

“Choose to Be an Antiracist”

Jonah 3:10-4:11; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 20, 2020, Antiracism Sunday, Proper 20, dedicated to the memory of Dr. Will Fernald who passed to eternal life on Monday, September 14 and to Senator Ray Miller who has been my friend for many years and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Jonah was not a heroic prophet. He was a complicated man with some serious commitment and anger issues. Nevertheless, God chooses Jonah for a mission.

When we meet him in the first sentence of the book which bears his name, Jonah, the son of Amittai is called by God to go to Nineveh and testify to the people so that they might turn from their wicked ways. Jonah responds by fleeing the opposite direction and heading

to sea. Apparently, Jonah believes that God's power is limited to land. He is wrong. God's power extends to the sea as well.

At sea, a storm blows up and threatens to sink the ship. While Jonah sleeps the sailors pray to their own individual Gods. Finally, the sailors decide their ship is cursed and decide throwing Jonah overboard is the only way to save their ship. They are right. The storm settles as Jonah hits the water and is swallowed by a Big Fish (not Jaws – because he isn't chewed - just swallowed... probably something more like a whale). In the belly of the Big Fish, he prays for deliverance and writes poetry. The praying prophetic poet gives The Big Fish indigestion so the BF spits him out on shore. Only then does Jonah realize he should probably do what God told him to do. So, he heads to Nineveh to spit out his prophetic pronouncements.

He goes the center of town. He declares *“If you don't turn and repent of your evil way, God will utterly destroy you and your animals.”* Within 40 days, they turn around! It turns out this complicated man is the effective prophet in Biblical history because the Ninevites listen to Jonah, turn their lives around and save themselves and their animals from the wrath of God.

Rather than rejoice at the turned around Ninevites, Jonah gets angry. He is mad that God has accepted the repentance of the Ninevites, even though that is exactly what he was sent on God's mission to demand! He is so mad about the Ninevites turning to God that Jonah goes out of the city, takes refuge under a shade bush and pouts. God destroys that shade bush under which the prophet is pouting. That increases his pouting and rage. Now he is beside himself.

God says, **“you can’t be serious.”** God challenges him, *“You are angry when I destroy a shade bush that I created. But you don’t care at all about the 120,000 Ninevites and their animals who didn’t know right from wrong whom I saved? Jonah, you are one messed up dude”* (Ahrens’ Revised Standard Version).

God rebukes Jonah’s foolishness and honors the Ninevites for their faithfulness. God’s grace is magnified. The wideness of God’s mercy is extended further than anyone (especially his own prophet) could imagine. In the end, God prevails and Jonah misses the point. The book ends with our graceful and merciful God reconciled with the city turned around and our not so heroic prophet still angry.

In summary: The prophet is a mess. And the previously messed-up ones are good. Turning around matters. Acknowledging what is wrong and changing course really matters. Ninevites break the mold of sinfulness and a lack of self-awareness. A prophet misses the point and is disappointed by grace and mercy. In the midst of all this, hope is reestablished in a once great city. This story line gets flipped on its head. The seemingly righteous prophet gets all messed up. The seemingly unrighteous wicked ones get all straightened out.

Throughout this story, choices are being made. Choices to run away from reality and try to hide from God’s call. Choices to get out the belly of the Big Fish and face the truth. Choices to call people to accountability. Choices of those called to accountability to change. Choices to forgive. Choices to be merciful. Choices to be angry. Choices to be confrontational in honesty and truth telling. Choices to blame God for God’s grace. And choices to do the right thing.

As I was reading the Book of Jonah, and preparing for today, I couldn’t help but see the story of race and racism in America and

how it interacts with this story of God's prophet Jonah. That may not sound like a natural connection for you. But I see the challenges of race and racism as our own "flipped on its head reality." Those of us who present ourselves as "together" need to take a good hard look at ourselves in relation to Race and Racism. Those of us who are deemed racist and a lost cause need to get it together as well and turn it around and face God's judgement or favor.

There are two recent books that I highly recommend that look at race and racism in America in Black and White ways. The first is written by Dr. Robert P. Jones entitled, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. The second is by Ibram X. Kendi entitled, *How to Be an Antiracist*.

Robert Jones is white and grew up as a Southern Baptist in the deep south. As the CEO and founder of Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), he has researched and written about religion and politics for the past 20 years. This book draws from history, public opinion surveys and his personal experience. He concludes: White Christians - including Catholics, all Protestant denominations, Orthodox, Pentecostal and Evangelical in the U.S. - have actively built and sustained white supremacy since before the nation's founding, constructing institutions and theologies that uphold racism to this day.

Jones says: "White Christians have not just been complacent, nor just complicit," But rather, as the nation's dominant cultural power, we white Christians have constructed and sustained a project of perpetuating white supremacy that has really framed the entire American story, and ... the legacy of this unholy union still lives in the of white Christianity today."

Jones recounted the history of white supremacy in the church. Prior to the Reformation, Catholic theologians concocted the “**doctrine of discovery**” that said white Christians had a divine mandate to occupy lands that were not “Christian,” which legitimized centuries of colonization, enslavement and genocide against indigenous people in places such as the Americas, Africa and Asia. This doctrine was enshrined in a papal bull issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1493.

