

To Give One's Heart To

John 3:11-21

©Rev. Sarah Cooper Searight
Swarthmore Presbyterian Church
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In the opening scene for the hit Broadway musical "Hamilton", a young, fiery, fresh off the boat immigrant from Haiti, Alexander Hamilton meets an equally young, composed, and already accomplished Aaron Burr. As the plot goes, the two find out they share some in common, specifically that they are both orphans looking for a way to make their names known in this chaotic world. But from the very start we learn that in one significant way, they are quite different—revealed here by a word of advice from Burr to Hamilton, "Talk less, smile more, don't let them know what you're against or what you're for. You want to get ahead? Fools who run their mouths off wind up dead." *It doesn't sound nearly as catchy when I say it as it does when they sing it...*

Hamilton, first confused, soon offers this in quick-witted response:
"If you stand for nothing, Burr, what will you fall for?"

Here is set up for the audience the basic tension throughout the story. Burr is the careful, cautious, perhaps a bit slippery one. Hamilton is the impassioned, quick-to-act, definitely a bit hot-headed one. Hamilton will fight for what he wants, what he believes in. Burr will be more cautious, hold more close to his chest, and be less able to pin down. As Lin Manuel Miranda, creator of Hamilton, drives it; our sympathies go with Hamilton. We like decisiveness in our protagonists.

As Hamilton infamously sings, "I'm not throwing away my shot."
For notoriety. For wealth. For a legacy.

How much this speaks to us in these days, when the hard line is drawn across every surface. One is either liberal or conservative; pro-Second Amendment or anti-gun; isolationist or willing to let anyone in; saved or condemned; enlightened or woefully ignorant. The clarity of a hardline position is easiest to categorize, the rhetoric of a firebrand is most memorable.

I'm not sure that we think of the writer of John's Gospel as a firebrand, perhaps we reserve that space in our minds for Mark. Yet, simply understood, the writer of John is doing what any good firebrand does, that is, on one hand reassuring and on the other, pushing towards a decision-point.

It was written this way with intent. David reminded me this week that some call it the martyr's gospel; for it speaks to a community of first-century Jewish Christians who were being expelled from the synagogues for their confession of Jesus as Messiah.

Think about this. It would be as if some among you now came to a different way of understanding than the whole. That friends and family of these, we as church leaders then said essentially, that this small group must go. Their affirmations are outside of this community, and no matter how long they have been a part of it, they are no longer now.

We know stories of congregations where this has happened. Perhaps we've even experienced it first-hand. Most recently around affirmations of ordination for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender children of God. Not so long ago, around acceptance of women in leadership. The church I served in Louisiana nearly split wide open when in the 1960s, the Session came to the point of a vote that would not allow African Americans to integrate worship; thanks be to Jesus that the brave pastor at the time stepped up and stopped it, saying that the moment the Session agreed to it, he would resign then and there.

It may not be that the pastor is the head of the church [that's Jesus' job], but a good pastor is near to the heartbeat of it, anyway.

This beloved community of John's Gospel was all of the sudden facing utter dislocation. Their faith community no longer accepted them. Their social status was lost. Their relationship with friends and family was severed, and all of the rituals and festivals and public life of which they had once been intimately a part, was closed to them.

What were they to do?

Where and on what could they stand?

Had they made the right confession?

The passage we've just heard is one that speaks into the core of this crisis between the Gospel-writer's community and the synagogue leaders.

That is, what does it mean to confess Jesus as the Christ.

Ensclosed here is the text.

The one interpreted so often to push towards that decision-moment.

"For God so loved the world..." Well, you know it.

The one held up on placards or written in eye black on a football player's cheekbone. The one that is both beautifully reassuring for some AND has been used for years to draw a line in the sand for others. The one thrown out into a packed sanctuary with feverish hope that it might boomerang and return the hearts of many to the front to be received into the arms of mercy, born yet again amid fervent prayer and promises of reform.

