

“Jackals and Ostriches Too: The Gospel According to Nikki Sixx”  
Lent 5C (April 7, 2019)  
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>>Extend your grace to us and help us extend that same grace to ourselves. Amen.<<

“The other day I had a dream,” writes Philip Harrison in his parable about heaven. “I dreamed I arrived at the gates of heaven, heavy-shut, pure oak, bevelled and crafted, glinting sharp in the sunlight. St. Peter stood to greet me; the big man wore brown, smile set deep against his ruddy cheeks. ‘You’re here,’ he said. ‘I am,’ I said. ‘Great to see you - been expecting you,’ he smiled. ‘Come on in.’ He pushed gently against the huge door; it swung silently, creakless. I took a couple of steps forward until, at the threshold, one more step up and in, I realized I wasn’t alone. My friends had joined me, but they hovered behind, silently, looking on. None spoke. I realized only I could speak. I looked at them; some were Christians, some Hindus, some Buddhists, some Muslims, some Jews, some atheists. Some God knows what. I stopped, paused. A hesitant St. Peter looked at me, patiently, expectantly. ‘What about these guys?’ I asked him. ‘My friends. Can they come?’ ‘Well, Phil,’ [St. Peter] replied, ... ‘you know the rules. I’m sorry, but that’s the way things are. Only the right ones.’ I looked at him. He seemed genuinely pained by his answer. I stood, considering. What should I do? I thought about my reference points, and thought about Jesus, [the outcast], the outsider, the unacceptable, the drunkard, the fool, the heretic, the criminal, and I knew exactly where I belonged. ‘I’ll just stay here then too,’ I said, taking my one foot out of heaven. And I’ll tell you, I’d swear I saw something like a grin break across St. Peter’s face, and a voice from inside [heaven] whispered, ‘At last.’”<sup>1</sup>

Theologian Peter Rollins calls this story - this parable told by Philip Harrison - a story about “stand[ing] with those who dwell outside.”<sup>2</sup> Rollins says standing with those who are seen as outsiders is the highest calling of the follower of Christ, because Christ, he says, “opens up [a way of being] that seeks always to find those who are excluded ...”<sup>3</sup> It’s a message that hit home for me this week as Friday was the 25th anniversary of the death of Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the band Nirvana. It was no secret that Cobain suffered from bouts of debilitating depression, mixed with an addiction to heroin; he became a victim of gun violence by his own hand. Tributes to the late singer have been in the news this week - some have called him a genius, others testify to a deep connection to his music (I grew up listening to Nirvana), and still others, like Susie Tennant, the band’s promotions rep, shared stories about Nirvana’s “connection to” and advocacy for “the underdogs”.<sup>4</sup> They had a “willingness to stand up for the [queer] community, [for] women ‘and every oppressed minority’,” she said - a willingness to step outside of heaven, so to speak, and stand with the outsiders, to refer back to the parable I began with.

In reading up on Kurt Cobain’s life this week, and listening to reports on NPR,<sup>5</sup> I began reading about his battle with addiction. And reading about his addiction led me to a different rock star, who died and was revived after overdosing. That person was Nikki Sixx, the bass guitarist of the band Mötley Crüe. In 1987, Nikki Sixx overdosed, was pronounced dead, but

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008), 171-172.

<sup>2</sup> Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 172.

<sup>3</sup> Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 169.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/a-kurt-cobain-primer-starts-with-unplugged-and-never-ends/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/05/709603031/reflecting-on-kurt-cobains-crystalline-understanding-25-years-later>

was revived by a paramedic who gave him two shots of adrenaline to the heart. That paramedic later said he was a Mötley Crüe fan, and he refused to let Nikki Sixx die. In 2017, twenty years after the day that changed his life, Nikki Sixx wrote an op-ed in the *LA Times* about the opioid crisis in America.<sup>6</sup> “Heroin nearly killed me,” he wrote. “As a matter of fact, it did: for two minutes in 1987 I was pronounced clinically dead from an overdose.” “Mötley Crüe had just released [a] record ... and we were about to tour the world,” he goes on. “From the outside looking in, I was living the dream. But in reality, I was in the throes of a disease I couldn’t control ... .” Nikki Sixx then shares a statistic: in 2015, over 140 people a day died from overdosing in our country, more than car crashes and gun deaths combined; today that number is close to 200/day or roughly 71,000 people per year. “I am one of the lucky ones,” he concludes. “And I know my continuing sobriety is not the result of my actions alone. I have a loving family and an extensive support network.” “No one is a junkie by choice,” he says. “And no junkie is a lost cause.”

