is a bridge too far. But we can—individually and as a parish—undertake new spiritual growth. And let the Holy Spirit take it from there. Trusting in the process.

If we see through the lens of superiority, we may still make empirically good decisions. I mean, the folks in MI5—who, in real life gave of their time and talent and, throughout the musical, acknowledged their shortcomings and grew in compassion—*did* create a diversion. And it worked. Hitler *was* deceived. Sicily *was* liberated.

It's true. Some *are* born to lead. But *all* are born to love. To pay attention: To ourselves and to one another. To heal: Our own wounds and, as far as we are able, the wounds of those around us. During whatever lifespan that is given to us, wherever we are placed.

Is there something you feel called to do? Raise your hand, lift your voice, follow your heart.

Let your spirit soar.

Amen.

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