

Sermon for National Weekend of Prayer for Transgender Justice

Jesus was a racist. Now there's a good way to get a contentious conversation going! While most of us want to respond to criticism by saying, "But I'm not a racist!" some know how disingenuous that argument is. Same is true with Jesus. Most people don't want to believe Jesus could possibly have said such a thing as "It isn't right to throw the children's food to the dogs." While others are relieved to know that Jesus' humanity included all the prejudices and assumptions about the "Other" that were part of his culture – just as ours does.

His experience of being challenged to change his way of thinking about and acting toward the foreign, non-Jewish Canaanites (or Syro-Phoenicians) was the same as the fictional Jonah's encounter with the hated Assyrians. Sometimes it takes a shock to the system to force us to admit our bias. In Jonah's case, it was three days in the belly of a fish. For Jesus it was a woman (and, as is often the case in the Bible, she was unnamed) who was warned and was given an explanation, nevertheless she persisted. And Jesus changed.

For most of us, our conversions to new ways of thinking are not so dramatic. But they're nonetheless necessary. Oftentimes we're not even aware that we need to have a change of perspective. Changing our thinking and acting in new ways towards those who used to be the "Other" takes resolve - which is why "resolution" is our word for today's "way of resistance for Lent." As part of our commitment to following Jesus, we resolve to identify and change our thinking on old prejudices and assumptions.

This is a courageous, but essential, part of discipleship. No less so for us than it was for those early followers. Identifying our Canaanites and Assyrians takes some serious soul-searching, when it would be so much easier to name the "Others" who are targeted by those – others. We're not exempt from naming our biases.

Or our ignorance. As you know, this weekend has been designated as the *National Weekend of Prayer for Transgender Justice*. It was initially intended to be a time to pray for Gavin Grimm, the transgender student arguing for the right to use the restroom that matches his gender identity. But that changed on March 6, when the Supreme Court decided it would no longer hear the case in response to the executive branch's decision to remove Title IX guidance clarifying protection for transgender students.

Reconciling Works, our Lutheran LGBTQ advocacy organization has said: "The Supreme Court will not hear Gavin's case, but we ask *Reconciling in Christ* communities around the nation to not wait for the court to act. The current environment of intolerance toward transgender people, implicitly condoned by the top levels of government, directly impacts our transgender neighbors, friends, and family members. People of faith will not be silent. We

stand with *RiC* communities across the country praying for transgender justice.”

Now it would be easy to rest on our laurels and remind ourselves that we were the calling congregation for Jay Wilson in 2008, when the T in LGBTQ was still pretty well under the radar. I remember Megan Rohrer coming to a church council meeting to give us a Transgender 101 course. I’m grateful for that and for all that Pastor Jay taught us in his time among us. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned is that there’s always more to learn. For example, according to Trans Student Educational Resources, the original LGBT has now been expanded to LGBTQQIAPP+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, aromantic, pansexual, and polysexual - often abbreviated to LGBTQ+ or simply replaced with “queer.” Many of us have had to change our bias about that word.

According to TSER, terms are always changing and the list will be updated as often as possible to keep up with the rapid proliferation of queer and trans language. So, while it’s imperative for us to be advocates for transgender justice, it also behooves us to be aware of the issues involved in “Transgender Lives Matter.” The same as it is with “Black Lives Matter,” “Muslim Lives Matter,” and “Refugee Lives Matter.” It’s not enough to take the liberal, politically correct position without making the resolution to personal confrontation and transformation - the spiritually correct position.

This is the way of resistance. As we know, the goal of empire is to build walls, create divisions, alienate one group from another, pit us against one another to make us subservient to its will. But the goal of discipleship is to break down walls, to cross boundaries, heal divisions, to bring even people of disparate views, opinions, and political persuasions together – in order to free us from bondage and help us create the Beloved Community.

Now how do we do that? We don’t live in a state with laws that exclude transgender people from restrooms which conform to their gender identity. In fact, as of March 1 CA law mandates that single-occupancy public bathrooms be gender-neutral. But there are still ways for us to be aware of how we can help break down walls other than in bathrooms.

Some of the suggestions in *Reconciling Works* toolkit include:

- Asking for preferred pronouns when making event name-tags because we can’t assume a person’s pronouns based on name or gender expression

For example, as you may know that Pastor Megan’s preferred pronouns are they/them/their. This is becoming fairly common among gender non-conforming people. I confess that I find it difficult to adapt and frequently misgender them. That doesn’t mean it’s not the right thing to do and I need to be resolved to making the effort to change my ways.

