

What Divides Us?

I'm a fan of the musical *Hamilton*.¹ In fact, I watched it for the fourth time on Sunday. This sung and rapped musical tells the story of Alexander Hamilton, the first United States Secretary of the Treasury, from his orphaned upbringing in the West Indies and his participation in the revolutionary war and founding of the US to his death in a duel with Aaron Burr, the third Vice President of the US.

Each time I watch *Hamilton* bits of the songs keep popping into my mind throughout the following days. This week, it was the song *It's Quiet Uptown*.² This song comes right after Eliza and Alexander Hamilton's 19-year old son, Philip, is killed in a duel defending his father's honor. Their son's death comes while Alexander and Eliza are estranged due to Alexander's infidelity and the public scandal that followed. The scene tracks the devastated parents as they go through the unimaginable. The song is sung by Eliza's sister Angelica, Alexander, and the ensemble cast. This is how it begins:

Angelica:

*There are moments that the words don't reach
There is suffering too terrible to name
You hold your child as tight as you can
And push away the unimaginable
The moments when you're in so deep
It feels easier to just swim down*

Ensemble:

*The Hamiltons move uptown
And learn to live with the unimaginable*

Alexander:

*I spend hours in the garden
I walk alone to the store
And it's quiet uptown
I never liked the quiet before
I take the children to church on Sunday
A sign of the cross at the door
And I pray
That never used to happen before*

Ensemble:

*If you see him in the street,
Walking by himself,
Talking to himself, have pity.*

Alexander:

Philip, you would like it uptown, it's quiet uptown

¹ *Hamilton: An American Musical* by Lin-Manuel Miranda

² *It's Quiet Uptown* by Lin-Manuel Miranda, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NM9WoCX1jnU>

Ensemble:

*He is working through the unimaginable.
His hair has gone gray,
He passes every day,
They say he walks the length of the city.*

Alexander:

You knock me out, I fall apart

Ensemble:

Can you imagine?

The song continues with Alexander expressing his grief, wishing he could trade places with his son, admitting his faults, and seeking reconciliation with his wife. Angelica and the ensemble tell us what happens next.

Angelica:

*There are moments that the words don't reach
There is a grace too powerful to name
We push away what we can never understand
We push away the unimaginable
They are standing in the garden
Alexander by Eliza's side
She takes his hand
It's quiet uptown*

Ensemble:

*Forgiveness
Can you imagine?
Forgiveness
Can you imagine?
If you see him in the street
Walking by her side,
Talking by her side, have pity
They are going through the unimaginable*

This song resonates with me. In many ways it seems we're going through the unimaginable. It's unimaginable that we're not all meeting together in this building; that we aren't singing and eating together. It's unimaginable that this began six months ago and could continue for another six.

It's unimaginable that schools can't operate as usual. It's unimaginable that people can't visit loved ones in hospitals and care facilities; that families may not be able to get together for Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's unimaginable that people have lost jobs; that businesses are going bankrupt.

It's unimaginable that fires are devouring homes and towns and killing people and animals. It's unimaginable that people fear for their lives because of their race, ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, gender, orientation, or location. It's unimaginable that there are so many things that divide us – in families, churches, countries, and the world. And yet, maybe division isn't so unimaginable.

Even the musical *Hamilton* is divisive. Lin-Manuel Miranda says it's a story about American then, told by America now. His intention is to give voice to people who have been silenced; to bring people together. The show's popularity demonstrates some progress toward

his goal of unity, but, of course, it's brought disagreement as well. Our former president is a big fan. Our current president is not. Some critics say it doesn't honor our founding fathers enough; while others say it glorifies them too much without highlighting their flaws enough.

Division is a story as old as time. Think of the stories from the book of Genesis that we're hearing during storytelling. Lot and his family traveled to a new land with Abraham and Sarah, but ended up separating from them because of strife between Abraham's people and Lot's people. We know that the descendants of Abraham's sons, Isaac and Ishmael, didn't get along. Next week we'll hear about Jacob and Esau, feuding brothers whose parents took sides in their division. The week after that is Joseph, a favored son whose brothers envied and despised him.

And, of course, we find division in the letter Paul wrote to the new Christians and young church in Corinth. We read the first chapter last week. Let's continue on with the next three chapters. I don't anticipate that we'll read the entire letter together during our journey with Corinthians, but I continue to think it's important to read long portions together, especially at the beginning, to get the flavor of Paul's writing and put what he says into context.

Remember that there was much diversity among the Corinthian Christians – Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, slave and free, of low and prominent social status. Also remember Paul was dismayed to hear that people within the church were aligning themselves with prominent Christians – Paul, Apollos, and Cephas – rather than being united in following Jesus. As we read, listen for what Paul says about wisdom, division, and ministry. The words I'm reading are primarily from *The Voice*,³ with a few adaptations.

