**Sermon Jonah**

INTRO STORY

Every time I go home to Ireland the first thing I need to do is make the short drive to the rugged, blustery beaches of County Donegal that I grew up on. My Aunt Gladys taught me to swim at Inver Harbor, I saw dolphins for the first time in the Donegal Bay. I learned how to drive on Rossnowlagh Beach, to surf on Murvagh and go horseback riding on Downings.

For me, going to the ocean (particularly the wild west coast of Ireland) is almost like…meeting God. The progressive writer John Pavlovitz says it this way and I find his description accurate. He says, “There’s a moment when you make your way down the path or the boardwalk that cuts through the sand dunes…” or actually, in Ireland you can often find yourself descending 100s of wooden steps before reaching the white sand of a hidden cove, but either way, “…as you walk farther, the quiet noise of the wind and the dull echo of the crashing waves, gradually increase to become a roar. You might crane your neck to see if you can catch a glimpse of the sky kissing the sea’s horizon. Your pace quickens as the sound rises and the rush of the wind grows, and suddenly you’ve emptied out into the full, vivid, raw majesty of it all.

I *always* find myself breathing more deeply than I have in months in that moment.

It never fails to level me. It’s never the same, the scene is always fresh, the colors, the smells, the feel of the wind, it’s rarely commonplace. It’s without fail…holy ground.

LINK

Maybe you understand exactly what I mean, if you’ve had to opportunity to travel to the coast. But if you have *never* been to the beach– well, it can be hard to imagine. That’s the thing about the ocean (and meeting God or encountering the Divine for that matter): it is until you *experience* it, a verbal description will never fully capture the reality.

ST ANDREW SERIES REVIEW

Many of the things that we’ve been talking about ‘setting our table with…’ these past few weeks are exactly *this* way. We can talk and talk about belonging, about collective wisdom and learned hope. We can talk of justice and …today of inclusion, but unless you experience those things (or perhaps the absence of them) it can be difficult to truly grasp or understand them. Their importance. Their ability to change lives. To transform us.

The first week of our Stewardship Series Pastor Lori talked about ‘belonging.’ We defined what ‘belonging’ means, we shared with you what it feels like, but until you experience a deep sense of belonging for yourself, it’s nearly impossible to fully capture. Yet, we know that when we, as a church, are intentional about nurturing an environment where all are welcome, all can find and experience belonging, lives can be changed. Belonging is *that* powerful. So, when we laid the tablecloth that Alice made, on our alter table, when we centered the cross upon it, we declared that on this simple but profound foundation, all can find belonging here.

In week 2, we added candlesticks representing both ‘wisdom’ and ‘hope’…recognizing that we all bring wisdom born out of our unique and sometimes painful experiences of life. We looked at Genesis and considered A’dam and Eve’s quest for wisdom, *and* their impatience in developing the *long* resilience that life and living requires in order to gain such wisdom that comes from experience and in community with those with different experiences than our own.

Our third week, saw the addition of individual place settings…plates, glasses, and silverware …these items were to remind us that no table is complete (no church is fully the church) no claim to God’s will or to faithful discipleship is complete…without ‘justice.’ Setting the table with ‘justice’ means that we take seriously the *ex*clusion of some, from living a full and flourishing life, whether because of the color of their skin, who they love, whether they are women or children, what gender they present to the world, or pronouns they use, how much education they have attained or wealth they have accumulated.

Saying, we hold the value of justice, means that we say ‘no’ to inequality and systemic injustice, and ‘yes’ to equity, advocate and the common good. Saying that we are a congregation that, sets the table around which we gather, with justice, means that we are attentive to one another’s needs and the barriers that prevent some from finding their placesetting among us and among our society.

MCCL INTRO

As Metropolitan Community Church you have certain value baked into ‘Who You Are.’ Values of diversity: diversity of opinion, expressions and viewpoints; diversity of worship styles, interpretation and organization. That is who you are not just as a community of faith, but as people. Diversity is a central part of the MCC.

For over 50 years the idea that God loves and accepts LGBTQIA+ folx. That they belong in Christian community, that they have wisdom and hope to bring and to share, that their collective fight for justice is, indeed, a holy fight. And you know that…

LINK

All these things – ‘belonging,’ ‘wisdom,’ ‘hope,’ and ‘justice’– like the ocean, are next to impossible to adequately describe with words alone. Each needs to be experienced, felt, sensed at the very core of our beings.

For, far too long, people who claim the name Christian have been content with solely telling people about the ocean, about ‘belonging,’ about ‘hope,’ and about ‘justice’ believing that that is enough. But these commitments are simply empty, only shadows *or* poor reflections of the Kingdom of God, the Kin-dom of God…this beloved community that seeks to put into practice values that point to the heart of a God whose love, mercy and compassion knows no bounds.

SCRIPTURE

And so, we come to our scripture this morning, which is from the book of Jonah. And we read episodes from various parts of the narrative found in that book. The first of which is God’s call to Jonah to go to a new place and engage with an unfamiliar people. And he is to go and embody the inclusive nature of God’s mercy. Yes, he has a message of warning, yes the consequence of ignoring that warning is dire. But, conversely aligning with God’s will means receiving God’s mercy. Our hero’s initial resistance to this divine call reflects a common human tendency to *fear* the unknown, to *cling* to familiar surroundings, and *avoid* the discomfort and risk of engaging with folks that have developed a reputation for aggression, violence, and distrust.