For God so loved the world...gave his only Son...that whomsoever *believes* in him... Light and dark. Yes or no. In or out. You stand with us or you act against us. These dichotomies make sense because from as far back as when these words were written, it was actually critical that a line was drawn. The people for whom these words were written had to know that they had stood firm for something. That their sacrifice of place and livelihood and community was for something.

Yet for so many years, for far too long, we have under-interpreted this to mean that God's love is somehow contingent upon us. It's an easy step from here, then to say that the decision point sits within us. Sure, God gives grace but really, we choose, finally and fully for God; or we don't, and suffer the consequences.

To believe, we think this says, must mean commitment to a firm understanding of, an intellectual assent. Believe, if you get it, or do not believe, if you don't: the hard line is easily there.

And so go generations of heart-giving, belief-capable people who are turned off from the church because, well, because they just can't reconcile immaculate conception with what we know of biology, and they're are not quite sure they can affirm bodily resurrection, and what about Jesus descending into hell? Also, if God's love is conditional upon all of these things, they're out. The price is too high. They are unwilling to pay.

"If you stand for nothing, Burr, what will you fall for?"

Oh well then, we as a church [a bit panicked] say, let's smooth it out. Let's take the parts that are confusing, difficult to reconcile, and push them under the rug. Put up onto a high shelf anything that even remotely sounds pre-enlightenment: the creeds, the confessions, everything that might make someone ask a question or venture a doubt. Also, if God's grace is so free for the taking, why church at all? The bar is too low. We can't discern church from a community of friends.

"Don't let them know what you're against or what you're for."

This is where it seems we have come, and it's been a long time coming, as an institution that invites a commitment to belief in a world that is more and more skeptical of what we always told them it meant to believe.

Poet Kathleen Norris journals her evolution of understanding and coming to belief, and so invites a different perspective. From the immediate, hard line, born-again variety, to a journey knowing. She begins, "I

find it sad to consider that belief has become a scary word, because at its Greek root, 'to believe' simply means 'to give one's heart to'. Thus, if we can determine what it is we give our heart to, then we will know what it is we believe." She goes on to lift up the place of memory, of patience, of repetition, of worship, of acceptance of doubt, all as part and parcel of belief and comes to conclude that "Fortunately, believing, like writing, is more process than product, and is not, strictly speaking, a goal-oriented activity. There is no time limit."ⁱ

The writer of the Gospel of John is affirming for two very different communities that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, yes that is for sure, and still further, that Jesus Christ is the center of God's will for the created world. This is a decisive-moment, no doubt, but it is one that pushes all who hear it to broaden rather than to restrict.

To believe that Jesus is the Christ is to affirm that God desires to be with us, that God was willing to go to the farthest lengths to know us intimately. To believe that Jesus is the Christ is not to say that God is restricted on how God reveals Godself or by what name God is called, rather it is to give our hearts to spending our whole lives in search of just how much God cares for us as individuals and for this whole created world. To believe and give our heart to God who defies expectation, is to repent from drawing the hard line and defining ourselves and others as either/or.

Our decision to believe, to give our heart to God and revealed in Jesus Christ, does not pull on the last of the few purse strings of God. It does not reveal a scarcity in God's economy of grace and love, but rather turns the light on our own scarce resource of trust. Our decision to believe is prefaced on God's action of grace, and God's acts of grace are magnified by our decision to believe, to give our heart to the things of God; the people of God; the kingdom of God, that God is still working out.

In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus shows us the way to believe. It is to wrestle with power, to acknowledge doubt, to stand firm for the outcast, to push institutions—religious and civic—to be better than they are, to allow others to care for you, to defy easy categories, to make people uncomfortable, to make people feel loved, to sacrifice, to live. That to which we give our hearts, expects this much of us and more.

So we have food for the journey. Bread and juice, simple but sustaining. It was enough for the Israelites. It was enough for the disciples. It was enough for Jesus the Christ. May it be enough for us. Lord, we believe, help our unbelief. Amen.

ⁱ Norris, Kathleen. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. (New York, NY: Riverhead Books), 62-68.