

What We Think We Know  
Gospel According to Hamilton Project  
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There has been a lot of great source material for hit Broadway plays. A T.S. Eliot poem inspired the hit musical “Cats.” French writer Gaston Leroux wrote a book about a phantom in an opera house that found its way to the stage. Gregory Maguire reimagined the life of a character from “The Wizard of Oz,” which was turned into “Wicked.” And Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote “Jesus Christ Superstar” based on...some book, I’m not sure which one.

Those are all compelling stories that lend themselves easily to a dramatic retelling. But who reads an 832-page book about our nation’s first Secretary of the Treasury and thinks, “This would make an amazing Broadway musical!” A guy named Lin-Manuel Miranda, that’s who. His play about Alexander Hamilton garnered a record 16 Tony nominations and 11 wins, including Best Musical.

If you’ve heard the soundtrack or seen the play, you know why. I was privileged to see it this April in Chicago and it is truly a cultural phenomenon. The play mixes diverse musical styles – everything from rap to British pop – with compelling characters and a surprisingly moving storyline. If you aren’t familiar with “Hamilton,” that’s OK. I’ll let you know what you need to know for this sermon, then I’ll encourage you to check it out yourself. Or you could read the 832-page book.

I was invited a few months ago to be part of a project called “The Gospel According to Hamilton,” in which preachers from across denominations and across the country are preaching today on their song of choice from the play. These sermons will eventually be gathered in one place and made available for review and discussion. Word is that Lin-Manuel Miranda himself has given his blessing to the project.

Let me give you a quick synopsis of the plot which leads up to the song I have chosen. The play follows Hamilton as he comes to New York from his home in the Caribbean to get an education. He meets Aaron Burr and becomes friends with a group of men who are eager to plot a revolution against King George in order to establish the colonies’ independence as a sovereign nation. The play takes us through Hamilton’s role in the American Revolution and it gives us a look into Hamilton’s personal life, including his courtship of and marriage to Eliza Schuyler.

After independence was won and our fledgling nation was just getting off the ground, Hamilton played a crucial role as an architect of our governmental infrastructure, to the detriment of his relationship with his wife and son, Phillip. There were long periods of time they were separated, as Hamilton stayed in New York City to work while Eliza and Philip went upstate for vacation. During one of these separations, Hamilton has an affair with Mariah Reynolds and ends up being extorted by her husband. He blackmails Hamilton, threatening to expose the affair if Hamilton doesn’t pay him off. Hamilton does, from his own pocketbook, and the news of the affair is silenced. Or so Hamilton thinks.

Hamilton’s rival at this time is Thomas Jefferson, who is at odds with him over aspects of the new government’s structure. Jefferson learns about Hamilton’s affair, so he, James Madison, and Aaron Burr confront Hamilton, thinking that Hamilton has used the government’s money to pay off the husband. That leads us to our song, which is called “We Know.”

In the song, Jefferson accuses Hamilton of adultery and misusing government funds, hoping that Hamilton will be trapped and give in to Jefferson’s demands about the government.

Hamilton responds that, yes, he did have an affair, but used his own money, and shows Jefferson his personal checkbook to prove it. Jefferson realizes that Hamilton is telling the truth and backs off from going public with the news.

In our story today, a woman caught in adultery is brought before Jesus by the Pharisees, who know that the penalty for adultery is stoning to death. They ask Jesus if this sentence should be carried out, hoping that Jesus will be trapped. They didn't care about the woman's well-being. She was simply a means to an end. To their surprise, Jesus tells them to go ahead and stone her, and then says something that has taken on a life of its own down through the years: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

Jefferson, Madison, and Burr entered Hamilton's office that day with stones in their hands. They didn't care about Hamilton's well-being. He was simply a means to an end of gaining control of this new government. Once they found out a piece of news that could be used against Hamilton, they took full advantage of it, leveraging his sin in their favor, just like the Pharisees did with the woman.

Jesus had a few things to say about judgment. This story is one of the primary examples. He also says in Matthew 7, "Do not judge, or you, too, will be judged." He then follows it up with the comparison between the speck in someone else's eye versus the log in our own. And Paul picks up the theme in Romans 2, saying, "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things." In the play, Jefferson was guilty of doing exactly what Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for doing. He is condemning the sins of another without acknowledging his own.

