

From Gilligan's Island to Amazing Grace
Sunday February 7, 2016

Is there anyone here who hasn't heard the Gilligan's Island theme song before? Anyone who can sing it from memory? Sherwood Schwartz, the creator of the series, who wrote the lyrics, heard this story from a friend who had traveled with a tour group in Europe: One day while on a long bus trip from one city to another, the guide suggested that the tourists sing their different national songs to one another. An American teen-ager on the trip, instead of singing "Home on the Range" or "America the Beautiful" sang "The Ballad of Gilligan's Isle" – and people from other countries joined in, each in their own language.

The song is more than just a catchy lyric that gets stuck in your head. Without it, *Gilligan's Island* might have been *Gilligan's Travels*. The executives at CBS liked the idea of a show about a skipper and his mate taking a group of tourists out on a cruise and being marooned on a desert isle, but they thought that should be the plot of only one episode. The executives wanted the crew and passengers to be rescued – if not at the end of the first episode, certainly by the second. They envisioned a show about Gilligan and the Skipper going out each week with a different group of passengers, having misadventures, but always returning safely to port. They argued that no one would want to watch the same group of people over and over, and that each week you'd have to explain how they came to be on the island and why they couldn't leave. So Sherwood Schwartz came up with a two-part solution: Part one was the theme song, which every week opened the show with a 60-second version of the storm which stranded them. Second, he promised that when ratings dipped, he would have the castaways rescued and send Gilligan and the Skipper off on a new adventure. But in the three seasons the show aired, from September 1964 to April 1967, ratings never dropped. Each week approximately 12 million households watched the adventures of the Skipper, Gilligan, the Howells, Ginger, the Professor, and Mary Ann.

This disparate group stuck on an island together was the whole point of the show. Sherwood Schwartz intentionally was putting together a microcosm of society and saw his series as a parable for his times. In his memoir *Inside Gilligan's Island*, he wrote that he meant the show as "comedy on top and allegory underneath." After working on such comedy shows as "The Red Skelton Show" and "My Favorite Martian," he wanted to create his own show, one which he could use to say something important. He wrote, "One day the idea of a group of diverse characters being forced to live together began to take shape. They would be a "family," but of a very different sort. ... The world, in a very real sense, is an island, where Americans and Russians, Arabs and Jews, Turks and Armenians, Irish and English, Afrikaners and Blacks, all must somehow learn to live together if they are to remain alive at all. Rich nations, poor nations, religious nations, godless nations, big nations, small nations, modern nations, backward nations, all exist on this same island we call Earth."

Once he had the concept, he had to come up with the characters. The first to be settled on were the Skipper and his mate. Then he had to decide on the passengers and how to arrange them to mirror the larger society. He settled on five passengers: Mr. and Mrs. Thurston Howell III for the powerful and wealthy; Ginger, for Hollywood, beauty, and vanity; the Professor for academia; and Mary Ann for the practical, every-woman. Each was planned as a caricature of the segment of society represented. The Howells, for instance, were so rich that Mr. Howell "felt writing a check ... large enough could stop a hurricane," and "Mrs. Howell expected somebody to come ashore every Thursday to dust the island and polish the coconuts." He and his wife were the only ones with a wardrobe, symbolizing that "rich people manage somehow to have the best of everything no matter what the circumstances."

But even Mr. Howell and his wife were also meant to seem human. “On Gilligan’s Island there were to be no villains among the seven Castaways. The villainy came from the forces of nature – storms, lightning, quicksand, tidal waves, volcanoes – or from wild animals, poisonous shrubs, savages from other islands. The Castaways themselves were all designed to be likable characters – though with very different sets of natures.”

As he settled on seven characters, he saw each as embodying one of the seven deadly sins: greed, lust, anger, sloth, gluttony, pride, and jealousy. He never did specify which character embodied which sin, but most sources I looked at saw the Skipper as embodying anger; Mr. Howell, greed; Mrs. Howell, sloth; Ginger, lust; the Professor, pride; Mary Ann, jealousy; and Gilligan, gluttony. But they were to be lovable at the same time – just like all of us, a mixture of good impulses and not-so good ones. This quality of loveliness made the role of the Skipper especially hard to cast. Schwartz wrote, “The Skipper had to combine the gruff, forceful strength of a lion with the gentleness and warmth of a pussy cat. You had to love the Skipper even while he was bawling out the sympathetic, well-meaning Gilligan. . . It required an actor who brought to the role so much innate warmth and humanity that you would love him no matter what.” Actor after actor read a scene with Bob Denver who had been cast as Gilligan, but no one could read it in a way which didn’t make an audience detest the Skipper, until Alan Hale was able to combine severity with kindness. To test for the part, Hale, who was on location in Utah for a western, had to borrow two of the movies’ horses, convince another actor to come with him, ride across the desert on horseback to the highway, where he hitchhiked to Las Vegas, flew to Los Angeles, took a cab to the studio, did the scene, and then reversed the process, ending up back at the spot where his friend had been waiting with the horses for six hours!