- Using the term “gender identity” rather than “sex” or “gender,” because not everyone who was assigned a certain sex at birth identifies as that later in life

I just learned about a practice that's become popular in recent years— gender reveal parties. The idea is that the mom-to-be's ultrasound result is given to a baker without anyone else seeing it. Then at the party, friends and relatives simultaneously bite into cupcakes filled with either pink or blue frosting, which informs everyone – including the parent(s)-to-be – of the baby's gender. As you can imagine, there's pushback about this from those who want us to move away from the gender binary and the stereotyping of gender roles. As one intersex writer imagined their mother's reveal party: "The frosting oozes out and your sister-in-law is the first to see its color. Giddy with excitement, she trips over her tongue and announces, "It's a... purple?" You almost don't hear the collective befuddled gasp made by everyone in the room. Purple? Dang! It's hard to imagine how confused an expectant parent in that situation might feel."

- Use language that is inclusive of gender non-conforming individuals. Try swapping out binary phrases like "women and men" and "brothers and sisters" with more inclusive phrases like "siblings in Christ" or "God's beloved." And we've already been doing this in our worship bulletins.

But we still have a lot to learn and do. I'm proud to say that our own Sierra Pacific Synod passed a resolution two years ago asking the 2016 Churchwide Assembly to instruct the ELCA Church Council to urge our church to use registration and other forms that:

- Include options for transgender, non- binary and/or gender non-conforming people
- When asking for personal information, to include asking for the person's pronouns
- When asking for a person's honorific or title, to include a gender neutral option
- These practices have already been adopted in our synod.

It may seem like we've strayed a long way from the tribalism and racism of Jonah and Jesus. But if part of our commitment to following Jesus is to resolve to identify and change our thinking on old prejudices and assumptions, it all hangs together.

On this day when we pray for Gavin Grimm and all transgender students, as well as for justice for all transgender people, we pray for all of us – that we will continue to be open to learning and growing in our understanding, our compassion, and our resolve to break down walls wherever we can and to resist the power of those who will keep trying to put them up.

When we follow the example of Jesus himself, who learned from a persistent Canaanite woman how to change his thinking, we know that we can do it too.

Amen

Jonah 1-4 Readers Theater

Adapted from <http://www.welcomingresources.org/2-HeartsUnbound-Jonah>

Far from either a factual account of a prophet's mission or a fantasy worthy of Hollywood's best computer graphics, this little book is a parable about God's infinite and universal grace. This ending of the tale brings out the full impact of its message that God's forgiving grace extends far beyond all the boundaries most religious folk like us might wish to set.

AUTHOR: Like most books of the Bible, the Book of Jonah doesn't identify its author, which is a shame because I wouldn't mind a little credit for such a biting satire with such a gracious message. That's history for you. Everyone knows Jonah - even though he's just a fictional character - but no one knows me! I didn't bother to date my book either. Who thought that a couple thousand years later folks like you would be reading it? Anyway, most scholars think I wrote sometime after the Exile. Whatever the exact date, the tale of Jonah speaks directly to Israel's life after the Exile, when one of the driving questions was, "Why did the Exile happen?"

One reason was that they'd been too friendly with the Babylonians and now there were many mixed marriages. For some, the only solution was ethnic purity. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate how a priest (Ezra) and a governor (Nehemiah) declared that God was opposed to all intermarriage. But this wasn't the only view. There were other voices - like mine, and the authors of both Ruth and Jonah - who understood God in a different way.

So I wrote my Jonah story in the midst of this debate about how to treat foreigners which was also a debate about how *God* regards foreigners. Most scholars consider my story to be historical fiction, sometimes it's even referred to as satire or parody for its over-the-top style. I take that as a compliment. But that doesn't mean it was any less "inspired" than other imaginative tales like, say, Jesus' parables. Just like the parables, the truth of my tale doesn't rest on the history it tells but on the insight it offers, the message about God that it bears. Now, let's turn to the tale itself.

NARRATOR: In the first scene we hear that the word of God came to Jonah:

GOD: "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh right now. Raise a cry against it! Tell them that I know all about their crimes."