When I came to you, my brothers and sisters, I did not pose as an expert with all the answers. I did not pretend to explain the mystery of God with eloquent speech and human wisdom. I claimed to know nothing with certainty other than the reality that Jesus is the Anointed One, the Liberating King, who was crucified on our behalf. I was moved to utter despair during my time with you. I would find myself trembling in dread and fear. The sermons I preached were not delivered with the kind of persuasive elegance some have come to expect, but they were effective because I relied on God's Spirit to demonstrate God's power. If this were not so, your faith would be based on human wisdom and not the power of God.

However, in the presence of mature believers, we do impart true wisdom—not the phony wisdom typical of this rebellious age or of the hostile powers who rule this age. Despite what you may think, these ruling spirits are losing their grip on this world. But we do impart God's mysterious and hidden wisdom. Before the ages began, God graciously decided to use His wisdom for our glory. This wisdom has not been grasped by the ruling powers of this age; if they had understood, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory. But as the Scriptures say, "No eye has ever seen and no ear has ever heard and it has never occurred to the human heart all the things God prepared for those who love Him."

God has shown us these profound and startling realities through the Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep mysteries of God. Who can see into a person's heart and know their thoughts? Only the spirit that dwells within. In the same way, the thoughts of God are known only by God's Spirit. You must know that we have not received the spirit of this rebellious and broken world but the Spirit that comes from God, so that we may experience and comprehend the gifts that come from God. We do not speak of these gifts of God in words shaped by human wisdom; we speak in words crafted by the Spirit because our collective judgment on spiritual matters is accessible to those who have the Spirit. But a person who denies spiritual

³ 1 Corinthians 2-4, *The Voice*, Thomas Nelson, 2012.

realities will not accept the things that come through the Spirit of God; they all sound like foolishness to him. He is incapable of grasping them because they are disseminated, discerned, and valued by the Spirit. A person who walks by the Spirit examines everything, sizing it up and seeking out truth. But no one is able to examine or size up that kind of spiritual person, for the Scripture asks, "Does anyone know the mind of the Lord well enough to become His advisor?" But we do possess the mind of the Anointed One.

My brothers and sisters, I cannot address you as people who walk by the Spirit; I have to speak to you as people who tend to think in merely human terms, as spiritual infants in the Anointed One. I nursed you with milk, as a mother would feed her baby, because you were not, and still are not, developed enough to digest complex spiritual food. And here's why: you are still living in the flesh, not in the Spirit. How do I know? Are you fighting with one another? Are you comparing yourselves to others and becoming consumed with jealousy? Then it sounds like you are living in the flesh, no different from the rest who live by the standards of this rebellious and broken world. If one of you is saying, "I am with Paul," and the other says, "I am with Apollos," aren't you like everybody else? So who is Apollos really? Or Paul for that matter? We are only servants, agents who led you to faith, and the Lord commissioned each of us to do a particular job.

My job was to plant the seed, and Apollos was called to water it. Any growth comes from God, so the ones who water and plant have nothing to brag about. God, who causes the growth, is the only One who matters. The one who plants is no greater than the one who waters; both will be rewarded based on their work. We are gardeners and field workers laboring with God. You are the vineyard, the garden, the house where God dwells. Like a skilled architect and master builder, I laid a foundation based upon God's grace given to me. Now others will come along to build on the foundation. Each serves in a different way and is to build upon it with great care. There is, in fact, only one foundation, and no one can lay any foundation other than Jesus the Anointed. As others build on the foundation (whether with gold, silver, gemstones, wood, hay, or straw), the quality of each person's work will be revealed in time as it is tested by fire. If a person's work stands the test of fire, they will be rewarded. If a person's work is consumed by the fire, their reward will be lost but they will be spared, rescued from the fire. Don't you understand that together you form a temple to the living God and God's Spirit lives among you? If someone comes along to corrupt, vandalize, and destroy the temple of God, you can be sure that God will see to it that that one meets destruction because the temple of God is sacred. You, together, are God's temple.

Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks they are wise in matters pertaining to this world, they are going to be really disappointed. In fact, one must be deemed a fool by worldly standards in order to become truly wise because the wisdom of this rebellious and broken world looks like foolishness when put next to God. So it stands in Scripture, "He catches the wise in their deceitful plotting." And the Scriptures add, "The Lord knows the highest thoughts of the wise, and they are worthless." So there is no reason for anyone to boast in human leaders. You already have it all. So whether it is Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life or death, the present or the future—it all belongs to you. You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

Rather than power brokers, think of us as servants of Jesus, the Anointed One, the Liberating King, caretakers of the mysteries of God. Because we are in this particular role, it is especially important that we are people of fidelity and integrity. It makes little difference to me how you or any human court passes judgment on me. I even resist the temptation to compare

myself to the ever-changing human standard. Although I am not aware of any flaw that might exclude me from this divine service, that's not the reason I stand acquitted—the only supreme judge, our Lord, will examine me in the proper time. So resist the temptation to act as judges before all the evidence is in. When the Lord comes, He will draw our buried motives, thoughts, and deeds (even things we don't know or admit to ourselves) out of the dark shadows of our hearts into His light. When this happens, the voice of God will speak to each of us the only praise that will ever matter.

