

DISCOMBOBULATING THE GRIM REAPER; LUKE 7: 11-17; COMMUNION/GAY PRIDE DAY; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

This Sunday is Gay Pride Day across the nation. Earlier this week the President declared June, Gay Pride Month. His proclamation states, "Since our founding, America has advanced on an unending path toward becoming a more perfect Union. This journey, led by forward-thinking individuals who have set their sights on reaching for a brighter tomorrow, has never been easy or smooth.

The fight for dignity and equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people is reflected in the tireless dedication of advocates and allies who strive to forge a more inclusive society. They have spurred sweeping progress by changing hearts and minds and by demanding equal treatment – under our laws, from our courts and in our politics. This month we recognize all they have done to bring us to this point, and we recommit to bending the arc of our Nation toward justice."

It is a privilege to pastor a congregation that has been and continues to be part of that journey and commitment to bend the arc of the Nation toward justice. And while there was much rejoicing when the Supreme Court overturned the Defense of Marriage and Family Act in 2014, thus ensuring the right to same sex marriage – there is, more recently, a new debate over the rights of transgender people.

North Carolina has been the center of the storm but other states and politicians have lined up against this new iteration of sexual justice – the right of transgender people to use the bathroom of their self-identified gender.

More than a few, mostly in southern states, have chimed in from their perches in governor's mansions and state legislatures in support of North Carolina's stand against a national and global chorus of voices for inclusivity.

The episode is eerily reminiscent of the exclusion, a generation ago, of African-Americans from lunch counters, buses, drinking fountains and bathrooms reserved for "whites only." The fact that the first black female Attorney General of the United States is suing the State of North Carolina for discrimination to public access is poetic justice. Her law suit recalls the days of Jim Crow when North Carolina was perfectly happy with 'all-gender' bathrooms as the only bathrooms for male and female blacks prohibited from using 'white only' facilities.

Someone has said the old adage "everything new is old again," has been reversed by the goings-on in North Carolina; indeed it would seem there, over the transgender issues, everything old is new again; discrimination, bigotry and bias die hard.

In fact, the same tired arguments are being dragged out yet again, as Jelani Cobb of *The New Yorker* writes, "As with the discrimination of the past, the lines between victim and victimizer are [now] deliberately blurred [in NC].

Jim Crow was anchored in a sense of white victimhood and fevered arguments about the protection of white women from black male rapists. Today – the new imagined predator is a transgender male."

Gay Pride Day is an important annual reminder that we are members of a rainbow species – that diversity is a God-given gift to the human family and, therefore, to recognize and celebrate our diversity is to fully recognize and celebrate creation as God made it – for which the psalmist sings, “majestic is his name in all the earth.”

It is fitting that our celebration extends beyond gay and lesbian matters to include transgender identity. I suspect most of us, have more to learn about what transgender is and means. This sermon is an attempt to get that project on our radar. It would be good if one of our education committees chose to deal with human sexuality and the politics of justice in the 21st century.

But that said, today is a day to acknowledge the progress that has been made in LGBT justice and that there is also a long way to go in gender rights and freedoms.

Such as justice for women; we have a false sense that women have essentially achieved equal rights at least with job opportunity, that a young girl can be anything she wants to be; yet, while much progress has been made there are grave concerns about the social and cultural oppression and abuse of women -- everywhere.

Gloria Steinem in an interview last week reported that for the first time in history there are fewer females than males in the world due to the widespread, systematic, methodical and routine violence perpetrated against women in all societies, especially developing nations.

Studies confirm that there is more violence against females of every age group where families, communities, societies, and nations rigidly define the social roles of men and women. Conversely, in social groupings where there is more integration of social roles, where men and women share and have in common more tasks and functions there is less oppression and violence.

Consider the Scripture lesson this morning; it is a reminder that the status of women in the ancient world was on the lowest rung on the social ladder – as it still is in many societies. Jesus has compassion because he sees it is a widow who is the mother of the young man who has died, he knows her life has been cut off not just from family – for he was an only child, but also of any economic or material survival.

Luke’s lesson is more about the mother than the son whom Jesus raises from the dead. It is interesting this story comes about six weeks after Easter – the average length of time it takes for the death of a loved one or friend to sink in.

The six-week mark is when the daily routine without the loved one becomes the new reality. When the realization that this is the way it will be displaces whatever fantasies or embers of hope of seeing the loved one again that may exist. Despite the uproar at Easter and the resurrection, deep down we may suspect that nothing has actually changed. Caesar is still in charge. We’re still having funerals. All the old distinctions – male/female, rich/poor, young/old, are still in place. We brush ourselves off after Easter and continue our trek that ends in death. We set goals, work hard, accumulate stuff and build our walls for security but in the end death waits; grinning, ultimately victorious.