JONAH: Now, I hope you'll understand what I did. For millennia I've been called reluctant, rebellious, recalcitrant. But Nineveh is the capital city of our worst enemy! Other prophets are sent to warn the people of Israel; I'm the *only* prophet sent to an *unchosen* people. What would *you* have done?

NARRATOR: Jonah does go - but as fast and far as he can in the *other* direction. He boards a ship heading due west while Nineveh lies due east. But a fierce storm comes up,

threatening to sink the ship. The sailors fearing for their lives, throw all the cargo overboard and implore their various gods to save them. Meanwhile Jonah is fast asleep.

AUTHOR: I mentioned my “over-the-top” style. Almost like a cartoon scene, I write that “the storm threatened to break up the ship” - in Hebrew the word portrays the boat itself crying out as if to say, “Hey, guys, find another ship, I’m going to pieces!” And in the midst of this storm that no one could ignore, Jonah ... is fast asleep?! Who does he think he is, sleeping through a storm on a boat - Jesus Christ?

NARRATOR: When the captain of the vessel finds Jonah asleep, he awakens him and tells him to start praying, too, in case maybe *his* god will save them. Meanwhile, the sailors, who often interpreted a stormy sea as the sign of an angry god, threw dice to determine who had angered the gods. Of course, the lot falls to Jonah.

JONAH: “Take me and throw me into the sea.”

NARRATOR: They don’t want to kill Jonah. They try to reach land. But when they realize there was no choice, they throw him overboard. Immediately the sea calms, which fills the sailors with even greater fear. They make the sort of vows we make when our lives have been saved from a great calamity: that is, they promise many things they’d forget by the time they reach port. As for Jonah, God doesn’t allow him to drown. Instead God sends a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and he remains in the fish’s belly for 3 days and 3 nights.”

AUTHOR: I have a love-hate relationship with that line. It’s simple, elegant, and helps the story turn an essential corner, but it’s otherwise entirely beside the point. It has no real significance at all! Yet it’s the one line that everyone from Sunday School kids to grown-ups knows: Jonah got swallowed by a fish. Really? Can a fish really swallow a man? What kind of fish is big enough for that? Or was it a whale? And for 3 days? Really? For literally 72 hours? How did he breathe? How did he hold up in the stomach acid? I guess I’m glad I didn’t have him scooped up by a submarine driven by extraterrestrials! For all the attention this gets - and for as much as it keeps people from noticing my real point - I wish I’d had him grab a piece of cargo and let him cling to that through the night.

NARRATOR: From the fish’s belly, Jonah prays. His prayer begins with a cry of distress, reaches a depth of sheer hopelessness, and then – even while he’s still in the fish’s belly - credits his rescue to God. So God speaks to the fish, which vomits Jonah out onto dry land.

AUTHOR: Not a pretty image, I know. But it’s a good prayer. And if the story ended there, Jonah would come across like a hero of the faith. But remember what the Narrator said, about the vows we’re all quick to make when our lives have just been saved from a great calamity, promising things we forget just as quickly? Jonah’s vow is like that.

NARRATOR: But not at first. Because God again speaks to Jonah, telling him to go preach a warning to the city of Nineveh. And this time Jonah goes.

JONAH: In the capitol city of my enemies, I walked through the streets like a fearless man. “40 days — count ‘em off — 40 days and this city will be destroyed.” Believe me, this was at least a message I could put my heart into.

NARRATOR: And the people repent, hoping that perhaps God would relent and spare their lives. And God...

AUTHOR: Wait a second! This is some of my best stuff. In case you were starting to take things too seriously, I’m reminding you here again that this is *parody*. This is *not* the way it ever happens. Only in this story. Only to make my point. So tell them...

KING: Well, we, the people of Nineveh, don’t just “believe,” we proclaim a fast. And everyone in our great city, from nobles to peasants, puts on sackcloth.

AUTHOR: It *never* happens like this. Read the prophets; they can’t pay people to believe. But here *everyone* believes. *Everyone* fasts. *Everyone* wears sackcloth. And it gets even better. Go on...

KING: When Jonah’s message reaches me, I take off my robe, replace it with sackcloth, and sit in ashes to show my complete humility. But I don’t stop there; I issue a royal decree. I make fasting the law of the land and declare that not even animals can be fed. I even order our livestock to be covered in sackcloth to join us in showing our repentance.