A good way to get at this is to divide sins into two broad categories. There are sins of the flesh, like adultery and murder and stealing, and then there are sins of the spirit, like pride and greed and gossip. You'll notice that sins of the flesh tend to get a lot more attention these days, don't they? There is a lurid attractiveness to them because they are easier to name and condemn. For example, there are a lot of pastors who've been fired for stealing church money or having an affair, but how many pastors lose their jobs because they are too prideful or judgmental?

C.S. Lewis says it this way: "The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronising and spoiling sport and back-biting, the pleasures of power, of hatred...that is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute." We are scandalized by sins of the flesh, but Jesus was scandalized by sins of the spirit. He was less concerned about the woman's adultery than he was about the Pharisees' arrogance.

And yet, the Bible doesn't distinguish between the severity of the different sins. As Paul says in Romans, all of us have fallen short of God's glory, and therefore all of us are in need of salvation. But here's the thing: it's a lot easier to feel better about yourself when you can point to someone else's sin, especially a sin of the flesh, and say, "Aha! At least I'm not as bad as that person." And that feeling is the root cause of a lot of sins of the spirit, especially judgment.

There's another great work of art that demonstrates the sin of judgment. In "To Kill a Mockingbird," lawyer Atticus Finch is defending Tom Robinson, an African-American accused of raping a white woman. Atticus is worried Tom will be lynched, so he sits outside Tom's jail cell. Sure enough, a gang of white men arrives to kill Tom. Just as things start to get tense, Atticus's daughter Scout runs over to her dad. She looks at the gang and notices someone she knows, the dad of her friend, Walter. She asks Mr. Cunningham about Walter's trouble with the

law, pointing out his own sins, then says to Mr. Cunningham, “Tell Walter I said Hi.” The mob, recognizing the sinfulness of what they were about to do, turns and leaves. No one was able to cast the first stone.

We could all use a good dose of self-awareness like this, because, if we want to be really honest, we all hold stones in our hands. Do you harbor judgmental thoughts about someone who’s not good enough? Do you have a superior attitude toward someone who’s made poor choices? Have you spewed impatient words in the heat of anger? Do you harbor bitter resentment toward someone who has wronged you? These are all stones we hold, ready to hurl at someone else. Sure, we might tell ourselves that they deserve it or that we’re just telling them the truth in love or that we’re doing it for their own good. It doesn’t matter how much we polish our stone or paint a pretty flower on it. It’s still a stone, and it’s still meant to do damage.

Thomas Jefferson and his friends entered Hamilton’s office with their arms full of stones. They thought they knew what Hamilton had done, and rather than try to help him get back on the right track, they were ready to stone his political career, his marriage, and his reputation. And yet, they were completely wrong about the source of money. How often do we do that? In the absence of facts, how often do we concoct stories about someone that paints them in a negative light? We think we know, when we really don’t know. Everyone has a story that is deeper and more complex than any of us see. Yet, when dealing with someone with whom we disagree or dislike, we tend to default to the version of the story that makes us look the best and them look the worst. And in doing so, we are committing a sin of the spirit, because we are judging them for their actions, while the log still sits in our eyes.

“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.” We have that ability, don’t we? We have the ability to judge, to condemn, to wound. That’s a lot of power. But we also have the ability to offer love, to offer acceptance, to offer hope, the very things offered to us by Jesus, who didn’t throw any stones at us, but instead hung on a cross for us. As it says in John 3:17, Jesus didn’t come down to the world to condemn the world, but to offer salvation through him.

What I appreciate about Hamilton in this song is his willingness to do some serious self-examination and to admit his sin of the flesh. I wonder how our lives would be different if we engaged in the same kind of self-examination and entered into the same kind of confession about our sins of the spirit. It can be oddly comforting to hold that stone, can’t it? But I wonder what we might gain if we drop the stone, and instead open our hands in love? We all have good reason to be judged, don’t we? We all fall short, in flesh and in spirit. Yet, we have been given such extravagant grace by Jesus Christ. We may not deserve it, but it’s ours nonetheless. May we give to others what has been given to us.