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2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“No Longer”

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Galatians 3:26-29

*For in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

## *No Longer*

In 1976, Barbara Jordan, a congresswoman from Texas, became the first African American woman to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. By that time, Jordan was accustomed to breaking barriers. She was the first African American elected to the Texas Senate after Reconstruction, and the first African American woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. She was also one of the first lesbians to serve in either office, but that was a well-kept secret. Jordan had become a national figure when she made a televised opening statement at the House Judiciary Committee hearings during the Nixon impeachment process. Some even believed that in the 1970s, she had a shot at the presidency, but, in the end, that was not to be.

Jordan opened her keynote address to the Democratic National Convention with a reflection on the one hundred and forty-four-year history of the convention, in which every four years, members of the Democratic party gathered to choose a presidential candidate and to set the party platform. But this year, she said, "there is something different, something special. I, Barbara Jordan, am the keynote speaker." With that statement, the crowd filling the stadium went absolutely wild, cheering and clapping. When the bedlam died down, Jordan continued, "My presence here is one additional bit of evidence that the American dream need not forever be deferred." To watch the footage of this speech you can find it on YouTube, of course even though the picture is grainy and the audio doesn't quite line up with the video you can tell, something important is happening. If a black, gay, woman's voice was not just heard, but amplified, and encouraged, and cheered on at a national convention, clearly a tectonic shift in American politics was taking place.

But Jordan was not naïve about the challenges that she and her country faced in 1976. "We are a people in a quandary about the present and in search of our future," she said, "...a people not only trying to solve the problems of the present...but attempting at a larger scale to fulfill the promises of America, to create and sustain a society in which all of us are equal."<sup>1</sup>

Jordan was speaking about the challenges of living and governing in America,

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<sup>1</sup> I learned about Barbara Jordan, and this speech on the podcast This American Life, episode 665, "Before Things Went to Hell," Act One, "Where Have You Gone, Barbara Jordan? Our Nation Turns Its Lonely Eyes to You," by Miki Meek. Listen here: <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/665/before-things-went-to-hell/act-one-3>

This country built on the extraordinary promise that all are created equal. But her words reflect the task to which God's people the task to which WE have been and always will be called: to work to fulfill the promises, not of humans or of nations, but of God. And the promises of God are that the forces that divide God's children forces of injustice, inequality, and prejudice these forces WILL be overturned...not by power and might, but by love. The Bible is full of stories that reveal the failure of humanity to fulfill this calling and the lengths to which God will go to set us, and the whole world, right. You might be surprised to hear that one such story unfolds in the book called the Song of Solomon.

It would be easy enough to ask what this book is doing in the Bible since it appears to be a description of a steamy love affair. But one of the things that happen in this book is a reversal of a long-standing, deep-seated inequality, the inequality between men and women traced back to the book of Genesis. One of the punishments for Eve giving Adam the apple is that women are subjugated to men.

"Your desire shall be for your husband," God tells the woman,  
"and he shall rule over you."

But in the Song of Solomon, the woman says boldly to her lover:

"my beloved is mine, and I am his,"

thus restoring men and women to the equal partnership, God intended them to have.<sup>2</sup>

This is a book which declares: inequality is not aligned with the promises of God and we will tolerate it *no longer*.

We see this kind of overturning and restoring again in the life and ministry of Jesus, who constantly reaches out to those who have been marginalized and devalued and returns them to their rightful place in God's community proclaiming, in word and indeed, that such injustice would be tolerated *no longer*. We see it in the conversion of Saul, who was first a zealous rule-follower, determined to persecute the followers of Jesus, but who became the most dedicated and passionate of Christ's apostles after his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road. In that brief encounter, the risen Christ overturned Saul's understanding of who God is and who God's people are, changing him so profoundly that he took a new name, Paul. The apostle Paul proclaimed to Gentiles throughout the Roman world that the promises of God were promises

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Schifferdecker, Working Preacher Commentary on Song of Solomon 2:10-13, 8:6-7; August 2, 2015: [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2511](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2511)

for them as well as for the Jews. He proclaimed to them, again and again, that because of God's love in Jesus Christ, love that is stronger even than death, you are outsiders *no longer*.

