



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year B – Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 6, 2018, Janis Ian at 17

You know, elementary school in the 1970s for kid like me was not the greatest place to be. I was skinny and awkward, I had glasses on my face from the time I was eight, I buried my face in books to shut out the world, and while I loved to do things like hike and ride my bicycle, and while I was in good physical shape, I was not an athlete: I hated sports, and I dreaded competition because I knew I would lose.

And the cruelest thing to me was when we had to pick sides for kickball, dodgeball, and baseball during PE because I was one of those kids who always got picked last, reminding me of that Janis Ian song that was popular at the time and the line she sang that said:

*To those of us who knew the pain of Valentines that never came,
and those whose names were never called when choosing sides for basketball.*

That was me.

It's no fun to be on the outside. It's no fun to be excluded, just because of who you are and the way God made you. And who gets to make that judgment? And is that the will of God? That's not what Peter seems to be saying in the Bible this morning. Peter says:

Can anyone withhold the water?

That line is about bringing people in; not keeping people out. In the Christian life, we supposed to be about inclusion. And we're not supposed to settle for leaving people in the margins and accepting segregation and exclusion. That can't be if we really seek and serve Christ in all persons and strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being.

And that's why after years of being on the outside, it was God's grace and a magnificent gift for me to take my first communion at age 30. To walk through the doors of the Episcopal Church and not just to be welcomed, but to be wanted. And to be wanted not in spite of who I was, but because of who I was and the way God made me. That's the redeeming love of God that was waiting for me all those years and toward whose light I finally walked, because of people in the church like you.

But I had glimpses of acceptance and inclusion along the way. Somehow in my childhood I learned gift of compassion that I longed for from others. And thank God for that. I think it came from the grandmother and grandfather who took me in when I was 12 years old when my stepfather said I couldn't live in his house anymore. My grandparents took me in, gave me a home, sat down at table with me for breakfast and dinner, talked with me about my day, took me with them to their friends' houses for parties. So, yes, I had a glimpse of what it was like to be wanted and brought into a loving fold.

And in return, I'm grateful that my grandparents taught me how to give some of it back to others.

"Our beloved Church regards her children as having bodies as well as souls to be cared for, and sanctions the consecration of these and all that is beautiful in nature and art to the service of God." . . . Queen Emma.

Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 6, 2018, cont'd.

When I was in the sixth grade, we had a classmate, a classmate whom I'll call Mike, whom everybody shunned – mostly because his mother and father wouldn't take the time to wash his clothes and make sure he was bathed; and so he came to school dirty and smelly. No one wanted to sit by him. Many of us teased him. And that poor neglected child of God lived a childhood life in the margins. It was the burgeoning sin of the cruelty of children, our first glimpse of creating divisions in the body of Christ.

And it all happened right around the time that Janis Ian sang:

To those of us who knew the pain of Valentines that never came.

I remember that Valentine's Day in sixth grade, because I sat in the dining room the night before, preparing those little perforated cards where we took pencils and wrote the names of classmates after having received a mimeographed class list from our teacher so that we wouldn't forget anybody. Because of my grandparents' gentle guidance, I never dreamed of intentionally leaving anybody off that list. And then on Valentine's Day we all went around and put our cards on everybody else's desk.

But Mike was absent from school that day – I figured out why later on. At the end of the day and out of a class of almost 30 kids, there were only one or two Valentine's Day cards on Mike's desk, and one of them was from me — because that's the kind of thing my grandparents made sure I did, and when the next day came, Mike walked up to me with that card in his hand and tears brimming in his eyes and whispered, "Thank you." That was a glimpse into what redemption in the Christian life could be like for me, and I'm glad that I had somebody who taught me how to be kind to someone in the margins.

And the sad thing is, I see adults push people into the margins all the time, making them "other." Creating a world not of *we*, but of *us* and *them*. And what's even worse is that I've even seen it at seminary and I've seen it in church.

And that's why am so grateful for this Cathedral and the way that you intentionally reach out to others and bring them into the fold. A couple of weeks ago a visitor from Indiana said to me, "This is the most welcoming congregation I've ever seen." And except for cases where there might be a danger of physical, spiritual, or verbal violence (and there a good number of you who are even willing to risk that), you do all you can to ensure that no one is excluded from walking through our doors or singing in our choir or taking communion at our table. And I'm thankful that you embody the words in the Bible:

Can anyone withhold the water?

That's where the rubber meets the road in terms of the Easter message, isn't it? Because if we don't live into those words today, then Jesus resurrected from that tomb in the Holy Land 2,000 years ago for nothing.

We don't get to decide that we're better than other people. We don't get to say who's in and who's out. That's not our job. Our job is to do our very best to bring everyone into the fold by showing them the glorious wonder of the Christ light that we have within us through our sacraments, through our thoughts, through our words, and through our deeds. It's about inclusivity.

Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 6, 2018, cont'd.

Peter lived into that call from Jesus, the same Jesus who told him he was the rock on which the Church would be built. Peter lived into that call for inclusivity from Jesus to do all he could to make sure there was no exclusivity in our world and in our church. And for that, Peter was crucified upside-down on a hill in the Vatican on the outskirts of Rome. And 2000 years later, it's our job to pick up his banner and continue that cause.

So may we all give new meaning to this Eucharist and ask that it empower us and give us the strength and courage to create a world where songwriters never have to write those kinds of songs again, songs that say:

*To those of us who knew the pain of Valentines that never came
and those whose names were never called when choosing sides for basketball.*

May our thoughts, may our words, and may our deeds dash those tragic lyrics that ring true for so many in the margins. And instead may we boldly proclaim for our sake, for Peter's sake, for my classmate Mike's sake, and for God's sake:

No one can withhold the water!

Amen.