

“I Love to Tell the Story”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on October 11, 2020
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Mathew 7:24-29

If you have not yet seen the musical *Alexander Hamilton*, I want you to know you are really missing something. None of us will be able to see it live anytime soon due to the darkening of theater venues across the country by Covid, but you can still watch a movie of the show featuring the original cast on the Disney Channel. It is worth the \$7.99 for a month's subscription to the Disney Channel just to watch it. This is not a conventional movie but rather a filming of a live performance of the show at its on-Broadway home at the Richard Rogers Theater in NYC. It is not your typical Broadway musical in many ways but what makes it so extraordinary is that it is the story of Alexander Hamilton, one of our country's Founding Fathers, told in the language of today sung by a cast of primarily persons of color and differing ethnicities. This is deliberate on the part of composer, producer and star Lin-Manuel Miranda who became enthralled by the story of Alexander Hamilton who rose to prominence during the Revolutionary War by the sheer force of his intellect and will. Miranda reframes the telling of the story of this Founding Father of America by emphasizing that Alexander Hamilton was, in fact, a poor immigrant who came to NYC as a teenager from Puerto Rico (before it was a US Territory obviously) to make his fortune. I confess I had to watch it several times to appreciate it fully because the entire musical is done in a mish mash of hip-hop and rap style. Once I could process this reality, I was blown away by the message of the show, driven home over and over again in the powerful lyrics of incredible songs masterfully performed.

The real miracle of this spectacular show, however, is that has literally made an entire generation of young people interested in the history of their own country, especially kids of color and kids from poverty because they can actually find themselves in the story given its remarkable contextualization through casting and musical style. Simply put, the kids relate to the rap, hip-hop means of story-telling. Even the duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton which ended with Hamilton's death is set to music in a scene that is profound and deeply moving. And did I

mention all the main characters are persons of color? Lin-Manual Miranda who portrays Hamilton is Puerto Rican. Hamilton's wife Eliza is portrayed by Asian American actress Philippa Soo. George Washington, the Marquis d'Lafayette and Aaron Burr are all played by African-Americans. It is truly the telling of the story of America by *today's* Americans.

I wanted to talk a little bit about *Hamilton* this morning because one of the great songs in the show reveals the central importance of story in our lives. The song, *The Story of Tonight*, is reprised several times throughout the show as it captures so exquisitely the notion that this Revolutionary War which gave birth to our country originated in the conversations of a group of talented and determined young men from humble backgrounds who recognized early on they had a unique opportunity to be part of history. The scene takes place around a table in a pub when the four young men – Alexander Hamilton, the Marquis d'Lafayette, John Laurens and Hercules Mulligan – played by a Puerto Rican, an Hispanic, and two African-Americans, were enjoying a drink together, dreaming about what they would accomplish during the coming war with England. The song expresses their conviction that at some point in the future others would know their story as heroes of the revolution. Even “the story of tonight” – the story of four young guys drinking in a pub -- would be a part of the history of the new nation others would want to learn. This song captures perfectly a moment in time when four young friends are confident that the stories of their lives would matter as the history of the nation they were fighting to create was shared from generation to generation. They sing of the importance of story as one generation learns from the one before what matters, what's important, as the years and decades and centuries pass. This song reveals the power of story, told over and over again even as it is renewed and refreshed each time it is told in a new context.

The understanding of the power of storytelling when it comes to the Christian life is what inspired Katherine Hankey to write what became the well loved hymn, “I Love to Tell the Story.” Hankey was an English evangelist who was a member of what was known as the Clapham Sect of the Anglican Church in Great Britain during the 18th & 19th century. This Sect was devoted to social justice issues generally, but especially to the eradication of slavery and the slave trade in Great Britain and the entire

world. Hankey herself was also a missionary who spent time in Africa. While there she contracted an illness which required a long convalescence and to keep herself amused, she used convalescence time to write an epic poem about the life of Jesus. She wrote it in two parts, “The Story Wanted” and “The Story Told.” Another hymn writer, Dr. W. H. Doane took several stanzas from the first poem to create the hymn, “Tell Me the Old, Old Story.” Hankey then allowed several stanzas from the second poem to be used for the hymn, “I Love to Tell the Story.” The tune was composed by William G. Fischer and it first appeared in print in 1869 in a collection of Fischer’s work called *Joyful Songs, Numbers 1-3*, published by the Methodist Episcopal Book Room. It was one of the first hymns to be recorded in 1916 by Henry Burr for Angelophone Records. It has since been recorded several times by different artists, not to mention its inclusion as a favorite in many hymnals over the years.

