

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 19, 2020

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Karen and I watched *Hamilton* on Disney + last weekend. If you get a chance you should watch it. It is a wonderfully written, scored, and performed musical.

Although I must admit that watching it with the lyrics in hand can be helpful.

The musical follows the adult life of one of the founders of our nation, Alexander Hamilton from his early twenties through his death in 1804 as the result of a duel with Aaron Burr. Hamilton was just shy of fifty years old.

I have been a student of history and of this part of our American story for my whole life. Part of what I appreciated about this musical is that it did not shy away from showing the founders as human beings- with all their flaws. Hamilton had an affair with a married woman and was so obsessed with his own success and sense of honor that he often ran roughshod over other people ignoring the effect on their feelings and lives. Burr was a man who always kept his powder dry, afraid to lose what he had, and therefore vulnerable to the charge that he stood for nothing but what was popular or good for him. And these were just the things they could fit into the show.

And yet, both were deeply devoted to their children. Both served in the Continental Army fighting for independence. Both worked tirelessly to create the Republic which has stood now for 244 years.

As with all of us, these founders were fully human- that mixture of good and bad, of selflessness and selfishness that makes up all of us, whether we will admit it or not.

To try and paint them as something other than that, is to do a disservice to both them and us. So why do we so often do just that? Why do we want to make those great people in our lives into perfect beings who can do no wrong? I've seen it. The descriptions that make them into two dimensional characters who- interestingly enough- reflect our own understanding of what that perfect human should look like or at least the perfect founder.

Why do we make those great people in our lives into perfect monsters whose works should be ignored or discredited because of their faults? I've seen it. Where everything about a person should be ignored or at least there should be no recognition of their accomplishments because of the awful and sometimes evil things they have done. Instead we make them into a two-dimensional character that is only the sum of the worst of their humanity- and interestingly enough- those awful things often reflect our own understanding of what a perfect human today should look like or at least a perfect founder.

Why do we do this? Seek to make our founders and other important historical figures into either heroes or heels? I think it is because we have not fully faced the contradiction in ourselves. Because doing so requires living with the tension that even great people can do awful things, and even awful people can do wonderful things and we don't know what to do with that.

We are like the slaves in the parable- seeing the weeds sown among the wheat and wanting to go in and tear it out. To create the perfect field.

The weed that is sown is called darnel and until it begins to bear fruit it looks an awful lot like wheat. But by the time they both ripen, bear fruit and you can begin to tell the difference, the roots of each plant has grown together- so intertwined

that, as the Master says, to pull one up will destroy the other. Instead, the Master tells the slaves to leave them to grow together, and at the harvest- then those who are appointed as reapers (note, these are not the slaves) they will determine which is weed and which is wheat. What is preserved and what is cast into the fire.

As one commentator put it, “The point of this passage seems to be, ‘expect good and evil to be jumbled together in this life. It won’t get sorted out until the eschaton.” And as Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we should be okay with this. For our own founder, Martin Luther, was a deeply flawed man. Devoted to God and the freedom that comes through the Gospel, but also one through whom flowed the prejudices of his day- towards Jews, Muslims, and others. His words about Jews later in life were used to help justify the treatment that led to the Holocaust in Germany. Luther called all of us a “mixed bag” of both good and bad. He knew from personal experience that we are all *simil justus et peccator*- both saint and sinner. Fully justified in God’s eyes and fully deserving of condemnation and death.

This side of the eschaton- the end times when Jesus comes again- this is who we are. All of us. Saint and Sinner. Wheat and Weeds. And when we deny that, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

In ways big and small we are all a mixed bag of wheat and weeds. For us to try and pull one of those realities out would destroy who we are. I think perhaps we recognize that...so instead we try and hide the imperfect. We put up a façade and try and ignore the fact that our spouse is an alcoholic. That our child has an addiction to meth. That we do have racist or sexist attitudes. That we are

intolerant of those who are different. We gloss over our anger that leads to outbursts towards those we love. Pretend that we have the perfect marriage. We make bad choices or decisions and, just like when we were kids, we blame someone or something else for them.