And not just at the end but the big and little deaths through life; some of our most painful dead ends come before death. Illness and disease are often dress rehearsals for death, simulations of that time when we will be cut off from the land of the living, isolated and alone.

Or there's an unexpected meeting and the boss tells you and the company have come to an end; or you get the letter that says not, "Congratulations, you're accepted!" but "We regret to inform you..."

Or Roger Angell, the 96 old baseball writer/former editor of the *The New Yorker* whose essay entitled, "This Old Man," – one of the most poignant meditations on aging and death I have ever read – reflects on his losses from family members, friends and his beloved fox terrier to the consequences of being inundated with the tolls and statistics of death from wars, terrorism, natural disasters and crime.

Last night on the steps of the Historical Society, facing the Japanese Garden I had the privilege of saying the invocation for the first annual "Save the Michaels of the World" memorial service for family members and friends who have lost loved ones to opioid addiction. This is an epidemic greater than the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.

Parents, brothers, sisters and friends told the heart-breaking stories of their loved one's addiction and death – young men and women, regardless of status or condition, who were prescribed pain killers and either abused them or turned to heroin and alcohol when they were no longer prescribed.

Avi and Julie Israel's son Michael – a brilliant engineering student at the University of Buffalo took his life five years ago after living on pain medication for Crohn's disease for most of his teenage life; he despaired of being able to wean himself from the painkillers. The Israel's started "Save the Michael's of the World" to raise awareness and fix a broken and sinister system of pharmaceutical pain management.

Teach us to number our days, says the Psalmist, "so we can have a wise heart." Numbered days and a wise heart. This is the way we talk and walk on this journey through what Angell calls "the collapsing, grossly insistent world." Yet, today we are in the company of Jesus, so it is good to fasten our seat belts and hold onto our hats. Jesus by now is attracting crowds of the curious and the committed.

As Jesus and his entourage enter the village, the funeral procession with the grieving, widowed, now childless mother is leaving the village; they encounter one another. Jesus sees what is going on. He has compassion for the woman. He understands her world is lost and her despair.

He tells her not to cry; it is an instruction as baffling as his informing Martha and Mary that their brother is not dead. How do you tell a grieving person not to cry? What is Jesus up to? Then to the young man who is dead, he says, "Rise!" Who instructs a dead man to rise? The man sits up and begins to speak; fear seizes everyone. Do you still have your hat on? Is your seat belt fastened? Now that Jesus has intruded among us God can surprise us anytime God pleases, pushing into "off limits" territory; the regions death thought it owned.

Sometimes the surprising work of Jesus among us is glorious, sometimes scary, sometimes both. What we thought was a dead end isn't a dead end but a turn in the road that leads to light and life.

One theologian says the way you can tell the difference between a false, dead god, an idol, and a true and living God – like the one who disrupted the funeral procession in Nain – is that an idol, a dead god, is one we concoct ourselves; a dead god is controllable, containable, manageable; a dead god stays put and can be used for our purposes. But a living God shocks, turns things upside down, and uses us for God's purposes.

As the President said in his proclamation of Gay Pride Month, a lot of people are working for LGBT justice, and, we could add a lot of people are working for all kinds of justice – for equal rights for women; for those facing addiction – to name just a few this morning. And among all of those brave souls, those who call themselves followers of Jesus have a special place.

We do this work because he summons us to repel the forces of darkness. We live in times as challenging to human rights, freedom and well being as any since WWII; from LGBT equality to the need for more women in positions of power and authority to the longing for a health care industry that does not abuse the sick for profit – we are waging the battles our life and times.

We may be discouraged or fatigued or weary. Last night Avi Israel shared with me that when he visited Congressman Brian Higgins, he was told he was taking on a \$2.7 trillion industry and not to get his hopes up. But I am sure that's what they said to other everyday, ordinary people whose loved ones or who themselves were excluded or abused or exploited by some rigged system; and there were hundreds of people there last night emerged from their tombs of shame and guilt wearing bright t-shirts with their loved ones smiling faces on them.

The message today is we need not despair in the work for justice because the God we worship is a living God; a God who disrupted our settled arrangements with death in a little village outside of Capernaum.

As one elder said to the session after a long debate over limited resources and money, "Friends, since the resurrection it's hard for us to know what can and can't happen in the church."

We can never predict to what or where the fellowship of this table will lead us – except that it will change hearts, heal brokenness, and quell fear.

When you walk with Jesus, the old order of death, we thought so invincible, crumbles, walls fall down, barriers disappear. "Rise up," he said to the young man on the funeral bier. Indeed, rise up! Amen.