

We spend a lot of time in my house listening to the soundtrack of *Hamilton*. There are multiple themes that run through the show, but there are 2 for today: “If you stand for nothing, Burr, what will you fall for?” and the closely related “Talk less, smile more.” In the show, Aaron Burr wants to succeed. He believes that means being liked, fitting in, waiting to see which way the wind of history will blow. Hamilton has some very different opinions. For him, making history is all about careful examination followed by prompt and decisive action. Sure, people will be unhappy with him. But will he have done what is right? One of the blessings of living through turning points in history is the opportunity to see what a difference we can make – individually and collectively.

As Methodists we find ourselves in this impossible position right now: judge not, lest ye be judged. And, as this scripture began “Tell me, why don’t you judge for yourselves what is just?” There is a difference between judgement and discernment. In attempts to avoid judgement we often sacrifice discernment.

It would be easy to skip over the middle of this reading – the part about all of the ‘sinners’ who meet terrible ends. Jesus asks the crowd if they think the people who ‘sinned’ were worse than they, given the terrible ends met in the story – the idea that only people who deserve it get terrible treatment. Here’s the problem with that line of reasoning – it blames victims when they suffer. But since we know that is not the case, since Jesus literally gave his life for a vision that rejected authority and domination, showing the awesome potency of standing for something no matter the sacrifice, we have to look deeper.

Jesus sacrificed his life to show us that it matters if we stand for something. And conversely it matters if we refuse to take a stand. It matters if we reject our

call to discernment. If we fail to discern, we accept injustice insisting that it is 'out of our hands.' That is Pilate's argument. Not Jesus'.

So, what is the difference between judgement and discernment?

Judgement is condemnation: you are unworthy. You are unsavable. Judgement is way beyond our human pay grade. I am so thankful that is not my role. I believe God judges all to be worthy and welcome, sorting out inequity at a scale I cannot comprehend. If I am wrong, I'm sure I'll find out when Christ returns. But I will have done my best to do no harm through judgement in the meantime.

Discernment is Wesleyan living. Know the quadrilateral? \_\_\_\_\_ Right. Scripture, Reason, Experience and Tradition. You are required, *required* to consider all four equally in your life choices. It is not optional. As Methodists, we do not get to wait for others to tell us what to do. We must each discern. We must stand for something or we will fall for anything.

Beloved, just because a person is seeking does not mean they are seeking God. Just because someone calls some awful, hurtful thinking Godly does not make it so. By that thinking nothing we did matters. God would just do the work for us. But I don't recall that scripture. I don't know the passage where Jesus says "I dunno, whatever you want, I'm sure it will be okay."

Of course, God is seeking each of us whether we are seeking back. That's Wesleyan, too: prevenient grace. As a Methodist, I am tasked to invite all to see that God is seeking them, to journey with those who see and want to draw closer (that's Justification by faith, more Wesley), and be guided by our mutual exploration of Scripture, Reason, Experience, and Tradition.

I am very clear that everything that says it is of God is not, and the holiest of coverings can cover the greatest of deceptions. I am very clear that people can

do terrible things and convince themselves that they are righteous. I know I have. It is what we do next that matters: do we see it and choose a better way? How can we choose better if no one will help us? When we permit everything we are not being loving. We are contributing to the spiritual decay that Jesus came to save us from. We are standing with Pilate and denying Christ.

The terrible realization for us is that in trying to welcome everyone and offend no one we may have failed everyone. Our efforts to forgo judgement have given us an excuse to avoid discernment. That is something we must answer for, and repent from, too.

I have been praying my heart out these last two weeks – for a spirit of forgiveness, for a calm center, for understanding of those I disagree with, and here is where I have come to: I believe that those who exclude any of God’s children are not on a pathway to the kin-dom. I believe they are on a pathway built of and leading to empire. I want them to come home. Just as I must repent of my refusal to take a clear stand, I pray they will repent of their desire to maintain the status quo and their own place in hierarchy. I grieve our divisions. And I do not believe that accepting injustice as a valid form of faith serves any of us in producing the transformation of the world for Jesus Christ.

As a denomination we are stuck on a question of the sacred worth of our LGBTQI siblings. Except that makes no sense. God made us all. We are all of sacred worth. And if we are honest, we know that this is about many issues: gender and sexuality, race and national origin, caring for creation. As Christians, all of these questions distill to the question: am I going to serve empire or Christ? I am going to be a well placed Pharisee or a follower of Jesus, calling for justice and love no matter the personal cost. I will choose again and again to stand with

Jesus, knowing that we love everyone, but some will choose to deny that inclusive love. It will not stop my loving, but loving those who do not want to be loved cannot and will not impede my determination to tend the vineyard God placed me into. The parable of the day.

We have tried to fertilize the soil of our sisters and brothers closed hearted and narrow-minded beliefs. We have put all sorts of fruitful kin-dom work aside. In the process we have depleted the soil. We have endangered the entire vineyard. We have given time and enough time. For the good of the vineyard we need to prune to grow. If we follow the metaphor through, I believe that when we prune, seeds will fall. We will till the earth and the seeds that fell from the trees we could not get to bear fruit will grow into whole new trees. We mustn't sacrifice the future trying to hold on to the past. We mustn't destroy the vineyard to save trees which want no saving. We just have to offer good soil and know what is ripe. Love is the best soil.

I am not yet making a judgement about what we should do logistically, but I am increasingly clear on the spirit that should guide us. We must learn from the past and lean into the future. We must live in a way that stands for something. The seeds falling off of those trees of the past? They are our children. And we owe them soil tilled over from hatred and exclusion, fertilized with love and care. We owe them deep planting in discernment and spaces to use what they discover through it. If we build such a vineyard, I believe, truly, that all those who earnestly seek God will come and grow with us. Those we may lose today we may gain tenfold tomorrow. This I do believe. Amen.

