

What's Your Name, Man?
Luke 7:18-35
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Northminster Presbyterian Church
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It was a strange night in Washington. It was May of 2009 and the Obamas were hosting the first White House Evening of Poetry, Music and the Spoken Word to concentrate specifically on 21st century poetry, rap and hip hop. The organizers of the event had invited the recent Tony-winning composer of "In the Heights," a musical set in the Latinx community of Washington Heights that had featured many styles of music, including rap. Instead of featuring one of these songs, composer/writer Lin Manuel Miranda famously said he would sing something new. It seems he was working on quoting "a concept album about the life of someone I think embodies hip-hop: US Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton."

And the entire room exploded in laughter. It was a ludicrous idea, Hip-hop music about the guy on the 10 dollar bill? But Miranda was deadly serious. He had read Ron Chernow's brilliant biography of Hamilton, who Miranda would describe in his song/poem/rap that night as "the ten dollar founding father without a father."

Jump forward seven years and Hamilton The Musical wins 11 Tony Awards and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Today, productions in New York and Chicago have a presale, that is, tickets already sold for shows that have not yet happened, of over \$80 million. Last week Hamilton on Broadway had the highest grossing week of any theatrical production in the history of the world with over \$3 million earned for just eight performances.

Hamilton has entered the zeitgeist in ways that no one could have imagined on that night almost eight years ago when everyone laughed at Miranda before he began to sing. Catch phrases, like "immigrants, we get the job done," show up in internet memes and media savvy quotes. Plans to replace Hamilton with Harriet Tubman on the 10 dollar bill were halted due to Hamilton's increased profile and Treasury officials have now shifted her up the line and instead she will replace Andrew Jackson on the 20 dollar bill.

The song that Miranda sang in 2009 in a slightly different form is the opening song of the musical today. Only a few lines in the song are sung by the character of Hamilton; most are placed in the mouth of Aaron Burr and the other men and women who played huge roles in his career. The song is a prologue of sorts, outlining Hamilton's upbringing as the illegitimate son of a Scottish tradesman and a woman who was rumored to have supported herself by the world's oldest profession. It tells how he got from being an orphan on the Caribbean island of Nevis to New York, based on his hard work and undeniable talents and intellect. At no point in the opening verses of the song does it identify who they are singing about until Burr chimes in with, "The world's gonna know your name / What's your name, man?" The reply: "Alexander Hamilton / My name is Alexander Hamilton / And there's a million things that I haven't done / But just you wait, just you wait..."

Now, those of us who are fans of the musical find that this simple line almost takes our breath away because it sets up the entire show—Hamilton’s entire troubled, ego-centered, brilliant, always-in-a hurry, far-too-brief story—but in 2009, it caused the stunned audience at the White House to laugh yet again. It was just beyond belief that they were listening to a compelling hip hop song about the man who co-wrote the Federalist Papers over 200 years ago. It defied expectations and it seemed both so wrong and so right at the same time.

John the Baptist can probably relate. We heard him just a few weeks ago beginning his public ministry announcing the coming of the Messiah. And do you remember the words he used? From Luke 3: “^{16b}I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” John was expecting a Messiah to be like a cross between King David and an avenging angel. Powerful, pious and, in the words of one of my seminary papers, a righteous force who will, on God’s behalf, kick butt and take names.

And now, John sits in prison having ticked off King Herod one too many times. He is the protestor of occupation who went too far. And now, he can no longer preach in the streets, so he sends some of his followers to check out this Jesus. And do they find someone gathering followers for an overthrow of the Roman oppressors, or even the temple collaborators? No. Do they find a hell-fire and brimstone preacher whose righteous anger shakes the people up enough to get them to straighten up and fly right with moral purity and valiant resistance to the current regime? No.

They find a man who cures a Centurion’s companion — the ENEMY — and he says his faith is greater than any in Israel. And he revives a son so that his widowed mother is not left powerless and hopeless. In short, they find a teacher and a healer who is transforming lives, but not the way a messiah is supposed to.

When he hears these reports, John sends his messengers back to Jesus. “What’s your name, man?” they ask, though not in those words. “Are we to call you Messiah, or is there another one we are waiting for?”

We can’t really tell what John’s intended tone with this message is. Is he mad that Jesus isn’t being the Messiah he expects? Is he just perplexed? Is he challenging Jesus to leave off this intimate healing stuff and get to transforming communities? It’s not clear. What we do know is that this is the last we hear from John in the Gospel of Luke. By the time we get to chapter 9, John will already have been beheaded by Herod and the king will fear Jesus might be John brought back to life.