Later, during the 18th century and the first half of the 19th, Catholic and Protestant slaveholders in the U.S. twisted biblical stories to suggest that Black people were inferior, while simultaneously claiming enslaving Black people was their Christian duty. They also brought enslaved people to church with them, forcing them to sit in the back or in specially-constructed galleries separate from white worshippers.

“What kind of Gospel could be preached in that setting, what kind of liturgy could get practiced, what kind of hymns could get sung?” Jones asked, referring to the churches enslaved people and their enslavers attended together. *“Then you really see that from the very beginning, white Christianity developed around this a priori commitment to a white supremacist status quo, and that that has carried forward for us.”*

White supremacy pervades white Christian institutions, theologies and even liturgies to this day, Jones said. *“For nearly all of American history, the light-skinned Jesus that was conjured by most congregations was not just indifferent to the status quo of racial inequality,”* Jones said. *“But that light-skinned Jesus demanded its defense and preservation as part of the natural, divinely-ordained order of things.”*

Churches are still highly segregated, Jones said. As of 2012, four-fifths of American churches had a single racial or ethnic group that

comprised 80% or more of the population, and 11% of churches were still 100% white, according to the Pew Research Center.

We need to know and to reconcile our history. We need to examine our language, our liturgies, our music, our preaching, our teaching, our organizational and leadership structures, our mission, our ministry - our very souls (drawn from “White Christians in the US helped build, sustain white supremacist nation,” by Madeleine Davison, National Catholic Reporter, September 19, 2020).

Like the Ninevites, we need to turn this around. In the words of Robert Jones, **there needs to be a reckoning.** For all who are White Christians, we need to name, to claim and to confess our part in this wickedness. We need to Repent and ask for God’s forgiveness for our part in this history and this moment.

I know that for some that this confess and turning is not only repugnant, but they would say, not necessary. I am sure, like the Ninevites before us, when the 120,000 Ninevites repented and turned around, there were most likely some who didn’t see the purpose of it. Either they thought they were fine and didn’t need to confess or they simply loved the “Ninevite privilege” they gained from all the perks of living in “Sin City.” In spite of the self-assured Ninevites who loved and benefited from Ninevite privilege, there still ended up being a complete turning around.

But turning around is only the beginning. We need to keep after it.

For help with life after confession and turning around, I turn to Ibram X. Kendi. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi opens the book with the chapter, “My Racist Introduction” which tells his own

confessional story of his own racist mindset, writings and actions as a teenager. He then goes on to write his book as a training manual on facing and dealing with Racism. I invite anyone who listening to pick up this book and read it. Come join our book study as well over the next six weeks- on Mondays or Wednesdays including Monday night, September 21st at 7pm.

How to be an Antiracist gives us definitions and language to assist in climbing this mountain of absolutely necessary change. It is essential to have words that clarify the problems and the solutions to the problems. Like Robert Jones, Dr. Kendi uses history, research and his personal experience and his family's story to show us a better way. Unlike Jones, he is an African-American. He grew up in New York, New Jersey and now teaches in Washington D.C.

The first two definitions he presents are **Racist** and **Antiracist**.

A **Racist** is one who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inactions or expressing a racist idea. He puts the emphasis on the marriage of racist policies and racist ideas.

An **Antiracist** is one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea. Antiracism is a choice. It is also defined by action. For example, when you say I favor education and housing for low-income families and persons of color, but do absolutely nothing, this is not antiracist. Racism flourishes with the inaction of people.

He goes on to clarify that there is no place or a category for someone who says "I am not racist." We need to choose to be an antiracist or a racist. This is actually quite liberating. The history of our nation and our families and each of our lives – no matter if we white, black,

brown or a glorious of all – is packed with pointing fingers at those we call racist and claiming we “are not racist” and then lack of action by most of us to be antiracist.

This needs to end. The only way to end this pattern of inertia is to make a choice. Are you a racist or an antiracist? Once you have made a choice, Kendi helps unpack this choice through his differentiation of dueling consciousness, power, biology, ethnicity, body, culture, behavior, color, class, space, gender, sexuality and more. He continues to present definitions and delineations.

Through it all, we have choices to make. Am I a racist or antiracist? Will I stop talking about others, pointing at others, and critiquing and criticizing others and examine myself and my place in these times -here and now? Or will I continue on as if none of this matters?

Let me put it this way. Will each of us examine ourselves and turn around – like the Ninevites did so long ago when facing a choice between redemption or extinction? Or will I claim – like Jonah – to be pure and sinless (even though none of us is) and get angry, and sit on a hill outside Columbus or wherever we are – and pout and throw a temper-tantrum at God or someone else for what “that other woman” or “that other man” is doing or not doing that doesn’t fit our self-righteous idea of right or wrong? Change ourselves and our society? Or scream and pout?

I choose to follow the example of God. I choose to be an antiracist. I choose to practice grace, forgiveness and mercy. I choose to develop and implement antiracist policies and practices.

I choose to be an antiracist and turn this thing around.

I hope you join me on this journey. Amen.

