

“The Power of Stories and the Gospel According to Jonathan Van Ness”

Proper 24C (October 20, 2019)

Scripture Readings: Exodus 1:22-2:10; Luke 18:9-14

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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

Jonathan Van Ness is completely fabulous. He (his preferred pronouns are “he/him/his”) stars with five other fabulous gay men on the Netflix show “Queer Eye.” The logline of “Queer Eye” is, “turning red states pink one makeover at a time.” If you’ve never seen the show, and you have a Netflix account, this afternoon would be a great time to enter the “Queer Eye” world of fabulousness. The “Fab Five,” as they’re known on the show - Antoni, Karamo, Tan, Bobby, and Jonathan Van Ness - are invited into the lives of people in red America who are down-and-out, struggling, underappreciated, or who just need a boost and a fresh perspective on life, and they transform them - modernize wardrobes, freshen up hairstyles, beautify workspaces, upgrade home furniture, and tell the people they help that they are loved and beautiful. The Fab Five are experts at making people look and feel fabulous. Jonathan Van Ness just came out with a memoir that was spotlighted in *The New York Times* last month.<sup>1</sup> The first thing readers encounter when they open his memoir is a note that reads as follows: “Imperfection is beautiful. To anyone who has ever felt broken beyond repair, this [book] is for you. If you’ve ever been excluded, or told you were not enough, know that you are enough, and beautifully complete.”<sup>2</sup> See? I told you Jonathan Van Ness is completely fabulous.

Alex Hawgood of *The Times* caught up with Jonathan at a diner near his apartment in the Chelsea section of New York. Sporting what he calls his “sixteenth-century Jesus look” - long hair and dark beard, deep, thoughtful eyes, Jonathan was “not feeling his normal gorgeous self.” He had what speaker and writer Brené Brown calls a “vulnerability hangover.” “I’ve had nightmares every night for the past three months because I’m scared to be this vulnerable with people,” he said. Jonathan was talking about his tell-all memoir where he writes openly about being bullied as a young teen for being, in his words, a “little gorgeous queen” born and raised in a small, conservative midwestern town.<sup>3</sup> He writes about being abused as a child by an older boy; he writes about having an eating disorder, about the pain of his parents’ divorce, about being a recovering addict, about battling depression, about being body-shamed for struggling with his weight as a teen, about having his heart broken many times by those he loved; he writes about being called terrible epithets for being the first male to join the cheerleading squad in his high school; he writes about being gender queer - wanting to wear, in his words, “dresses, rock heels, play with makeup. But [also be able to watch] WWF wrestling [with his] brothers . . . . Identifying male and female in the same day is something that has always been possible for me,” he writes.<sup>4</sup> “I’ve always been in touch with my feminine side. [As a child,] I loved to carry purses with checkbooks, pens, ChapStick, and little baby things for my Cabbage Patch doll. I wanted to be a modern mom on the go . . . .” And, in his memoir, he writes about being terribly self-destructive into his 20s, because, in his words, “[I had] an insatiable thirst for somebody who wouldn’t reject

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/21/style/jonathan-van-ness-hiv-memoir.html>

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Van Ness, *Over the Top: A Raw Journey to Self-Love* (New York: HarperOne, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Van Ness, *Over the Top*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Van Ness, *Over the Top*, 25.

me.”<sup>5</sup> “The shame,” he writes, “ran down into a fundamental belief of what I was worth. Which [I thought] wasn’t a lot.”<sup>6</sup>

As Jonathan shared a few of these stories and experiences with Alex Hawgood of *The Times* in a Chelsea diner while sipping his fifth cup of coffee, “Suddenly, a 20-something woman with a ponytail appeared at the table [looking to snap a selfie with Jonathan]. ‘I’m so sorry,’” he said, holding her up, “‘I [just] can’t take a picture right now,’” as he, “discreetly wip[ed tears from] his eyes. ‘Oh, that’s fine, [she said]. I just want to say that I love the show.’ ... ‘Thank you,’” he said. [After exhaling and sipping his coffee, Jonathan said] ‘If you’re having a terrible moment or in the middle of a conversation about something serious, people don’t care’ ... . ‘They [just] want their bubbly [Jonathan Van Ness] and to get that major selfie.’” Jonathan’s fame - his instantly recognizable sixteenth century Jesus look on the streets of New York City, frolicking like “a gorgeous gazelle,” in his words - his fame has led him to ask some difficult questions: “Would [people] still be so excited to meet me if [they] really knew who I was? If [they] knew all the things I’d done?”<sup>7</sup> “If [they] knew all of me,” he writes, “[would they still love me? Would they] want me as [their] best friend?” He writes about feeling shame. “Shame,” he says, “is the feeling of, ‘If you knew all there was to know about me, you wouldn’t love me anymore ... .’”<sup>8</sup>

