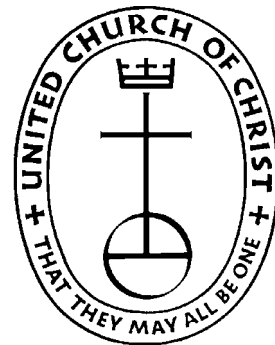


The Danger of the Single Story

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
January 10, 2010



This sermon tells of the danger of telling just one story about people, the danger of seeing people in one narrow way. We must listen to more than one story, and we must let people tell their own stories about themselves, if we are to move toward peace and understanding.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Reading: Book of Jonah (selection)

First Congregational Church
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The Danger of the Single Story

Chimamanda Adichie was born in Nigeria. Her father was a university professor and her mother a college registrar. At age 19, she came to the United States to study. With degrees in creative writing from Eastern Connecticut State University and Johns Hopkins University, she produced her first prize-winning novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, in 2003. Since then she has written a second novel and a collection of short stories. She divides her time between Nigeria and the United States.

Last year at Oxford, she delivered a remarkable lecture about the danger of the single story. Listen to the opening paragraphs:

I'm a storyteller. And I would like to tell you a few personal stories about "the danger of the single story." I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. I was an early reader and I read British and American children's books.

I was also an early writer. And when I began to write, at age seven, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading. All my characters were white and blue-eyed. They played in the snow and ate apples. They talked about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow. We ate mangoes. And we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to.

My characters also drank a lot of ginger beer because the characters in the British books I read drank ginger beer. Never mind that I had no idea what ginger beer was.

This demonstrates how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children.

[Let me stop for a moment. Those of you who are lesbian or gay, who in your youth heard the single story that said homosexuality was an aberration and sinful, think how vulnerable you were to that story.]

Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books, by their very nature, had to have foreigners in them, and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify.

Now things changed when I discovered African books. There weren't many of

them available. But because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye I went through a mental shift in my perception of literature. I realized that people like me, girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature. I started to write about things I recognized.

Now, I loved those American and British books. They stirred my imagination. They opened new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did was save me from having a single story of what books are.

She continued:

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. So we had live-in domestic help who often came from nearby rural villages. The year I turned eight we got a new house boy named Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then we went to his village to visit. His mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them is how poor they were. Their poverty was my single story of them.

That's how she began talking about the danger of a single story. Let me tell you about a time in ancient Israel when a single story prevailed. According to the biblical narrative, the kingdom that David established around 1000 BCE split into two entities after his son Solomon's death: the north, which continued to be called Israel, and the south, which was called Judah and later Judea.

When the north fell to Assyria in 722 BCE, its leading citizens were deported and resettled elsewhere in the Assyrian empire. Many likely became refugees in Judah. The south continued as an independent nation for over a century after that, but in 586 BCE, Babylon conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem's temple and sent most of its people into exile.

But 50 years later, Cyrus, of Persia, conquered Babylon and allowed the Hebrews to go home as long as they remained loyal to Persia and submitted to heavy taxation.

That is a quick summary of much more complicated set of events.

The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah give us a glimpse into the restoration of Judah. A single story arose that said we Judeans have always suffered at the hands of

others. We must re-establish our realm and rebuild the Temple. We need to build a wall around Jerusalem to keep all others outside.

They would have nothing to do with those who had migrated to Judah after the fall of the northern realm; they would have nothing to do with Samaritans who had moved down to the area around Jerusalem during the exile. New laws required that the men of Judah who were married to foreign women had to send those women and their children away from Judah.

There was one single story that defined “we” versus “them.” But amidst that xenophobia, some pieces of incredible Hebrew literature emerged that did just what Chimamanda Adichie called for: literature that lifted up an alternative story; one story is not enough.

The book now attributed to Isaiah is really a compilation of writings of at least three people, and the third section comes from this time of “the single story.” But it speaks of affirming foreigners who wanted to be part of the life of Judah; it calls for kindness and justice rather than judgment.

A second book with an alternative story is Ruth, a beautiful piece of fiction from this post-exilic period which lifted up as its heroine a foreign woman.

And perhaps my favorite post-exile alternative story is the Book of Jonah, a tale set in the north in a much earlier era when the Assyrians were seen as the enemies. Its central character, Jonah, feels God wants him to go to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh to preach to the people about God’s love. That goes absolutely against the single story of good Israelites and bad Assyrians. Jonah won’t do it.

So he flees, and the storyteller has God stirring up a tempest at sea, and Jonah ends up in the water being swallowed by a big fish. After a few days, the fish deposits Jonah on the shore, and this time he decides to obey God’s call to go to Nineveh. It is a fun and clever story.

Jonah preaches to the people he despises and converts them, much to his chagrin. So now there is no chance God will punish them, and Jonah is furious. The story ends with the fascinating image of Jonah sitting on a hillside, a lonely and pathetic figure, pouting and hoping that somehow God will repent and decide after all to rain down fire on the Ninevites.

