

“Come from Away” New London UMC Sun., Sept. 11 & Mon., Sept. 12, 2022
Psalm 14; Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; I Timothy 1:12-17 *NRSV* Rev. Joyce Rich

After Friday, November 22, 1963, people would ask the question, “Where were you when President Kennedy was shot?” After Thursday, April 4, 1968 people asked, “Where were you when Martin Luther King Jr. was shot?” After Monday, July 21, 1969 people asked, “Where were you when Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon?” And since Tuesday, September 11, 2001 people ask, “Where were you on 9/11?” Anyone old enough to remember that Tuesday would never have expected someone to make a Broadway musical about what happened that day. And yet the Canadian writing team of Irene Sankoff and David Hein did exactly that. Their musical, “Come from Away” focuses on how the events of September 11th were experienced by people in Gander, Newfoundland. The show opened March 12, 2017 on Broadway; and a touring company brought it to the Performing Arts Center in Appleton, Wisconsin April 2-7 in 2019. It might be the most inspiring play I’ve ever seen on stage.

But first, let me set the scene. If you’re like me you might not be able to reel off the names of the ten provinces and three territories of Canada – much less locate them all on a map. So here are a few interesting facts about the province of Newfoundland and Labrador: this province was the oldest colony of the British Empire; it is the most easterly point in North America; and it has its own time zone. The town of Gander, Newfoundland was selected as a refueling spot for early transatlantic flights. And when the Gander International terminal opened in 1959 it had the province’s first escalator. While aircraft now carry enough fuel to make non-stop transatlantic flights, Gander remains a preferred emergency landing point for any planes over the North Atlantic experiencing an onboard medical emergency or security issue.

When the airspace over the United States closed on September 11, 2001 all 4,000 flights inbound to the United States were diverted to airfields in other countries. Approximately 239 flights became what was dubbed “Operation Yellow Ribbon” in Canada. Halifax received the most aircraft with a total of 42 planes carrying 8,400 passengers and crew; while Vancouver received the largest number of people with a total of 8,500 passengers and crew members. Gander International received 38 commercial jets carrying 6,122 passengers and 473 crew members. Bear in mind that in 2001 the total population of the town of Gander was 9,285; while the population of Halifax Regional Municipality was 359,110; and Vancouver’s population was 545,670.

One of the songs from “Come from Away” is titled, “38 Planes.” The song recalls how folks in the Gander control tower started doing the math: “That’s a jumbo! There’s got to be 250 to 300 people on there! . . . Probably another 100 on that one . . . and more than 200 on that one . . .” That day no one knew how long all of the planes were going to be grounded, or how long all those people would be in Gander. Of course, for security

reasons, the passengers weren't allowed to disembark for hours. Many passengers didn't even know why their flights had been diverted to Gander, Newfoundland and why they had to continue to sit in the stuffy, hot planes until they were told they would be getting onto school buses and taken to local temporary shelters. Of course informing people from 95 different countries what was going on, and where they were being taken to, was another challenge that was compounded by the fact that **none** of their checked baggage would not be allowed off the planes due to on-going concerns about security. The passengers also did not know that the local school bus drivers were on strike so there had to be negotiations to get drivers to come in and take the passengers from the airport to the schools and other shelter locations. And if it wasn't for Bonnie Harris from the Gander and Area SPCA asking, "Who is taking care of the animals?" – who knows when the airport officials would have thought to look at the flight manifests and find out that there were eleven dogs, nine cats, and two Bonobo chimpanzees onboard those planes?

Needless to say, there was a lot happening in Gander, Newfoundland on Sept. 11 and the days that followed. Schools and clubs became shelters. Grocery store shelves emptied. Wal-Mart and other stores sold out their stock of underwear and toiletries. Pharmacies filled prescriptions. Residents of Gander, and the towns around, emptied their freezers and pantries to make roasts and casseroles to feed all their guests; and volunteered to take the "plane people" home with them so they could: take a shower; use a telephone to call their family or friends; borrow clothes while they washed what they had been traveling in; or have a change of scene away from the shelters. They went above and beyond to welcome and help people who were far from home. They comforted both those who had, and those who hadn't, been able to reach loved ones. And they wouldn't take any money for all of the long distance phone calls that needed to be made. Many of the oral histories of the experiences that bonded people together in the days following September 11th were compiled by Jim De Fede in his book, *The Day the World Came to Town*, which was published in 2002.

One thing that often came up in the remembrances of the "plane people" was that despite the overwhelming sense of shock and sorrow that hung over those days, they were deeply touched by the hospitality and kindness they experienced in Gander. They couldn't believe that people would literally open their homes to strangers, give them clean clothes to wear, hand them the keys to their car and say, "Here, I'm going to be at work – why don't you go out for a ride?" Ganderites just kept doing so many things that the "plane people" would have considered to be too risky, or the height of foolishness, for someone to do for strangers. But the Ganderites didn't seem to think anything of it. They just took it in stride – day after day until all the planes could take off again. And that left the "plane people" wondering if they could ever be as gracious and trusting of strangers. They asked themselves, "What would it have been like if this had happened in my home town? How would people have been treated there?"

Those are good questions, aren't they? Because they are really asking, "What kind of a person am I? What kind of community am I a part of?" Those same questions come up in our scripture readings today. The psalmist says that when we're only concerned about ourselves, and we take advantage of other people, it's like our lives are saying, "Hey! We don't believe there is a God who will hold us accountable, or who cares about the poor or the oppressed." But that's a foolish way to live. And God stresses that point in our reading from Jeremiah:

For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.

(Jeremiah 4:22 NRSV)

And in the letter to Timothy we are reminded that no matter how foolish and stupid we might be, and no matter how sinful and far away from God we might think we are, the merciful love and grace of God is greater. No one has to stay stupid and apart from God.

Now according to the last census count in 2020, the total population of New London, Wisconsin is 7,121. That puts our community in between the number of "plane people" who arrived, and the number of residents who were in Gander, on Sept. 11, 2001. What can we see from here in the middle? How are people doing? Who needs help? Is our community skilled in doing evil and taking advantage of others, or is our community skilled in doing good? These are the questions that the lives we live answer each day. And why we are grateful that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of all stripes. As the grateful, forgiven children of God we can give honor, glory, and praise to God forever and ever. Amen.