

Jeff's Jottings  
August 28, 2020

### **I Am Not Throwing Away My...Shot**

*The basic format of what you are about to read—if you choose to do so, and thank you if you do—first appeared in Jottings three years ago. Updated in this time of pandemic and racial reckoning, it still seems relevant.*

*Hamilton* re-appeared over the summer, the Disney-Plus hit that debuted Fourth of July weekend. More than a third of anything watched on streaming services in July was *Hamilton*. Disney's not saying how many eyeballs that was. Millions. And millions. Including mine. Twice.

*Hamilton*, of course, is the huge Broadway (and all-over, including Minneapolis) hit musical that tells the story of Alexander Hamilton, the brilliant and flawed American statesman, Founding Father, and creator of the United States' financial system. While the storyline of *Hamilton* is relatively true to Ron Chernow's nearly impenetrable 832-page biography, nothing else about the play screams traditional US history—not the hip-hop, rhythm and blues, pop music, traditional-style show tunes, or color-conscious casting of non-white actors as the Founding Fathers and other historical figures. Yet here it is, a runaway success.

I couldn't help but wonder again this summer, much as I did three years ago when I saw *Hamilton* in the theater: does *Hamilton* the musical have anything to say to the church? Does the success of non-traditional tradition—telling and showing a story in ways that honor the story while seemingly breaking all the rules of its telling—say anything to us? Three brief thoughts from three different characters, built on lyrics from the show:

*I am not throwing away my shot  
I am not throwing away my shot  
Hey yo, I'm just like my country  
I'm young, scrappy, and hungry  
And I'm not throwing away my shot. (Alexander Hamilton)*

Hamilton was orphaned as a child by his mother's death and his father's abandonment. Taken in by an older cousin and later by a prosperous merchant family, he was recognized for his intelligence and talent, and sponsored by a group of wealthy local men to travel to New York City to pursue his education. He was an outsider—young, scrappy, and (often literally) hungry. He didn't play by the unspoken but understood social rules. And yet he shaped a country. His insistent conviction—I'm not throwing away my shot—challenges us to ask: who are the outsiders speaking to the church, the insistent voices we may not want to hear? This year, it's been the voices of BIPOC; the black woman and children pushed aside by the General Assembly; the majority of our population who lives paycheck to paycheck, except now when there is no paycheck. The young, scrappy, and hungry. We must change, they tell us. It's hard for the establishment to listen to those who don't respect the way it's been done in the past. Maybe it's time we do, lest we in the church throw away our shot at engaging the next generation.

*Well, even despite our estrangement*

*I've got a small query for yoooo...  
What comes next?  
You've been freed  
Do you know how hard it is to lead?  
You're on your own  
Awesome...wow  
Do you have a clue what happens now?  
Oceans rise  
Empires fall  
It's much harder when it's all your call  
All alone  
Across the sea  
When your people say they hate you  
Don't come crawling back to me... (King George)*

The rapacious self-interest and almost comedic appearances of King George obscure the difficult question he poses after the Revolutionary Army's victory at Yorktown. It's as much our question today as it was back then. After the protests, the opposition, the fight against what we perceive to be wrong, then what? How will we lead? In this fractured society of ours—and in this fractured church of ours—can justice be found, and if it is, will reconciliation and unity follow? How will we invite the whole of the people of God—their full and imperfect selves—to be part of the present and future church? How do we lead beyond our own desires—and especially in this time when the future remains shrouded in the fog of pandemic?

*Now I'm the villain in your history  
I was too young and blind to see...  
I should've known  
I should've known  
The world was wide enough for both Hamilton and me (Aaron Burr)*

In the marketplace of competing ideas and worldviews, Aaron Burr was Hamilton's opposite. Burr was the insider whose own ambitions clashed at every turn with the upstart Hamilton. More often than not, Hamilton's vision and presence won the day, including the 1800 presidential election when Hamilton endorsed his rival Thomas Jefferson over Burr. Their antipathy for each other ended in a duel, Hamilton's death at Burr's hand. Only then—only when it was too late—did Burr discover a world of both/and, not either/or. In a church like ours, with fracture and division not simply in our DNA but our recent history, with pandemic uncertainty all around us, how do we—both upstart and establishment—stand for the Gospel without immediately opposing those who do not stand in exactly the same place? At what point do we repent of the divided body of Christ—and our role in it—and actively seek other ways of living, with each other and with the world?

You hear what you want to hear, I suppose, learn what you want to learn in the experiences you have. What resonated with me in *Hamilton* may be different than you. But it might be useful too. For “what has already been in the ages before us” is too often not remembered “by those who come after them”, in the words of Ecclesiastes.

*Hamilton* helped me remember. And not just Alexander. Eliza, too.

*I put myself back in the narrative  
I stop wasting time on tears  
I live another fifty years  
It's not enough...  
And when you're gone, who remembers your name?  
Who keeps your flame?  
Who tells your story?*

This year, we are all Eliza Hamilton, toiling through the pain and the uncertainty we can not only outlast, but change.