

The Beatitudes of Broadway

Hamilton: The Sermon

Rev. Dr. Michael Piazza

Sunday, August 19, 2018

Isaiah 49:1-6; 14-18/Mark 14:3-9

In the olden days, when people actually carried cash, we often had a picture of Alexander Hamilton in our wallets. Until a few years ago, the fact that he graced the \$10 bill, was about the only thing most Americans knew about him.



Oh, we might remember from school that he was the nation's first treasurer, and one of the founding fathers, and instrumental in shaping our financial system. We might have a vague recollection that he was killed in a duel with Aaron Burr, but we don't remember why. (That is one piece of history the musical that is not strictly accurate.)

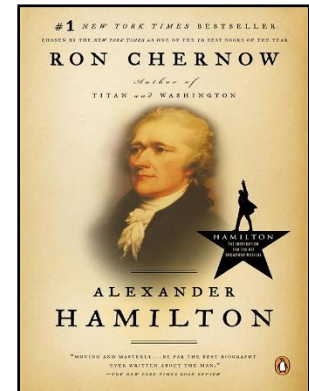


Born out of wedlock in the West Indies and orphaned as a child, Alexander Hamilton was arguably of more influence in shaping our nation than people better known like Thomas Jefferson, who became president only because of Hamilton's support.

Although Jefferson gets most of the credit for the Constitution, it was Hamilton who wrote 51 of the 85 segments of "The Federalist Papers," which, to this day, shape how we understand what was intended by those revered words.

Hamilton's only memorial—the \$10 bill—might have been lost in the just movement to put women and people of color on our currency had it not been for a hit Broadway musical.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ron Chernow wrote a biography of Alexander Hamilton which became a “New York Times” bestseller. Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creator and star of the musical, picked up Chernow’s book in an airport bookstore and read it on vacation. Perhaps because he had written a paper on the 1804 duel between Hamilton



and Burr when he was in high school, Miranda was intrigued by this piece of history and spent several years creating a Broadway masterpiece out of dusty history.

Given the demographics of New Canaan, I may be the only one in the room who has not seen the musical. Still, because of its historicity and remarkable diversity, I decided we had to include it in our first “The Beatitudes of Broadway” series because it reflects what is in the DNA of this church.

“Hamilton: An American Musical” garnered a record 16 Tony nominations, winning 11 including Best Musical. It also won a Grammy and a Pulitzer, and, by using hip hop, rap, and R & B, as well as traditional show tunes to tell the story, “Hamilton” made its own artistic history. It also has proven to be a healthy cultural challenge by insisting that people of color and immigrants also deserve to own the history of this country.



Friends have threatened to cut up my gay card because I am not a big Broadway fan. That was never more true than when they learned that, because of an insider connection, Bill and David got to see "Hamilton" from the VIP seats where the Obamas sat. They also got a personal backstage tour ... while I stayed behind to teach worship and preaching at Hartford Seminary.



Seeing that show was one of the last truly happy moments of Bill's life because we returned home and went immediately to Houston where he was hospitalized and never recovered.

Still, because of a childhood friendship of David's, they got a very special experience that even people from New Canaan can't afford. Because Bill got to see it and I didn't, as I pondered what to preach about, I had to take his advice about what was most important and moving.

Bill saw much more theater than I have. He also listened to more than 35 years of my sermons, and he thought that the most powerful theme running through "Hamilton" is the idea of who will tell our "story" in the end.

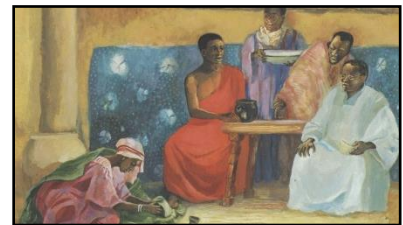


Because of the duel, Alexander Hamilton does not get to grow old like the other founding fathers, so he is unable to determine how his story is ultimately told, what his legacy is, or the theme of the final story that gets told about him. In the end, I think "Hamilton" is a love story, though, at one point he and his wife Eliza are estranged because of an affair he had. They are reconciled after their son Phillip is killed in a duel defending his father's honor.

Theirs is a story of estrangement and grief, forgiveness and reconciliation. I think that is an important part of what makes this historical musical work. It also is what makes life work for us all. The musical styles of this show may be new and unique, but the story is old and one we all share in some way.

It also is the story of a conflict between a flawed but principled leader and a charming leader with no true values or principles, other than his own personal advancement.

This morning's Gospel lesson tells of a woman doing an extraordinary and extravagant act of devotion and love for Jesus. In another telling of this tale, she is called a "sinful woman." Jesus said that her profound love comes from knowing deep forgiveness. That kind of redemptive transformation comes only to those who can acknowledge their need of it.



This good woman quickly discovered the truth that "no good deed goes unpunished" ... or at least uncriticized. I wonder why we who believe that we have been redeemed by a gift more costly than we can earn or deserve, are still so prone to live as if we've never known unconditional and relentless love.

The total testimony of the Gospel is that Jesus cared deeply for the poor, so this story can be challenging, unless we understand that Jesus was never an either/or kind of person.

The witness of his life is that **we all are poor** in one way or another, and this unnamed woman poured out her love extravagantly as a living memorial of both how we are loved and of the kind of lovers we are called to be. We are

called to love like God does because we are children of the God whose essence is relentless and unconditional love.

Jesus said that the extravagant way she poured out her love would be the memorial of her life. It would be how she would forever be remembered, and here we are, 2,000 years later, remembering her deep and generous devotion. Which, of course, begs the question: "What will we be remembered for?"

This is not one of those decisions to be delayed. Life should never be delayed. Every day, in every way, how we live our lives determines the true legacy we leave behind.

Because I pastored one of the largest churches in the world during the time of a global pandemic, I had the dubious honor of presiding over thousands of funerals, many for young men who died far too early. I also have done hundreds of funerals for those who lived long full lives.

In both situations, I sometimes found it challenging to find something to say, and there have been times when there was more than ever could have been said. In the end, though, it is not the words that are said, but the life that is recalled. Just a name on a grave or a plaque, or a story that lives on in those we have loved extravagantly and in our remembered acts of profound devotion ...

**"But when you're gone,
who remembers your name?
Who keeps your flame?"**



"Hamilton" isn't an artificial story of a magical time or a perfect hero with super powers destined for victory or even tragedy. It is an all-too-real story of an all-too-real human who made terrible mistakes but also did amazing things. It is about someone who was so

loved by another who forgave him and was determined that he would not be forgotten.

“Hamilton: An American Musical” made history with its rap and hip hop, but, if you will forgive me, I think its most powerful moment is found in the song “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story,” which is pretty classically Broadway. In the duel, Hamilton fires his pistol in the air, and Burr kills him. The song reminds us that we don’t get to decide who lives or dies, nor who tells our story, but we do get to write that story with the devotion of our lives.



In the end, the only stories ever worth remembering and retelling on Broadway, or in church, or anywhere are love stories, stories of love so profoundly passionate that they can never be forgotten or erased.



You alone get to write the story that will be told about you.