So something important is happening here in John’s farewell in Luke. He’s not just giving Jesus a chance to laud John as one of the greatest human beings to live, but he’s letting us hear this puzzling question: Are you the one who is to come?

In Hamilton, this troubled founding father’s great struggle is to find his place among his peers. He is poor and an orphan. Washington married wealth. Madison and Jefferson

inherited it. Who is he? He becomes George Washington's right hand man. His Federalist Papers help define our understanding of the Constitution and the role of the federal government in American life. But that's not enough for him. He is brilliant; he is ambitious; he is loving, and he is deeply flawed. He and his arch rival, Thomas Jefferson, will do more to shape the nation as it exists today than almost any other figures. But in his lifetime, he will trip over his hot head and his own ego so often that his death at 47 years of age in a duel with the vice president of the United States, Aaron Burr, seems almost inevitable.

Hamilton gets in his own way, and he tries to get in the way of Washington when Washington decides to retire after two terms as President. Hamilton likes being in the place of power, the right hand of the boss. In one powerful scene in the musical, he confronts Washington about leaving only to hear the President sing how he will show the people to say goodbye, to not ever be dependent upon or overly burdened by their President.

Today Jesus makes it clear in his non-answer to John that he is not going to get in his own way and he's not going to let anyone else's thoughts about who he should be get in his way. What does he tell John's followers in response to the question? "Tell him what is happening; tell him lives are being changed; tell him people are being restored to health and community; tell him the poor and powerless are given hope..." Those are the signs, Jesus seems to be saying, that God is at work here. And this is what the people need the Messiah to be, regardless of what they want him to be.

And Jesus is clearly concerned with expectations here. The whole final section of the passage is concerned with expectations — who they expect John to be; who they expect Jesus to be; and even how the current generation, Jesus' generation, seems to expect the whole world to dance when they play music, or to cry when they lament. Sound familiar? It's nice to know our tendency to narcissism isn't a new phenomenon.

Still, it makes me wonder, who do we expect Jesus to be and how is that different from what we need Jesus to be. Do we want Jesus just to be another preacher who worked for justice and confronted the powers that be until he got killed for it like a prototype for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? Or would we rather have a peacenik 70's love child Jesus whose demands on us are few and whose place in our life is as peripheral as if he were no more important to us than our second grade teachers?

I want to suggest that we need Jesus to be that catalyst for change in our lives just like those who needed him so long ago, and that the surest sign that we are following him is when we are his agents of healing and transformation in the world. Certainly, if we take Jesus at his word today, he doesn't want us to be mere mealy-mouthed complainers who pout like toddlers when the world doesn't go how we think it should be going. Let's call that Facebook faith, not that there is anything wrong with expressing views or opinions on Facebook or even face to face, but if that is where it stops...

Just as Jesus tells John that the answer to who he is can be found in what his faith and his love have driven him to do for the people, we need the healing, welcoming, comforting presence of Jesus as savior and friend. But surely, just as Jesus' answer to — "are you the

one?" or "what's your name, man?" — is answered in what he does in his loving response to God's call on his life, how we answer the same questions — who are we as a community or who are we as beloved of God, as followers of Christ — is best answered in how we live that love, even if it defies the expectations of the world.

Hamilton The Musical has very literally transformed the way many people think about history; it asks the questions, who lives, who dies, who tells your story? And, in so doing, it reveals the power of art to tell important, challenging, ancient stories in new and fresh ways. It defies every expectation a 1950s or even a 1990s musical theatre audience would have.

And the church is invited to live this ancient story in fresh ways as well. Let us pray they will be able to say of us — "Look around, look around / And see what is happening" — in how those people are living their faith in how we and our neighbors and strangers are brought nearer, by our dismantling of social structures and prejudices and by our surrendering privileges that have divided us. "Look around, look around / And see what is happening" — in how we encounter and journey with those who find themselves on the fringes of our society; in how we create a community of welcome that is willing to be uncomfortable; in how we learn new ways of being together; and in how we are God's agents for the transformation of our lives together, our families, our communities.

After the opening number, the most famous song from the musical is probably Hamilton's "I am / I want" song. He sings, "I am not throwing away my shot." Jesus' sermon in response to John today says the same thing, and may we have the same joyful, hopeful, empowered way of encountering every day we are given. In the company of this carpenter of Galilee, we are not "throwing away our shot." Amen.