Despite its title, it becomes apparent when examining the lyrics that this hymn is not about any one of the stories told by Jesus or about Jesus. Instead it is about the act of telling the stories of Jesus itself. In doing so, it reminds us to consider afresh the reasons why does a person of faith, a Christian, tell the stories of Jesus. She writes, “I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love. I love to tell the story because I know ‘tis true. It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.” Her words written more than 150 years ago remind us that we tell others what we know of Jesus because our own faith and understanding of the story of Jesus deepens through the telling. We tell the story also because it’s not something people unfamiliar with the story will know unless they hear it from someone who knows, loves and trusts the stories. The stories are “unseen” but they are about this person Jesus who is both glorious and loving at the same time. We tell others the stories because we know they are true and important for everyone to know, even if they don’t ultimately value them in the same way we do.

The next two stanzas continue on in the same vein – telling the story because it matters more than “all the golden fancies of all our golden dreams”. We tell the story because knowing the story means so much to us. The story of Jesus is in fact what makes us who we are! Telling the story for the people who “know it best” also matters because they “are hungry and

thirsting” to hear it like the rest. Just because we already know the stories, doesn’t mean we don’t still need to hear them over and over again because we do. We long to hear them because they remind us who and whose we are. They remind us that God loves us more than we can possibly know, enough that God sent his own Son to show us a new way of living in relationship with God. They remind us that with God, all things are possible – even an empty tomb.

Jesus himself reminds us of the power of story over and over again throughout the Gospels. He used stories, the parables – like the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan and even the Mustard Seed – to explain this new and revolutionary way of understanding God’s love for us and what God expects of us in return. Why this matters, why it’s so vitally important for our faith and ourselves is explained by Jesus himself in the text we read this morning which comes at the end of what is known as the “sermon on the mount.” As his conclusion, he says, “Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock.” These stories of mine, Jesus says, all these things I am teaching you through them – form a foundation on which you are able to build a life that will withstand whatever life throws at you. Brick by brick, story by story, these teachings of mine will build a framework for your life that enables and empowers you to live your life confident you are loved and cherished by God no matter how challenging, how downright awful, things in your life might become. Jesus reminds us that through all of the stories he told and all of the stories about him recounted in the Gospels, each of us is able to understand and claim as our own that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that you and God cannot overcome together.

How does this happen? Jesus is clear it’s a two-step process. First, you have to hear the story, you have to hear Jesus’ words – God’s words from the Scriptures, Hebrew and Christian. In other words, this is not something you just know instinctively. You have to be exposed to the stories of Jesus, to the truth of God, if they are to have any impact on you and the way you live your life. How does that happen? Because someone – a parent, a grandparent, a friend, a pastor, a teacher – tells you. And they

tell you, as Hankey's hymn reminds us, for the simple reason that it means so much to them. In other words, each of us learn the stories of our faith by hearing them from someone else whose life has been changed by them. Then you, in turn, do the same. You tell others the story of Jesus so that they will be able to share in this great gift of knowledge of God's love just as you have.

This telling of others what you know about Jesus is the second step on the road to achieving the wisdom of the wise man who built his house on the rock. That second step is to act – to do something – with these stories you have heard. That something is to tell what you have come to know about Jesus and living your life in the light of this knowledge. And let's not forget that telling can happen in more than one way. The simplest way is to literally tell someone the story – any story – you love about Jesus. The Christmas story, the Easter story, the feeding of the 5000 – what is a story about Jesus you love and can tell someone about? Think about it!

Of course, there are other ways of telling what we know about Jesus and you in this church already know what they are. We told folks about Jesus every time our face mask team sewed a mask that went to someone who didn't have one. We told folks about Jesus every time we raised funds for missions projects and the pollinator gardens and the scholarships through a Dine to Donate event at Stonington Pizza. We told folks about Jesus when we went Christmas caroling. We told folks every time we collected diapers and school supplies and food for the Jonnycake or the PNC. Dear ones, we tell folks about Jesus every time we offer to pray for them in worship or through our prayer tree. We tell folks about Jesus every time we do what we do as the people of God living our faith together moment by moment as life unfolds each day. Dear ones, clearly we do love to tell the story right here and now in this church because we know it's true! We love to tell this story because we know with all our hearts *it is our* story – an old, old story of Jesus and his love. It is the story of today and tonight, and all the moments of our lives. And nothing – not a pandemic, not a contentious election, not economic challenges, not family worries – absolutely nothing can prevent us from telling this story which is our story. The only real question then is – who are we, better yet who are YOU, going to tell next? Amen.