Right now, brothers and sisters, the best thing I can do for you is to apply these principles to the situation with Apollos and me. Maybe we can show you the meaning of the saying, "not beyond the things written." If you learn that, perhaps none of you will swell with pride because you fall into the seductive trap of pitting one against the other. Is there any reason to consider yourselves better than others? What do you have that you didn't receive? If you received it as a gift, why do you boast like it is something you achieved on your own?

Now let's see if I have it straight. You suppose that you already have all you need. You already are rich and prosperous. And without us you've already begun to reign like kings. To be honest, I wish you did reign so that we could reign with you because it seems to me that God has put God's emissaries at the end of the line, like convicts in their final walk to certain death. We have become a spectacle to the rest of the world—to all people and heaven's messengers. We are nothing but fools for the cause of the Anointed One while you are wise in Him. Am I right? We are feeble and tired while you are mighty and full of life. You are well respected by others while we're treated as contemptuous creatures by pretty much everyone everywhere. Up to this very minute, we are famished, we are thirsty, and our clothes are shabby, practically rotted to pieces. We are homeless, hapless wanderers. But still we labor, working with our hands to meet our needs because, despite all of this, when a fist is raised against us, we respond with a blessing; when we face violence and persecution, we stay on mission; and when others choose taunts and slander against us, we speak words of encouragement and reconciliation. We're treated as the scum of the earth—and I am not talking in the past tense; I mean today! We're the scraps of society, nothing more than the foulest human rubbish.

I am not telling you all this so that you'll feel guilty or be ashamed of how you have acted. I am only trying to warn you, just as a father would warn his children. You may have 10,000 instructors in the faith Christ, but you have only one father. In Jesus the Anointed I have become your father through my efforts in spreading the good news. So as your father in the faith, I want to encourage you to live as I have lived. Imitate my life. This is one of the reasons I sent Timothy to be with you. He is my dearly loved and faithful child in the Lord. His mission is to remind you of the way I experience life in the Anointed. In all the churches everywhere I go, I teach the same lessons the same way, and I live out those lessons. But the reality is, some of you have put yourselves on pedestals and live like you are high above the rest—it's as if you assumed I would not return to confront your misguided pride. But I am coming. Lord willing, I will be with you soon. Then I will know what power is backing those arrogant folks and their words. The kingdom of God is not a realm of grandiose talk; it is a realm of power. So tell me what you want. Should I visit you, rod in hand ready to discipline a crew of self-important people; or should I embrace you, love you, and gently teach you as we celebrate the blessings of God together?

I wonder what stands out to you from Paul's words. What did you hear him say about wisdom, division, and ministry? I haven't experienced a lot of division within this congregation. There have been disagreements, of course, and sometimes people have stayed away from church

for awhile to give relationships time to heal. There are people who have come and gone, sometimes because they didn't think this congregation was a good fit for them. But there haven't been any recent major schisms. (Perhaps I'm unaware of or have turned a blind eye on things that divide us.) And this unity – not uniformity, but unity – allows us to work together. As Paul says: We are gardeners working together for God, each serving in our own way.

My hope, my prayer, is that we can honor the diversity among us without alienating each other. This is especially true right now when a pandemic, natural disasters, protests, and a presidential campaign are happening simultaneously. Campaigns always get nasty. This was true when our country began and has continued every four years since then.

I'm registered as an Independent. I've voted for both Republican and Democratic candidates throughout my adult years, but I admit I've tended to lean more one way than the other. I know that in this congregation we have people who belong to different parties and will vote for different candidates. I've noticed that the people who are most vocal in our public worship tend to express views that are more in line with Democrats than with Republicans. My hope is that we will express our concerns about issues and events without denigrating particular groups or disparaging specific people.

As followers of Christ, we can show that it's possible to disagree politically and still be part of the same church. We can work together to meet the needs of our community and our world, even though we are not meeting together in the same building. We can accept and extend a grace too powerful to name. In the words of Paul, when a fist is raised against us, we can respond with a blessing; when we face violence and persecution, we can stay on mission; and when others choose taunts and slander against us, we can speak words of encouragement and reconciliation.

With God's help may it be so. Amen.