

LIVE YOUR LIFE, TELL YOUR STORY
Lessons from Stage and Screen: *Hamilton*
Galatians 1:13-24

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Memorial Day didn't become an official holiday until 1971, but the observance began a hundred years before, as people marked the end of the Civil War and honored those who had died in those battles. Once called Decoration Day, Memorial Day is an occasion to remember those who have lost their lives in service. And it is one of those days which has become, also, simply, a day to remember. A day to remember our past. A day to remember those we have lost - whether military or otherwise. A day to think about remembering. Who do we remember? And how do we want to be remembered?

A few years ago on this day, this church dedicated our own Memorial Garden which has become a place for sacred memories.

In our passage for today, the apostle Paul talks about his life. He acknowledges what everyone knows - that when he was young, he persecuted Christians. He refers to the dramatic encounter in which he himself becomes convinced of the presence of Christ and becomes a Christian himself. And then he talks about his work as an evangelist, spreading the faith, establishing churches, encouraging young Christian communities. He writes with a bit of an edge in his voice, as if he is disputing other people who claim to have more knowledge of his life than he does. At one point, he puts it this way, "In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!" It's as if Paul is saying, "I know my life story better than anyone else. I know what I've said and what I've done. I'll tell my story myself." We studied the book of Galatians in Bible Study this spring and at several points in the book, we said, "We wish we knew exactly what he's arguing against," for clearly Paul is writing a counter-argument, one side of a debate. Only Paul's writings were preserved so all we can do is guess as to what the other people were saying to him and about him.

Has it ever happened to you, that someone else tries to tell you what you think or what you feel? I don't think there's anything worse than being falsely accused of something you did not do. When I read books or news stories about people trying to fight

for their innocence, it almost makes me physically ill. Your story is your character, your integrity. When other people try to claim it, it is like someone stealing something very precious from you.

On the other hand, it can be incredibly useful to have people whom you trust who can give you constructive criticism and feedback. When it's done in love, when it's done for all the right reasons, people we trust can bring out the best in us.

The last song in the musical, "Hamilton", is called "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story". I haven't seen "Hamilton" yet. I was in Chicago this spring and looked into buying tickets for me and my son. It's been playing for several months there so I thought maybe the excitement would have died down, taking the prices down with it. I was wrong. Oh, there were tickets available, but for \$350 each. So I haven't seen "Hamilton" yet but I continue to be intrigued by it. Who would have ever imagined that someone would read an 800-page biography of the first Secretary of the Treasury of the United States — and then be inspired to write a musical based on the book? (Not to mention setting it to rap and hip-hop music) (Not to mention that it has become one of Broadway's most successful and well-acclaimed musicals!)

Alexander Hamilton may be an American hero in some ways, but his life was far from perfect. He had at least one very public affair, and other aspects of his personality would have made him a difficult husband. But his wife Eliza, in the end, forgives him of all of his faults. She lives 50 years after his death. She lives such a remarkable 50 years that some people say she deserves a musical all her own. She paid off the debt her husband left, finished raising their children, was deeply involved in charity work - including the founding of an orphanage - and dedicated herself to preserving her husband's legacy. If she hadn't spent so many years reorganizing his papers, letters and other writings, there wouldn't have been material for an 800-page biography.

When Eliza Hamilton is hurt and angry, she says to Alexander, "I'm removing myself from your narrative." After his death, she says, "I put myself back in the narrative...I interview every soldier who fought by your side...I try to make sense of your thousands of pages of writings."

Who is remembered? And why? And for what? How do we want to be remembered? These are Memorial Day questions. And they are spiritual questions.

Some of you have probably heard of Barbara Brown Taylor, the preacher and author. Her last book, Learning to Walk in the Dark, was featured on the cover of Time magazine. In 2014, Time magazine named her one of the 100 most influential people in the world. I heard her speak at a conference earlier this month. When the person who introduced her mentioned that Time magazine list, Taylor said, "My nephews were very impressed...not so much that I was on the list, but that I was on the list with Beyonce."

