

Stand at the Center

The event of the summer here in Cleveland has been *Hamilton*, the Broadway production and winner of 11 Tony Awards, the astounding hip-hop style musical about Alexander Hamilton that will have its last performance in Cleveland soon. It is a unique combination of history, music, poetry, and drama. Yet it has roots that go back as far as classic Greek theatre: the tragedy, the story of the heroic character with a tragic flaw. Was Hamilton selfishly seeking fame and success (“I am not throwing away my shot”) or was he selfless (against Aaron Burr he aims his dueling pistol at the sky)? The online debate rages. From Achilles to Macbeth to modern heroes and heroines fictional and real, their tragic flaw leads to their downfall. This literary device of the tragic flaw was introduced way back by Aristotle and the Greek word for it is *hamartia*, a weakness, an error in judgment, an act that misses the mark. Hamartia is used throughout the Bible in the original Greek where we have usually translated it as “sin”.

In today’s Gospel a tragic flaw weaves through the narrative. Many supposed disciples object to Jesus’ claim to be the bread of life: “Jesus, what you are saying is too hard to take. We can’t accept this!” And they walked away. Oh, did they ever miss the mark. What error in judgment. Sometimes the world is more reluctant to accept holiness than sinfulness. Only Peter seems to get it. Peter, who has more than his share of tragic flaws, stands tall here: “Master, where would we go? Only you have those words of eternal life. Yes, you are our bread of life.” Everyone else was looking for the magician who could turn water into wine and feed thousands with a couple loaves of bread. Their view was too shallow. Hamartia. But it began to dawn on Peter here that Jesus is the center of it all. Accepting that and choosing to participate in Jesus’ life would be sharing in the very life of God. Peter trusted he was hearing words of Spirit and words of life. Peter had no idea how it would all happen but he knew that somehow it would. That’s what faith is, sorting through all the externals and the noise, all our tragic flaws, and finding that center where God dwells. C.S. Lewis has said, “The Church exists for nothing else but to draw us to Christ, to make us little Christs. If

we are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became man for no other purpose.”

The Gospel reading today is sometimes called the “crisis” in John’s Gospel because Jesus loses a large number of His followers as they all “miss the mark” of what He is saying and leave, drifting back to their old way of life. As he does so often, Peter speaks for the Twelve like Joshua did in his time, “As for us, we will serve you, Lord. We’re staying. Where else would we go?” We need to hear that. We need to hear that today because we have a crisis right now as we ourselves try to live out Gospel-inspired lives. Some of our shepherds have failed us. Tragically flawed, they have missed the mark and made errors in judgment. They have sinned and they have covered up sins. We are shocked, and angry, and sad. Many of us could be thinking, “How can I stay...with all this?” For some it may even be the last straw on top of proclamations that are not relevant enough, liturgies that are not inspiring enough, fellow Christians who are not Christian enough. We might be murmuring, “This is all too hard; who can accept it?” And we are tempted to walk away. So, we need to pause. We need to see Jesus standing at the center of it all. It is Jesus who offers us that Bread of Life with words that are Spirit and life; it is Jesus who offers us Himself. God is here. And so we stay. By His invitation we eat His flesh and drink His blood and live in Him through the Eucharist. We believe in our relationship with our God and that is everything. All the rest we do not ignore. We work to correct and improve, to root out sin, our tragic flaws, always invoking God’s justice and mercy. But also, always keeping Jesus at the center, relying on Him for strength, we deepen our relationship with every step we take toward Him and that eternal life He has promised. By His grace we will succeed. We are not throwing away our shot.