AUTHOR: See, it’s like a cartoon again. It’s way over the top. I’m shouting out as loud as possible between the lines: “Not meant to be taken literally. Something more is going on here. Wait for the punch line, it’s coming!”

KING: Finally, I command everyone – nobles and slaves alike, young and old, cattle and goats, dogs and cats – I declare that everyone should call on God with all their might. And I pronounce, “You must all renounce your sinful ways and the evil things you did. Who knows, maybe God will have a change of mind and relent!”

AUTHOR: Any of the prophets in Israel would trade places with Jonah in a heartbeat. People actually listening to your message? All of them? The king, too? This is *rich*.

JONAH: Me? I feel like a fool. I mean I *saw* this coming. I didn’t want to bring this message to those people precisely because of this possibility. They’re not supposed to repent! *They’re not God’s chosen people!* God could care less about the Ninevites. In fact, the angels have a hellfire and brimstone package all set, marked “special delivery” and addressed to Nineveh.

NARRATOR: But, God did see how the Ninevites repented, and God did relent. And the calamity that God had announced for Nineveh, God chose *not* to do it. But God’s decision to spare Nineveh left Jonah angry.

JONAH: “Please, YHWH! Isn’t this exactly what I said would happen? That’s why I fled. I knew you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness,

relenting from violence. Every child of Israel knows that. Please take my life! I'd rather be dead than keep on living!"

AUTHOR: None of us one wants to identify with Jonah at this point in the story. He's being petty and self-centered to a ridiculous extreme. But he's a symbol here for Israel after the Exile – at least those who want to say God is for Israelites only. Indeed, he's a symbol for us all, whenever we try to narrow God's love down to the people we're comfortable loving.

NARRATOR: The scene ends with God asking Jonah whether it's right for him to be so angry. Jonah sulks off to the edge of the city and finds a place to sulk. God causes a plant to grow, a bush that rises quickly and offers shade to Jonah's head –which pleases Jonah. But then God sends a worm to eat the plant and it withers. God sends a hot wind from the east, and a harsh sun, and before long Jonah was faint from the heat. And for the third time in four chapters, he declares that he wants to die.

JONAH: I've had it up to here. Sent to my enemies. Tossed overboard in a storm. Swallowed and vomited up - by a fish. Left in the lurch like a laughingstock when God decides to show mercy right after I announce God's impending justice. And now, in the middle of my grand pout, even this little shade plant betrays me. So when God asks if it's right for me to be angry about the plant, I can't imagine what's coming next. I just practically explode at God, "I have every right to be angry, to the point of death!"

GOD: "You're sad about a plant that cost you no labor, that you didn't make grow, that sprouted and perished in a night. Is it not right then, for me to feel sorrow about the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than 120,000 people who can't tell their right hand from their left, to say nothing of all the animals?"

AUTHOR: And there's the punch line! If Jonah would do anything to save the plant, how can he not see that God would do anything to save an entire city?

NARRATOR: Imagine how that sounded in a time when Ezra and Nehemiah were breaking up every inter-racial marriage and driving all the foreign women and their children out into the wilderness. It's no wonder that the author of this story set it in a different time and told it as a parody. He used the different setting to protect himself from charges of being a traitor. And he used humor to catch his hearers off guard, to sneak in a word of truth before their defenses shot up. The message at the heart of this story isn't about deciding who's wicked today or who needs to be warned or who needs to repent. It's about whose God might be too small. And that's a message aimed at all of us in every time and place.

Matthew 15:21-28

There seems little doubt that Matthew fully intended the story of Jesus healing the daughter of a Canaanite woman in a foreign country as an expression of the universal love

of God for all peoples. This important lesson touches us pointedly at a time when we too are all prone to divide the good from the bad, our race, our country, our tribe, our folk, our faith from all those others.

After leaving Gennesaret, Jesus went to the district of Tyre and Sidon. It happened that a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried out to Jesus, “Heir to the House of David, have pity on me! My daughter is tormented by a demon.”

But Jesus gave her no word of response. The disciples came up and repeatedly said to him, “Please get rid of her! She keeps shouting after us.”

Finally Jesus turned to the woman and said, “My mission is only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.”

She then prostrated herself before him with the plea, ‘Rabbi, help me!’

Jesus answered, “But it isn’t right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

“True, Rabbi,” she said, “but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table.”

Jesus then replied, “Woman, you have great faith! It will be done for you as you wish.”

At that very moment her daughter was healed.