During their three seasons, while coconuts landed on the Skipper’s head, missiles sunk in quicksand, and the castaways dealt with repeated disappointment in their attempts to leave the island, along with poisonous bugs, blights, vampire bats, invasions of Soviet spies, bank robbers, leftover Japanese soldiers, lost pilots, and bad news from the outside world which came in over their radio, there was always a moral to the episode. As Schwartz envisioned it, “underneath all the whipped cream and icing, there was usually something solid to chew on.” The episode “The Little Dictator” about a Central American dictator exiled to this supposedly uninhabited island showed the importance of fighting for democracy. The episode “The Big Gold Strike” showed the danger of greed – the Castaways are about to escape the island on a raft, but Mr. Howell, trying to take his gold with him, sinks the raft – and the gold with it. “Slave Girl” highlighted the ways we enslave one another and the importance of working for freedom. In almost every episode, growing understanding and compassion for one another healed the comic misunderstandings. In “Angel on the Island” Ginger learns over the radio that she’s lost a leading role in a Broadway play by being shipwrecked. Mr. Howell promises that he’ll back her in a play when they get off the island. Then and there, they all start to rehearse the play to make Ginger feel more hopeful. But Mrs. Howell demands that she have the starring role and her husband can’t say “No.” Ginger has now lost the role twice and feels even more hopeless. So Gilligan goes to Mrs. Howell and tells her that she has everything she wants, and the only thing Ginger wants is the lead role. Mrs. Howell pretends to have laryngitis so that Ginger can have what she needs. In other episodes, the castaways go to great lengths to convince the Skipper that the SS Minnow didn’t sink because of his negligence, to comfort Mary Ann when they hear over the radio that her boyfriend has eloped, to let Mr. Howell know they still value him when he thinks he’s lost all his wealth, and to help Gilligan regain his courage.

In several of the stories, the castaways are willing to sacrifice their very lives to save one another. Gilligan jumps on a missile which lands on the island and steers it out into the lagoon so that it won’t blow up the island. Fortunately the explosives had been deactivated, so everyone

is safe. In another episode, Ginger offers to throw herself into a volcano thinking that will prevent it from erupting. And in the final episode, “Gilligan, the Goddess,” when the king of a nearby island arrives looking for one of the women to become the goddess sacrificed to yet another volcano, Gilligan dresses up in women’s clothes and goes off with the king to save Mary Ann, Mrs. Howell, and Ginger. He is spared being thrown into the volcano when his wig falls off, and the king flees from this evil goddess.

This was never meant to be the final episode. At the end of the third season, CBS said they were going to renew the series for a fourth year. They were going to drop a series which was low in the ratings, *Gunsmoke*. But *Gunsmoke* was the favorite series of the president of the network and he’d never liked Gilligan’s Island, despite its high ratings. He still thought week after week on the same island with the same people was boring. So without any announcement *Gunsmoke* was saved and *Gilligan’s Island* dropped. Had he known, Sherwood Schwartz would have ended that third season with the story line he’d planned all along to wrap it up – the castaways would finally be rescued, but after getting back to the lives they’d been mourning, they would realize they missed each other and had been in paradise all along. So they’d return to the island where Thurston Howell would finance a resort and they’d enjoy their put-together family for the rest of their lives.

On their island, they experienced what the Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams wrote about church: “Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human.” Had they not randomly all set out on the same three hour cruise, their paths never would have crossed. The professor would have spent his life surrounded by other scientists and academics; Ginger encased in the glamor of Hollywood; Mary Ann with others from her small Midwestern town; the Howells with other one percenters. Gilligan and the Skipper might have met a large variety of people, but never developed such connections that they would be willing to sacrifice their lives for those strangers. Their understanding and compassion for the other would never have been stimulated to develop.

In our faith community, we may not live day after day together without running water or electricity amid falling coconuts and palm trees, but we do gather Sunday after Sunday (and often other days too) with people we wouldn’t otherwise know. Where else in our society today, do second graders and their parents mix with people whose children are long grown? Where else do executives and social workers, lawyers and electricians, artists and technical writers come together? Where else are people not divided along lines of age, gender, family and marital status, education, income level, or work? How many of you have become friends with someone you never would have met if it hadn’t been for First Parish? How many of you have learned to look at a situation with different eyes because of getting to know someone here? How many of you think sometimes, “but how would this affect so-and-so who’s dealing with health care issues, or unemployment, or depression?” How many of you, like the castaways, have learned about what it means to be human from being part of our First Parish Isle?

When Mona Haydar and Sebastian Robins joined us for worship two weeks ago, they commented with surprise and pleasure “and you do this week after week?!” Yes, we do this week after week. We gather to understand ourselves, our world, our lives. We gather to remind one another that we are held in love. We gather to support one another in our efforts to spread justice, equity, and compassion. We gather to find something solid to chew on – even underneath the whipped cream and icing of a sermon on *Gilligan’s Island* and a luau coffee hour.

And though we can and must leave this island oasis each week, we carry with us a renewed compassion, an interest in the lives of strangers, and a desire to serve, which help to spread the warmth of paradise in our often icy world.

The tune for “The Ballad of Gilligan’s Isle” is in common meter, a four line rhythm of 8 beats, 6 beats, then 8 and 6 again. Many familiar hymns fit this meter including the tunes for “Joy to the World,” “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” and “Amazing Grace.” That means that the words and tunes of all those hymns are interchangeable with the words and tune of “The Ballad of Gilligan’s Isle.” “Gilligan’s Isle” and “Amazing Grace” are the most well-known pairing. Beth and I thought it would be appropriate to end our service this morning by singing the words of “Amazing Grace” to the tune of “Gilligan’s Isle” as a reminder that grace can come to us in the most unexpected ways – even through the parables of a 50 year-old sit-com. Please join us now in singing “Amazing Grace.” The words are printed in your order of service.

- Pamela M. Barz