

## THE FRIENDSHIP TABLE

[Introduction of scripture readings.]

In our scripture lessons from the book of Acts we are going to be reading the early history of the Church. In the sermon I'll be sharing with you some of the early history of our nation. I wonder how we might compare and contrast those histories. I am curious about what implications there might be for us as we make history at Wedgewood.

As I read both early Church history as presented in Acts and as I go over early American history, I notice an unbelievable unity followed by---followed by discord and great disagreement.

Hear the unity of the early church in our first scripture lesson. And as you hear it pray that it may be so here among us.

Acts 2:43-47

Acts 15:36-40

It was the darkest day in the young life of our nation.

Aaron Burr, the vice president of the United States, the grandson of the great theologian, Jonathan Edwards, left his home on Richmond Hill near the southern end of Manhattan at first light on Wednesday, July 11, 1804. No one can be sure what was in Burr's mind as a single oarsman rowed him across the Hudson River to Weehawken, New Jersey.

Meanwhile, near present-day Wall Street, Alexander Hamilton was boarding a small skiff. At forty-nine, he was a year older than Burr, and, like him, was a relatively short man---an inch taller, at five feet seven inches---with similarly small hands and feet, a somewhat delicate bone structure, and a truly distinctive head and face. Hamilton had a peaches and cream complexion with violet-blue eyes and auburn-red hair, whereas Burr had the dark and severe coloring of black hair and dark brown, almost black eyes that suggested a cross between an eagle and a raven.

Unlike Aaron Burr's distinguished bloodline, some said Hamilton's dashing and consistently audacious style was a result of reacting to his impoverished origins. Hamilton was the illegitimate son of a down-on-her-luck beauty of French extraction and a hard-drinking Scottish merchant with a flair for bankruptcy. Because of his background, Hamilton always seemed compelled to be proving himself. He needed to impress.

Two boats. Two men. Both headed to Weehawken, New Jersey for what turned out to be the darkest day in the early years of our nation's history.

By prearranged agreement, Burr's group arrived first, just before 7 a.m. He began clearing away the incidental brush and rocks on the ledge.

Hamilton's party arrived shortly thereafter. Representatives met to review the agreed-upon rules of what was called "the interview". It was called an "interview" because dueling was illegal in many states, including New York. Because of the illegality of what was taking place, all except Hamilton and Burr had to turn their backs so they could make claims of ignorance if the matter ever was brought to court.

So with backs turned, from this point on we really don't know what happened, but we do know the following. Because Hamilton had been challenged, he had the choice of weapons. His choice was decorated pistols with hair-triggers.

Hamilton, also because he was the challenged party, had the choice of position. He selected the upstream, or northern side, a poor choice because the morning sun and its reflection off the river would be in his face.

Burr and Hamilton took the required ten paces, which put them at the extreme ends of the ledge. Upon reaching his designated location, Hamilton requested a brief delay. He pulled his eyeglasses out of his breast pocket, adjusted them, then squinted into the glare, raised his pistol, sighted down the barrel at several imaginary targets, then pronounced himself ready.

As I said previously, what happened next is a great mystery. There are contradictory versions of the next four to five seconds. What we do know is that two shots were fired and that Hamilton was hit, fatally.

Although back then, the details of those four or five seconds did matter, the truth is they don't matter. Whatever happened, as I said, the day was the darkest day in a young nation's history that up to that point did not have that many days in its history books.

We know that in the immediate days after the revolutionary war, everyone pretty much pulled together. George Washington, the General, our first president, the George who was a legend in his own time, the one with Olympian status, the Father of our country, the one whose image was everywhere, in paintings, prints, lockets, on coins, silverware, plates and household bric-a-brac, that six foot four, a full head taller than his contemporaries, George held the country together---- during his first term. The country was unified. Washington's second term, however, was a different matter. In that period, Washington's leadership was persistently attacked. And soon political parties rose up: the Federalists who wanted a strong central government and the Republicans who stressed individual and states' rights.

What I'm saying is that whereas the revolutionary cause had united them, the aftermath got messy, no messier than on that day at Weehawken, New Jersey.

Joseph Ellis, in his book, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, points out that in politics Hamilton and Burr each thought the other was utterly wrong. They also did not think too highly of each other's character. And so they were there on the ledge. To settle it.

Ellis goes on to comment that the duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton is the only occasion, the only instance within the revolutionary generation when political differences ended in violence and death rather than in ongoing argument, even though the politics of the 1790s were truly a messy affair. It was, as some have called it, a decade-long shouting match. It was the age of impassioned speeches, hot debates. But other than Burr and Alexander there was no violence.

Ellis asks, How did they do it? How did they live together, how did they stick with each other, in such an era of flamboyant displays of ideology, intense personal rivalries and hyperbolic claims of imminent catastrophe if their political opponents' ideas were adopted. How did they do it?

One of the keys, according to Ellis, is that they all knew one another personally. They broke bread together, sat together at countless meetings, corresponded with one another about private as well as public matters. Politics, even, at the highest level, remained a face-to-face affair.

Let me underscore that. They broke bread together. The founding brothers knew each other. They disagreed with each other passionately. But even with their mutual imperfections and fallibilities, their eccentricities and excesses, even with all that, with the exception of Burr and Hamilton, they continued to be in relationship.

Perhaps the most outstanding example was that of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Two very different personalities. Adams, the short, stout, candid-to-a-fault, New Englander; Jefferson, the tall, slender, elegantly elusive Virginian; Adams, the highly combustible, ever combative, mile-a-minute talker, whose favorite form of conversation was an argument; Jefferson, the always cool and self-contained enigma, who regarded debate and argument as violations of the natural harmonies he heard inside his own head. Adams was the orator, Jefferson the writer. They were very different but---but they were friends. To be sure the friendship was tested severely. For a long stretch of years they did not communicate with each other. Adams, particularly felt betrayed by Jefferson. But toward the end of their lives, the friendship was renewed and over a fourteen year period Adams and Jefferson wrote 158 letters to each other.

Perhaps most touching of all is this fact. On the evening of July 3, 1826 Thomas Jefferson fell into a coma. His last discernible words, uttered to the physician and family gathered around the bedside, indicated he was hoping to time his exit in dramatic fashion: He asked "Is it the Fourth?" It was not, but he lingered in a semiconscious condition until shortly after noon on the magic day. He got his wish. He died on the Fourth.

That same morning, John Adams collapsed in his favorite reading chair. He lapsed into unconsciousness at almost the exact moment Jefferson died. The end came quickly, at about five-thirty that afternoon. He awakened for a brief moment, indicated that nothing more should be done to prolong the inevitable, then with obvious effort, gave final salute to his old friend with his last words: "Thomas Jefferson still lives."

Of course, he was wrong. Thomas Jefferson had just died. But on his deathbed, his friend was on his mind.

How apropos. Two friends, two friends die at the same day, a day so special to both of them. They both die, Jefferson and Adams, on July Fourth.

Friendship!

Today we come to the table, a table that brings us together despite our differences, our idiosyncrasies, our excesses. I sometimes call it The Friendship Table.

In just a few moments I want you to find a friend to come to the table with you. I want you and that person to serve each other. I want you to eat the bread and drink from the cup together. But before finding your friend let me say this. Don't underestimate the power of The Friendship Table. Hear me. Don't underestimate its power.

Joseph Ellis is right. The real drama of the American Revolution was its messiness. And I would add, the real drama of the early church was its messiness. And I would add, the read drama of the contemporary Church, the real drama of Wedgewood, is its messiness. Hear me. Don't underestimate the power of the table.