It’s that last line - *no junkie is a lost cause; no one is a lost cause* - that has stuck with me this week as I read Peter Rollins talking about standing with outsiders, because that’s what Jesus would do; and as I read about Kurt Cobain’s demons; and as I read Nikki Sixx’s op-ed and then thumbed through his published diary entries written while he was in the throes of addiction in 1987 in the run-up to that fateful day when he was resurrected from death.<sup>7</sup> *No one is a lost cause.*

Maybe this is also a message that emerges in today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah - today’s reading that is a poem, or perhaps even a set of song lyrics, penned by an ancient Hebrew prophet speaking or singing or reciting to a people who’d been dehumanized by exile. Removed from their homeland by imperial power, temple and capital city destroyed by that same power; and to this exiled, outsider people Isaiah speaks words of promise, borrowing imagery from Israel’s past stories of deliverance. Speaking on God’s behalf, Isaiah recalls the Exodus: “Thus says the Lord,” says Isaiah, says God, “I once made a road through the sea so that you could pass through mighty waters. I toppled chariots and horses - a mighty host - to set you free.” Isaiah promises a new exodus for an exiled people. He continues by recalling the wandering in the wilderness. Again, speaking for God, Isaiah says, “like I once made a road for you in the wilderness, I will make another road through the wilderness, like a river in the desert.” Isaiah promises that Israel’s new wilderness wandering in exile will lead to a new promised land. “I’m about to do something new,” says Isaiah, speaking for God. And then Isaiah’s lyrics veer into weird territory. “The wild beasts will honor me,” says Isaiah speaking for God. “The jackals and the ostriches.” Why “jackals” and “ostriches”? I confess that I didn’t know what to do this week with this part of Isaiah’s promise. Recalling the Exodus and the wilderness wandering to promise a new exodus and a new deliverance? That part is clear - new Exodus language is a common trope in the Hebrew prophets. Even the first followers of Jesus spoke of his death and resurrection as a new exodus. And making rivers in the desert, that too is a common trope: it’s new creation language, bringing life and refreshment out of dryness and death. St. Paul uses this language of new creation to speak of the experience of knowing Christ. But, to me this week, the jackals and the ostriches in today’s reading from Isaiah seemed to be just out-of-the-blue weird. Weird, that is, until I started researching where else in scripture jackals and ostriches make an appearance. They appear together earlier in the book of Isaiah (in ch. 34), and there

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-sixx-opioid-crisis-20170929-story.html>

<sup>7</sup> Nikki Sixx, *The Heroin Diaries: A Year in the Life of a Shattered Rock Star* (New York: Gallery Books, 2017 [2007]).

they symbolize isolation and abandonment. Jackals and ostriches are the outsiders: the one scavenging for scraps; the other sticking its head in the sand in isolation. But there's more. In the Mosaic law - in the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy - ostriches are listed with buzzards and vultures and pelicans and bats and several other winged creatures as un-Kosher. Not to be eaten by Kosher Jews. Why ostriches are on this forbidden list, I'm not sure. But ostriches remind me of emus - flightless and pretty rough-looking - which reminds me of a story. When I was in college, our baseball team would frequently travel around central Pennsylvania to play away games against other college baseball teams in the area. We had a food and a travel budget, but it wasn't a king's ransom, and so our baseball coach would take every opportunity, while we were on the road, to get us free meals whenever possible. After one away game - I don't remember where - we were heading home, but we stopped at a farm. The farm happened to be owned by the family of one of my teammates. The weather was nice, and we were eating outside in their backyard. There was potato salad and macaroni salad and watermelon and all the fixings of a typical picnic. We were also eating sloppy joes, which tasted a little bit funny. About midway through the meal, my teammate's dad, who owned the farm, asked how we all liked the sloppy joes. "Do you wanna know what meat is in those sloppy joes," he asked? A couple of guys stopped chewing at this question. Then my teammate's dad pointed across the dirt road to a paddock. In the paddock we saw about 30 or so emus. Yes, we were eating emu sloppy joes. A few guys on my team politely put their sandwiches down. Others just shrugged and kept on eating. I went for a second helping of potato salad.