In her presentation a few weeks ago, she said this, "Listening to our lives is one of the most important spiritual disciplines." What does that mean, to listen to your life? It means paying attention, for one thing. Taking the time to reflect on your life. Where do you see God at work in your life? What are you doing that feels most authentic to you, that brings you the most joy? Are you spending a lot of time doing things that feel completely meaningless?

I watched the sermons from last week's Youth Sunday service and I want to thank our confirmation students for taking on such a topic as silence. They know that living well takes time, and intentionality. It is countercultural to choose silence over noise, quiet over distractions.

Looking at your life, with kindness, without judgment, is not a selfish act, even though it may seem self-absorbed at first. True reflection on your life will allow you to look at others and see them as real human beings, not caricatures, not stereotypes, but real human beings with their own story. Barbara Brown Taylor travels a lot - she writes books and goes on book tours. She's on demand as a preacher and lecturer. So she spends a lot of time in airports. She says she practices attentiveness in airports. She notices people, and instead of summing them up as one type of person or another, she makes a spiritual practice of paying attention to them, until their humanity is as vivid as her own.

When we live as our most authentic selves, becoming the people God intends us to be, it will not make us self-centered. It will ground us in such a way that we are fully free to be of service to others, loving others in the most healthy way possible.

In the spirit of honesty and authenticity, I want to share with you today that I am really troubled by the struggles faced by some of our young people and young families. There are so many blessings and benefits of living in this modern technological age but we are also only beginning to grasp some of the challenges. When you are growing up, or raising your family in the age of social media, your life has pressures different from that of any other generation. The term is “curating your life”. Yes, just as a person who works in a museum curates an art exhibit, choosing this or that painting, that sculpture here, that piece of pottery there, to create a room that looks just so - a room that conveys a certain image — people now curate their lives on social media. They pick and choose which pictures to post, and those pictures can be touched up in any number of ways. Our lives can be made to look however we want them. Do you want your image to say, “Happy Family”? Can do. Don’t take pictures of your children screaming at each other. Don’t put it on Facebook when you stomp upstairs after yelling at your spouse. Few people curate their worst moments. Few people put it out on Twitter when they just binged on a whole box of Girl Scout thin mint cookies or just had a few too many beers. The result is that other people’s lives look perfect.

Social scientists are beginning to study the effect of social media on the lives of our children. Without a doubt, constantly comparing their lives to others is leading to more anxiety and depression. I tell our young people and families all the time, “Don’t compare your insides to someone else’s outside curated lives.” It’s just not reality.

Technology and social media are not going away, so we need to learn how to live with them. We need to learn how to live healthy lives - psychological and spiritually healthy lives. We need to create a culture, right here in this church family, where people are free to talk about how hard this is. How countercultural it is to put limits on social media use and exposure, as well as the use of other technologies - how can they be used for good and not harm? It’s hard to be countercultural, to go against the norm. It’s also necessary.

I love this wisdom from Howard Thurman, the civil rights leader, preacher, author and educator. In his commencement address to Spelman College in 1980, he said

this...I'm going to excerpt portions of his speech which is entitled, "The Sound of the Genuine":

There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born...

You are the only you that has ever lived...and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls...

There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself and sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds of signals...and in the midst of all of this you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through to you...

The sound of the genuine is flowing through you...the only true guide that you will ever have, and if you don't have that you don't have a thing.

Cultivate the discipline of listening to the sound of the genuine in yourself.

Now if I hear the sound of the genuine in me, and if you hear the sound of the genuine in you, I see in me what you see in me, and the wall that separates and divides will disappear, and we will become one, because the sound of the genuine makes the same music.

There is in every person that which waits, waits, waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in herself. There is that in every person that waits—waits and listens—for the sound of the genuine in other people. And when these two sounds come together, this is the music God heard when [God] said, "Let us make humankind in our image."

On this Memorial Day, listen to the sound of the genuine in yourself, telling you that God created you to be the unique person you are, that God loves you unconditionally, wants the very best for you - a life of joy, meaning and purpose. Don't be afraid to be different, to be countercultural. Live your life and tell your story.