These are such raw and painful statements. They are personal story-statements about insecurity and shame, and the question of whether someone is worthy of love. And they remind me of that personal statement - that prayer - of the tax collector in today’s gospel reading - the one who stood at a distance; who was too ashamed to dare look up to heaven; who whispered his quiet prayer from the back of the sanctuary: “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus is the storyteller; and this short, six-verse parable is full of emotion. It’s a parable about two people praying in the temple in ancient Jerusalem: a Pharisee and a tax collector. As Jesus tells it, the Pharisee, pompous and haughty, looked proudly to heaven and prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector over here.” You can imagine him pointing to the tax collector in the back of the sanctuary as he prayed. “Thank you, God, that I’m not like him.” We don’t know much, historically speaking, about Pharisees in the first century. But I’m pretty sure most of them weren’t as self-important as this guy. Jesus is using caricature as a story-telling tool to describe anyone who compares themselves with someone else in order to make themselves feel better. “At least I’m better than *that* person.” But what’s so disturbing to me about the Pharisee’s words is his use of prayer to shame. He lumps together the Jonathan-Van-Ness-like-tax-collector with a bunch of other people who he thinks do bad things: “thieves, rogues, adulterers.” It’s a shaming act - a shaming prayer *in* the sanctuary of all places. “Thank you God that I’m not like all ‘those’ people who do bad things. Thank you God that I’m so much better than him - that filthy tax collector.”

It’s no secret that tax collectors in the ancient world were unpopular. It’s fair to say, they were no more popular than the IRS is today. Ancient Roman and Greek writers, like Cicero or Diogenes or Dio Chrysostom, lumped tax collectors together with thieves, robbers, and beggars.<sup>9</sup> Julius Pollux - an ancient Athenian rhetorician - listed 19 undesirable occupations,

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<sup>5</sup> Van Ness, *Over the Top*, 103.

<sup>6</sup> Van Ness, *Over the Top*, 163.

<sup>7</sup> Van Ness, *Over the Top*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Van Ness, *Over the Top*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> ABD 6:337.

among which were 6 varieties of tax-collectors.<sup>10</sup> And rabbinic writers in early Judaism lumped tax collectors in with robbers, murderers, and sinners.<sup>11</sup> The Roman Empire in the first century didn't employ a large number of administrators, even when it came to collecting taxes. In fact, it's still a marvel of history that such a geographically large Roman Empire - extending from Britain to Russia, from northern Europe to the Sahara, from the Atlantic Ocean to eastern Syria - held together with such a slim administration. When it came to collecting taxes, the second century Roman jurist Gaius said the Romans employed "partners," or private contractors.<sup>12</sup> Oxford classicist Robin Lane Fox describes these private contractors - ancient tax collectors - as "ferocious," because they "often used force" to squeeze local populations.<sup>13</sup> Ancient tax collecting could be brutal and even corrupt. In the region of Gaul - modern day France and Belgium - one Roman "financial agent, or procurator, is said to have declared that there were fourteen months in the year, not twelve, in order to claim two more months' tax."<sup>14</sup> At the local level, private contractors - tax collectors - employed armed thugs to help them collect above the required tax amount, while the Romans looked the other way; the extra amount they could keep for themselves as profit. Call it imperial government extortion. A system that bred corruption and targeted the vulnerable. Which is why today's story about a repentant tax collector is so powerful, and why it was such a marvelous act of grace for Jesus to eat with tax collectors, and even to name a tax collector - Matthew - as one of his disciples.