As a rule-following Jew, Paul knew that the ritual by which Jewish children were brought into the faith was circumcision, a ritual reserved only for boys. Paul knew the daily prayer uttered by Jewish men, thanking God for not creating them a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul boldly overturns this understanding, proclaiming that the new ritual of baptism available to all of God's children reveals that no matter our gender or station or citizenship, we all belong to God, we are all one in Christ Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Paul argues that baptism changes everything or, more accurately, it reorients everything, restoring it to the way it is meant to be. Because of our baptism, we do not define ourselves by the family we are born into.

We do not judge one another more or less worthy or capable because of race or gender. We no longer look at our outward identifiers and then treat one another accordingly. We are **divided *no longer***. Baptism means that no matter who we are or what we look like, we are no longer different, or other, or better or worse. Because of our baptism, each of us is unconditionally loved and infinitely worthy. Because of our baptism, we are all ONE.

Like the apostle Paul, Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned a world where the categories of identity race, nationality, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, education or any other category you can think of where these categories did not determine a person's value or self-worth or the opportunities they were afforded. King envisioned a world where dreams would be deferred or denied *no longer*.

In his "I Have a Dream Speech" in Washington, D.C. in August 1963, King spoke of the "fierce urgency of now."

*Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice, he said.*

*Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.*

*Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.*

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, Working Preacher Commentary on Galatians 3:23-28, June 20, 2010: [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=610](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=610)

*It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment.*<sup>4</sup>

Paul too was convinced of the fierce urgency of now. He knew that the promises of God revealed in Jesus Christ changed everything NOW. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or citizen, there is no longer man or woman, we are all one!

Two thousand years after Paul wrote those words, fifty-five years after MLK's famous speech, forty-three years after Barbara Jordan spoke at the Democratic National Convention, and ten years after our first black president was sworn into office, what are the urgent issues of our time that God calls us to lift up, to overturn, to reorient, to tolerate *no longer*?

In too many ways, they are the same issues: prejudice, bigotry, racism, sexism, greed. So it's easy to despair that all the changes we've seen are incremental and easily reversed. But I am convinced that the apostle Paul would say, and King would say, and Barbara Jordan would say, and Barack Obama would say, and all the others that have fought so hard for a better version of community would say, *no longer!* We will tolerate these distortions of God's promises *no longer!* Every one of us has the fire of love and compassion in our souls, for we are the beloved children of the living God. We have the power of God, power to overcome hate with love, to overcome prejudice with compassion, to transform inequality into equity that all of God's children may have their gifts stifled, and their dreams deferred *no longer*.

Thirteen years after King's speech in Washington, Barbara Jordan made her speech at the Democratic National Convention. In that speech, she reminded her listeners what happens when we fail to recognize our common identity, saying: *Many fear the future. Many are distrustful of their leaders and believe that their voices are never heard...but a spirit of harmony will survive in America **only** if each of us remembers that **we share a common destiny**.*

*If each of us remembers when self-interest and bitterness seem to prevail that **we share a common destiny**.*

*We are a generous people so why can't we be generous with each other? But this is the great danger America faces:*

*that we will cease to be one nation and become*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>

*a collection of interest groups instead.*

*City against suburb, region against region, individual against individual,  
each seeking to satisfy private wants:*

*if that happens, **who then will speak for America?***

***Who then will speak for the common good?***

Forty-three years later, this is still the great danger America faces. It is also the great danger humanity faces. In our government, in our schools, in our churches, in our homes, in our neighborhoods: who will speak for the common good? Who will remind us of our shared destiny? Remember what Paul reminds us:

in Christ, there is **no longer** Jew or Greek,

**no longer** Christian or Muslim or Jew or Hindu,

**no longer** male or female or transgender or cisgender,

**no longer** immigrant or refugee or migrant or citizen,

**no longer** Democrat or Republican,

**no longer** liberal or conservative,

**no longer, no longer, no longer.**

WE ARE ONE.

We belong to God and to each other.

This is the promise of God.

May we claim it as our own and use the gifts God has given us

to restore our world and gather each other into

the **beloved community** God longs for us to be.

Amen.