

Sermon: Sometimes You Just Need To Chill
Text: John 15:1-8
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Context: WWPC
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As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

John 15:9

The hit Broadway musical *Hamilton*, and *The West Wing*, the famous TV show about life in the White House, are two of my all-time favorite cultural creations. And it so happens that these two brilliant offerings came together recently in a way that made me deliriously happy.

Lin-Manuel Miranda, the writer of *Hamilton*, and Tommy Kail, who directed the original production, sat down for a guest appearance on *The West Wing Weekly*, a podcast devoted to all things *West Wing*.

They were there to talk about the way the *West Wing* -- particularly its characters and the way it was written and directed by Aaron Sorkin -- had influenced the way they wrote and directed their massive Broadway hit.

It was a wide-ranging conversation but one part that especially caught my attention was the story about how a particular song in the show came to be written.

In preview performances of *Hamilton*, the song was called *One Last Ride*. It was sung by George Washington (played by Chris Jackson) to Alexander Hamilton (played by Lin Miranda himself).

It was meant to be a kind of swan song for President Washington. His way of telling his trusted confidant, and then Secretary of the Treasury, that he was about to exit history's stage and head into retirement.

The problem was the song was about the wrong thing. It focused on Washington's involvement in the Whiskey Rebellion, not on his plan for presidential succession. That later question--of how to make a peaceful transition from his presidency to the next, in this brand new democracy--was one of Washington's great concerns.

So, if they were going to be faithful to the historical record, Miranda and Kail knew they had to change the song. But off-Broadway previews were drawing to a close, and so they're now on a deadline as opening night on Broadway itself was rapidly approaching.

The bigger problem was that Lin-Manuel Miranda suddenly had writer's block.

This guy is a genuine genius. He is as prodigious as he is brilliant. He had just written a massive new musical, featuring more than 40 original numbers. But suddenly he just can't find the groove for a rewrite of this one critically important song.

Then one day, with the clock ticking, Tommy Kail is rehearsing with the company out on stage.

Lin emerges from the little room in the theater where he does his re-writes and confesses that he's stuck. He just can't find a way into this song. Try as he might, he can't find an opening that will lead him into this part of Washington's story.

Off the top of his head Tommy mentions that time Washington spoke about just wanting some time to sit under his own vine and fig tree.

I'm pretty sure Tommy Kail only knew what Washington said, not where it came from. But the phrase sounded unusual enough he thought it might help get Lin's creative juices flowing.

And it did. Lin did a little research on the phrase, and discovered that it was from the Bible.

It came from the passage Fritz read earlier from the prophet from Micah, in fact. Equipped with this knowledge, Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote a whole new song. This one was called not *One Last Ride*, but *One Last Time*.

And here is one specific verse that came of it:

Like the scripture says:

*“Everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree
And no one shall make them afraid.”
They’ll be safe in the nation we’ve made
I wanna sit under my own vine and fig tree
A moment alone in the shade
At home in this nation we’ve made
One last time*

Now, let me repeat that this did actually happen--not just the part about Lin-Manuel Miranda and Tommy Kail, but the part about George Washington.

America’s first great general, the country’s first President and Commander in Chief, the great and legendary George Washington himself--well, it turns out he just wanted some rest.

After fighting the British and helping to defeat them against all odds, after helping to found this brand new country, after helping liberate the 13 colonies from monarchical rule and helping this audacious and fledgling experiment called America take wing and begin to fly, after all of that, well, George Washington just wanted some time to relax in the shade, to sit under his own vine and fig tree.

I say this because, in our own way, some of us here today might be feeling like we, too, would love to grab some time, relaxing in the shade. In fact, I know some of us are feeling that way.

And strange as this may sound, we’re feeling this way for similar reasons, smaller in scale but still similar: because we’ve been fighting hard for our country and we’re tired. And so we’d love to just chill out in the shade for a little bit, as it were.

And I know this, in turn, because of a conversation I had after worship a couple weeks ago.

After most everyone had cleared out of the sanctuary, someone took me aside for a private tet-a-tet.

“I finally know how I feel after I listen to your sermons,” this person said to me.

My mind immediately began racing ahead to the words I was just sure she was going to say: inspired, moved, encouraged, motivated, hopeful -- I figured it had to be at least one of these words, if not some combination of them, if not all of them.

“Oh really? Do tell,” I said, keen to hear her say the specific words of affirmation that we preachers live for, words that help us know that the time and effort we invest in writing sermons and feeding our flock does in fact help nurture and sustain the people who hear them.