We don't know much about the tax collector in today's gospel reading. But we might imagine him asking the same questions as Jonathan Van Ness: "Would anyone want to talk with me if they really knew who I was? If they knew all the things I'd done? If they knew all of me, would they love me?" And we might imagine this tax collector straining under the burden of shame - shame over the things he had done - entering a sanctuary in search of relief and healing, having, in the words of Jonathan Van Ness, "an insatiable thirst for somebody who wouldn't reject [him]." Which is why the pompous Pharisee's prayer *in* the sanctuary is so heartbreaking: "Thank you God that I'm not like *that* guy." It's interesting to me that even though the characters in the story don't have names, and even though we don't know their backstories, there are three statements - three mini stories - told about the tax collector in this parable. There's the mini story the Pharisee tells about the tax collector, lumping him together with "thieves, rogues, adulterers," people who he thinks are really bad. It's the shaming story. There's also the mini story the tax collector tells about himself, which emerges in his prayer: "God be merciful to me a sinner" - a personal mini story that is honest and vulnerable. The story that says, "I don't have anywhere else to go, God, no one wants to be my friend, so I'm here opening up to you." And then there's the story Jesus tells about the tax collector: "I tell you this man went down to his home justified . . .," says Jesus. It's a story of acceptance and grace. The compassionate story - the story with words from the first page of Jonathan Van Ness' memoir - we might imagine God speaking them: "Imperfection is beautiful. To anyone who has ever felt broken beyond repair, my grace is for you. If you've ever been excluded, or told you were not enough, know that you are enough, and beautifully complete."

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<sup>10</sup> TDNT 8:99.

<sup>11</sup> ABD 6:337-338.

<sup>12</sup> Gaius, *On the Provincial Edict (Institutiones)* 3 = *Digest* 3.4.1.

<sup>13</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 490.

<sup>14</sup> Fox, *The Classical World*, 491.

As a child Jonathan Van Ness loved women's gymnastics. He wanted to *be* Dominique Dawes or Tatiana Gutsu - famous Olympian gymnasts. To help him realize his dreams, Jonathan's step-dad took a four-inch wide piece of lumber, sanded it down, attached a piece of "thin light-blue-Berber-style carpet around" it, and nailed it to two-by-fours "about three inches off the ground." It was a do-it-yourself balance beam for seven-year-old Jonathan to practice on.<sup>15</sup> "Once [the beam] was finished," he writes, "I was ready to create my moment of moments. I began my process of choreographing what was to be, I was sure, the most beautiful, moving, and artistically accomplished balance beam set of all time. The mount to the routine was an off-ice-style single toe loop landed with one foot into a straddle-leap that then went into some side-step dance work . . . . Then with dramatic flair, I turned my gaze back to the beam into a straight-on stance, with one toe pointed out in front of me, as I lowered my arms to my side with attention and panache, . . . into the most technically perfect beam cartwheel . . . . I successfully landed it only once in thousands of attempts. . . . [My step-dad] was most often willing to be my Ukranian judge, my Chinese judge, and my Russian judge. . . . [And he] helped me find my voice in my routine. [And when I struggled with back-flips, he took me to the pool to practice.] "You can do this," he [would say]. . . . [On one] particular day, he got me out onto the diving board, standing behind me [as a coach]. . . . I walked to the edge of the board, looking back at him, the invisible unknown of the pool behind me. 'Put your hands up,'" he said. "'I'm not ready!' I said. 'Not yet.' [My step-dad marched out onto the board,] put his hand under my lower back and forced me into a back bend and pushed me and finally, for the first time, I did a back dive. It wasn't even that high. It was a one-meter . . . diving board. It wasn't far to fall at all. But I was like, [wow,] I didn't die. When I went back up onto the diving board, I did a backflip into the pool on my first try."

Jonathan's mom and step-dad loved him unconditionally through all his years of wandering and shame. I want to close this morning with the words he uses to describe his parents.<sup>16</sup> Maybe we can imagine them being words about our Divine Parent, the One who says to the tax collector in each of us, "If you've ever been excluded, or told you were not enough, know that you are enough, and beautifully complete."

Here's what Jonathan Van Ness writes about his parents: "No matter how persistent the bullying or frequent the social slights and disappointments, my mom always tried to help me through it. She never made me feel weirder or worse about myself and I never ever had to question her love and acceptance of me on a human level. . . . My mom accepted me completely when so many others couldn't." "When I'm fiercely loyal, when I have the courage to trust even after that trust has been violated, when I can find hope and faith even when the world has given me every reason not to - that's the part of me that my mom and [step-dad] nurtured. Even though I was a prickly, prickly rosebush, . . . they cared for me with so much patience - as much as they had for each other. That showed me what love is, and that it really can exist. It was the most hopeful lesson that they ever could have given me." They taught me that "I had been worth saving all along."<sup>17</sup> Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> Van Ness, *Over the Top*, 58-63.

<sup>16</sup> Van Ness, *Over the Top*, 44, 62-63.

<sup>17</sup> Van Ness, *Over the Top*, 44, 226.