What is so hard about this faith that Jesus calls us to, that we in particular as Christians who happen to be Lutheran live, is that it calls us to die. We are a people of the cross- we are what Luther called Theologians of the Cross and that means we call a thing what it is- even when it hurts. Even when it will cause something to die. I cannot work to control my addiction without admitting I have one, dying to the perfect image of myself. I cannot get help for my child if I don't admit that they have a problem, dying to the image of a perfect child, of being a perfect parent. I cannot apologize for my mistake or make amends for my bad decisions if I do not admit that I did that. That I did the very thing I did not want to do, that I knew was wrong.

To do this, our own delusion must die. The nice façade we have created for ourselves that we are just fine. And then we need to figure out what it is we do with this imperfect human that we are. Do these flaws mean we are worthless? Deserving only of being uprooted and thrown into the fire? As humans we seem to want to do that. What of those places where I am bearing good fruit?

The good news for us is that God in Jesus shows us how we ought to think about this mixed bag that we are. Paul points to it in Romans 5:8, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." God has looked upon the mixed bagness of our lives and loved us. Accepted us. As that.

And why not! For just as the founders of our nation are imperfect beings, so were the founders of our faith. Abraham was a liar when it came time to save his own hide. Both he and his wife Sarah at times trusted themselves more than God. Moses was a murderer. David was an adulterer and had someone murdered. Paul was a persecutor of Christians before his conversion. And God loved them all. And God used the faithfulness and giftedness of all of them to further God's pursuit of the creation God loved. Even in their brokenness, God embraced them.

And so, God embraces us and that embrace becomes even more amazing when we see ourselves with clear eyes, see those places where we have born bad fruit. And we marvel- God loves me even though I have done that?

This does not mean that we don't strive to produce good fruit. It does not mean that we don't point out where there are weeds in the world. We are children of the good seed that has been sown. And as we pointed out last week, that means we place ourselves in a position to have that good seed sown in our lives. That it might grow, fed and watered by God's Word, and produce wheat enough that the darnel might be squeezed out. That what bears the fruit of the kingdom in our lives would be what we feed and nourish.

I think it is also important to note that it is not us who gets to decide what is saved and destroyed- that work belongs to God and God alone. We do not get to judge who or what goes into the fire and what goes into the barn. Perhaps, when Christ comes again, we all will go through that fire. That the weedy things in our life will finally be burned up and we will be only the fullness of the good fruit in our lives.

I also wonder if when we finally admit to the mixed bagness of who we are, that the result is like the Japanese pottery art of kintsugi. In this practice, instead of throwing away the broken pieces of a shattered jar or vase, the pieces are mended back together with gold lacquer.

This follows the Japanese philosophy of “wabi-sabi,” the act of embracing the flawed or the imperfect. The jar or pot is whole again, but the “imperfection” of the shattered pieces is highlighted by the lacquer. They acknowledge and even accentuate the flaw!

Maybe this is what Jesus does to us when we can finally admit to our own broken lives. Maybe Jesus mends us in ways that leave our imperfection, our brokenness, open for all to see- including us. Reminding us that we are broken but that Jesus can fix that. Making a whole thing out of both wheat and weeds.

It’s not that Jesus doesn’t care about sin- he cares very much. It’s just that the point is not to destroy the sinner, but to get them to stop sinning.

Let us trust God enough to admit to one another the truth of where we produce bad fruit. Let us embrace the imperfection of our lives. For it is in that confession, it is in that embrace- that we fully experience the grace and love of God in Jesus. That we receive that grace and love through our fellow believers.

And in doing so, our hearts can sing- maybe not with the same skill as the cast of *Hamilton*, but with a gratitude and joy for the God who loves us- now and always.