Jackals, ostriches, emus. Kurt Cobains. Nikki Sixxes. Tax collectors. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector - today's gospel reading - is one of Jesus' most comical parables about two people who went into the temple in Jerusalem to pray. The Pharisee - the religious leader, says Jesus - proudly looked up to heaven, and then pompously thanked God that he was "not like other people" - not like the jackals and the ostriches and the emus, the Kurt Cobains and the Nikki Sixxes. "Thank you God," he prayed, "that I'm not even like this tax collector over here." "Thank you God," he continued, "that I'm so pious: fasting and giving, dotting all the 'i's' and crossing all the 't's'." I wonder if Jesus smirked as he told this part of the story. It's such a caricature - a caricature of the person who pretends to have it all together on the outside, when the truth is that inside there are jackals and ostriches, there are Kurt Cobains and Nikki Sixxes. The scene of the parable then shifts to the tax collector - the outsider, the reject, the addict, the junkie, the trans 30-something, the bullied teen, the parent who can't see light at the end of the daily-grind-tunnel, the millennial with piles of student debt, the lonely retiree. "Tax collector" is a symbolic phrase in this story - symbolic, like jackals and ostriches in Isaiah. The posture of the tax collector in this parable is crucial. Jesus says he "stood far off" - far away from the center of the temple, not believing he was worthy to enter God's presence. He was too unclean, like an ostrich. And then, says Jesus, the tax collector "was beating his breast" and he "wouldn't even look up to heaven," believing he was too far outside, too dirty, too compromised; so far gone that possibly even God couldn't reach him. And in that state of outsider-ness - that state of jackal-ness, of ostrich-ness - the tax collector spoke a simple prayer, the simplest of prayers, a prayer that Christian liturgy over the years has turned into a song in Latin: *miserere mei, Deus*. God have mercy on me. A prayer of desperation that sounds like one of Nikki Sixx's journal entries from January 28, 1987, when he was in the throes of addiction: "Please, God," he prayed, "make it stop."<sup>8</sup> *Miserere mei, Deus*.

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<sup>8</sup> Sixx, *The Heroin Diaries*, 50.

You know, there's a reason why Jesus took a step out of heaven - to return to that parable I began today's sermon with - took a step out of heaven and entered the world of tax collectors and sinners, the world of jackals and ostriches, of addicts and outsiders, why, as an infant he was a migrant and refugee, and why, as an adult, he was a critic of those who pretended to have it all together: it was to hammer home a simple point - the same point Nikki Sixx made in his *LA Times* op-ed - the point that *no one is a lost cause*; that God, as Isaiah says, can make a way in any desert in life, that God's arms of love can spread so wide that even jackals and ostriches can find acceptance and grace.

Which reminds me of a UCC Daily Devotional written recently by Marchae Grair. Grair speaks about the miracle of grace. "I am a miracle," she writes. "When you look at me, you may see the teenaged girl with pain in her heart and cuts down her arms. Or the empty alcohol bottles and the blurry memories. Or the scars from abandonment and relationship abuse. But if that's all you see, you're not looking hard enough. You see, you're missing the miracle. I am a living miracle; my testimony is a miracle. The tears I've cried in darkness don't get to rob me from feeling the warmth of tomorrow's sunshine. The pain I've experienced does not get to define me. All of my definitions begin and end with Grace. In his arrival," writes Grair, "Jesus made room for spiritual rebirth. Although our past exists, we don't have to live in it. The greatest gift we can receive during this season [of Lent] is the permission to look into the mirror without grief or shame. We can look past the hurtful things people have done to us, or even the hurtful things we've done to ourselves and know our worth is not diminished and our souls can't ever be tarnished beyond repair. I am an ever-evolving miracle, and so are you, made whole by the grace of [God]. For with the miracle of the coming Christ, nothing - not even the salvation of someone like you or me - is impossible with God. Amazing Grace," she prays, "thank you for the sweetest sound, the sound of your love setting me free."

...Marchae Grair has tapped into something profound - something at the core of Christianity. A core idea, a concept, a reality: it's that old idea of the incarnation. The incarnation: God becoming human; God touching humanity; God becoming vulnerable and taking a risk in the name of love (to borrow lyrics from the band U2); that God stepped out of heaven to stand with the outsiders, as in that parable I began today's sermon with; that God became the Curt Cobains and the Nikki Sixxs; identifying with the junkies and the tax collectors and the sinners, the Zacchaeuses who had money but who needed a friend, the broken and the damaged people, the jackals and the ostriches, with *miserere mei, Deus* on their lips. And Christ stepped out of heaven to make a way for all of us in the desert, because no one is a lost cause. Amen.