“Well, you make me so mad!” she confessed.

Balloon officially popped.

I think I might have nodded understandingly, a non-verbal signal that I wanted her to say more. This saved me from having to tell her outright that I wanted to hear more, which, in that moment, would technically not have been true.

“Yeah,” she said, “after you’re done preaching, I always feel like I should be doing more. Like I’m some sort of slacker for not being more active.”

Obviously this was not the kind of feedback I expected, or even wanted. But I could not stop thinking about it.

Mostly because I knew this kind person had made not just a fair point, but an important one.

It feels to me and to most of us in this room like our country has gone a little bit bananas over the last year or so.

And the craziness and corruption in play out there--the ongoing assault on the poor, the assault on our health care, on our environment, on immigrants and refugees, the assault on our values--it all just feels relentless, and perhaps a little overwhelming.

Looking back over the last weeks and months, I realized it’s been a steady stream of responding in here to what’s going on out there.

So her point was well taken. But with all due and gracious respect, isn’t that also sort of the point?

Coming to worship to hear about how we as people of faith might do justice and love mercy and make peace and wage hope and love our neighbors and even our enemies, well I think most of us would agree that all of this is a central part of what church is about.

It's certainly a central part of what Christian discipleship is about. As the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner once said, "The Church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning."

Mission is the fuel that energizes us. And we're going to hear more about a specific way to be engaged in such mission, following worship today. So I hope you can stay for that.

But it is also true that fires burn out over time if they are themselves not supplied with fuel.

Which brings us to our text for today. Both of these things seem to be in play in this short passage. Jesus admonishes his followers to be fruitful. Here, in some of the last words he will say to his disciples, he exhorts them to continue doing the work that he's been doing all along.

He's depending on them to carry out his mission. To help save the world by building out the kingdom of God in the here and now. To visit the sick and welcome the stranger and to make all people feel loved and welcomed. To speak truth to power and to push back on evil.

He then warns his listeners that if they don't do this, if they don't carry on with his work, if they grow weary of well-doing and stop being fruitful, they'll be cut from the team, cut from the vine.

I don't know what that means, exactly, but I'm sure it can't be good.

So all of that is in play in this short passage. But Jesus also seems to understand how hard this work is, and what a toll it takes. That being fruitful requires sustained effort over a long period of time, and that this effort can be exhausting.

And so he extends to his listeners what at first sounds like a gracious, if slightly odd, invitation.

I am the vine, he says. Abide in me.

At first it sounds like his way of saying, come chill out in the shade. But the comment is actually given in the imperative tense. It's less of an invitation and more of a command.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

In other words, don't just sit under the vine and relax in the shade. Plug into the vine. Stay connected to the sources of your life and your energy.

Which sounds great. But what does that mean, exactly? And how might one do this?

I think it means, find your holy place and go there.

I think it means, find the things that give you a sense of God's presence and of the divine, and do those things.

Or to flip that just a bit: do the things you love and that give you joy, because if you do those things, you'll find God there.

Because, as Frederick Buechner reminds us, if you find the place where your deep joy meets the world's deep need, that's the place you're called to be. That's the work you're called to do.

And it doesn't have to involve traveling to Washington to join huge marches for some cause you believe in, or traveling to Raleigh and getting arrested for protesting in the capital.

Mind you, it mean that. It might mean signing up for alerts about deportation actions and turning up to stand in solidarity with our neighbors whose status in this country is at risk, and who are at risk of being separated from their children and spouses.

But it also might mean reading stories to children at the library. It might mean growing vegetables in your garden, and then maybe donating some extra tomatoes and zucchinis to a food pantry.

It might mean joining a group of singers who volunteer to share the gift of their voices and their music with patients under hospice care.

And sometimes it might mean doing nothing at all. Just go sit by a waterfall and let its steady, soothing sound flush the toxins out of your head.

Ordinarily I like to have the last word in my sermons. But given where we started this morning, I'm going to give the last word today to Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Because in addition to being a creative genius, he too is fighting hard to save the soul of this country. He knows how hard this work is. How important it is. And how tiring it can be.

And so this is the message he sent out yesterday to his 2.3 million followers on Twitter:

G'morning! This feeling will pass. This workload will pass. These people will pass. But look at you, with the gift of memory. You can time travel to the good stuff just by closing your eyes & breathing. Then come right back to now, eyes up for the good stuff ahead. You magic thing.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.