However, as the story unfolds, we witness Jonah’s own transformation, if only partial. He learns the importance of embracing new experiences and encountering those whose ways of life may be different from his own. Jonah eventually makes the pilgrimage to Nineveh, making a mental and emotional shift towards greater openness, curiosity, and a willingness to engage with others beyond his comfort zone. But, as we’ll see, old attitudes and prejudices die hard.

In Jonah’s mission to the city of Nineveh, we witness *God’s* concern extending beyond the boundaries of a particular people or religious tradition. *Not Jonah’s.* We witness *God’s* profound love that encompasses all. *Not Jonah’s.* We witness *God’s* inclusion of even those deemed unworthy or outside the accepted norms of society. We witness *God* extending invitation, drawing extra chairs to the table, so that more and more people could experience divine grace and transformation.

What a challenge us: to examine ourselves, our own communities, our church with a critical eye. May we be prompted by this well-known story, to recognize who may be *missing* from the table. May we actively work towards creating spaces that celebrate diversity and embrace inclusion. Because when we do so, we can become catalysts for profound shifts in people’s lives, fostering healing, reconciliation, and growth. We know, at least intellectually that by embracing and engaging with new people and their diverse experiences, that we open ourselves to encounters that expand our understanding and deepen our connection to the divine.

And yet moving from intellectual ascent to embodied experience is not an easy shift to make…as Jonah discovered. His anger, his dislike and distrust of the Ninevites is OH SO RELATABLE.

But, ultimately, the story of Jonah serves as an invitation to transcend those limited perspectives, to let go of fear, and to embrace the expansive and inclusive love of God. To participate in the ongoing work of transformation, not only in our own lives but in the world around us, because…as we have been reminding you each week, of you and your contribution to the creation of a more just and inclusive society, to expand the table, to draw up more chairs, to sit shoulder-to-shoulder with the beautiful diversity of all God’s children, our church can change lives.

CONCLUDING STORY

At the Kentucky Council of Churches Annual Gathering a couple of weeks ago, one of the keynote speakers told a story of laying on the ground with his grand-daughter to put together a 500 piece jigsaw puzzle. This was her first of one this size, but she had just turned 9 years old and it was time to graduate from the puzzles with lesser pieces.

He said that after tipping the box of unconnected pieces out onto the floor she would carefully turn each piece, so that the side with the image faced upwards. She would then examine each piece, trying to see the part that it played in creating the entire image. She would set some pieces aside, *but it wasn’t that they would be excluded indefinitely*, it was because there was nothing for them to connect to…yet. She knew that she would need them when the time was right, when the infrastructure of the puzzle could support their inclusion. She would gather all the *edge* pieces together next. And starting with the corner pieces she would begin to build the frame of the image.

Our speaker said that she would only stop for short periods of time over that weekend staying with her grandparents. And it wouldn’t be long before she would gravitate back to the puzzle. You see she had the final image in her head, she no longer needed to look back at the guide on the box. She could envision what the final picture would look like, and it motivated her to keep working. She was determined to make that image a reality, even when there were still pieces missing, and that final form seemed a long way off. The places with pieces missing meant that the desired image was not yet complete, that there was more work to be done.

CONCLUSION

Friends, our Creator God has entrusted us with building the Kingdom of God on this earth. And like the jigsaw puzzle there are unnumerable pieces that need to be included in that beloved community and hoped-for vision.

I don’t need to tell you that we are not there yet.

*We talk about it.* We *remind* ourselves again and again of the *values* that this holy and diverse Kin-dom holds central. We *practice* loving one another, *forgiving* one another, *serving* one other, *giving* of ourselves to another. We have been entrusted, as stewards, with placing more and more pieces into this, yet incomplete puzzle. It calls for strength, resilience, compassion and commitment.

So, as we draw the chairs around the table, as we begin to see the final picture emerging and enlarge our capacity to love…let our story not end like that of Jonah’s.

May we celebrate differences and not be fearful of them.

May we be grateful for genuine transformations and not suspicious of them.

May we grow in our capacity to love like God and not succumb to our own limited ability to care.

May we believe, from the bottom of our hearts that God has elected us, ordinary human beings to make visible the invisible dream of the Divine –to nurture environments and community where all people can experience first-hand, the full, vivid, raw majesty of God’s Kin-dom.

To create and resource an organizational infrastructure that is ready to welcome in and fully embrace those who are different from us, knowing that they too are critical pieces of the puzzle, and without which the dreams of God could not be realized.

MCCL Conclusion.

Amen.

Friends, we are approaching the conclusion of our Stewardship Series. Next week we will have a part in the morning service when you can hand in your pledge cards. And have that commitment blessed and prayed over for the year to come. This act is an expression of not only your generosity but your commitment to stepping beyond the familiar. And I pray that when you do, you can experience and participate in a church that truly changes lives. Amen.