Jonah couldn’t let go of that single story; he couldn’t see the Assyrians in any way other than the way he had been previously taught. He couldn’t hear their story. What a remarkable narrative to come out of that xenophobic time in the life of Judah.

Let me return to Adichie's lecture. She said:

When I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States, I was 19. My American roommate asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said Nigeria has English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa. A single story of catastrophe. In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her. No possibility of a connection as human equals.

Then Adichie continued:

But I must add that I too am guilty in the question of the single story. A few years ago, I visited Mexico. The political climate in the U.S. was tense. There were debates about immigration. There were endless stories of Mexicans sneaking across the border and fleeing the healthcare system.

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. Then I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself.

So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.

I think she is right – we do that all the time. Think of the single story that has been told about race – about orientation – about gender – about disabilities.

So often religion is dictated by a single story. Diana Eck, director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, has said that if you know only one religion, you don't know any. One story isn't enough.

The Christian story – the teachings and example of Jesus – is of great value to me. But that story alone is not enough. Jesus wasn't a Christian; he was an active, faithful, practicing Jew. His movement was aimed at revitalizing the Judaism of his day. And so the Christian story must always be intertwined with the story of Judaism. Christianity

has so often defined faith in terms of correct belief which is not at all what Jesus was about. Judaism talks more about behavior than belief, about the way we live our daily lives. We need that story.

There is so much we can learn from Islam. I marvel at the deep faith that inspires the daily prayers and the Ramadan fast. Muhammad was deeply concerned about issues of justice for the poor; some of his words in the Qur'an are inspiring. We need that story.

Hindu worship involves all the senses; word-focused Protestants need that story. This morning for the pastoral prayer I used the Metta, the Buddhist practice focusing on loving kindness. One story is not enough.

Right after the Fort Hood shooting, the Islamic mosque in Azusa, Al-Fatiha Masjid, was desecrated.

A bomber boarded a plane to the US – so last week a Qur'an was burned outside the Islamic Educational Center in Costa Mesa during the Friday prayers and the Islamic portion of an interfaith display in Mission Viejo was vandalized.

I would guess whoever engaged in that vandalism knew only one story, which connected Islam and violence.

Think about the folks who voted for Proposition 8. Most of them operate with only one story – that a marriage can only be between one man and one woman. That is incredibly sad, because there are other beautiful stories to be told of a variety of ways that people build loving relationships. I think of Chuck and Al, important members of this congregation for so many years before their deaths, who were together for over forty years. None of us could say "Chuck" without adding "Al," or "Al" without adding "Chuck." Two men who were never apart, who loved each other in incredible ways.

Think of the six couples married here in that special ceremony during that window of time when gay marriages were legal. Couples together faithfully for 20, 30, 40 years.

Now those with the single story miss the richness of that experience. One story is just not enough.

Each year at the Pride Parade we pass those far-right demonstrators who make it clear that they detest church folks like us who walk in the parade. I used to be angry about those protestors, but now I simply feel sorrow. How much they are missing. Their whole lives are built around one hate-filled story. They could find so much more mean-

ing in life if they could hear the stories of those who walk past them in the parade.

Listen to how Chimamanda Adichie connected having only one story to the issue of power:

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is an Igbo word about the power structures of the world; it is "nkali," a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali. How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many are told, are really dependent on power.

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.

I thought of that this morning in terms of the work of CLUE (Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice) and our information moment today. The Long Beach Chamber of Commerce, the Mayor, the Downtown Business Associates say there is only one story for Long Beach – the story of business development and economic opportunity. In that story the Long Beach hotels are icons, worshiped for bringing revenue into the city.

But you heard another story this morning, a very different story. You heard about the pain felt by those who work in the hotels – about the struggle to survive on salaries that are below living wages, about the physical difficulty of meeting the increased demands placed on those jobs. That is a second story. A story that those in power don't want heard.

CLUE is also involved with working for justice for those who drive trucks at the ports. The people with power, the people with money, the people who can get their stories turned into editorials in the *Press-Telegram*, the Mayor and Council Members, will tell you one story – that the Long Beach port is now clean and that the settlement they reached with the American Trucking Association is a good thing. And it is good that there has been progress on air quality and environmental concerns. But they won't talk about the workers. Anyone who asks about what the truck drivers face is accused of being a pawn of the Teamsters who are only out for the own self-interests.

But I have been to the port. I have talked with the truck drivers. I have ridden with them. I know firsthand that most of them work 12-14 hours a day just so their families can survive. Has the Mayor met with them, looked at their trucks, helped add up their expenses? Have the Council Members or Port Commissioners? Or are they comfortable with the one story, the one the press is happy to print? Yes, sometimes hav-

ing only one story is about power – who has it and who doesn't.

There is a real danger to a single story. The quilt hanging on our balcony rails today is a visual reminder of that. The workers in our hotels are working long hours and still living off food stamps, covering their children with Medicaid, while the city officials are toasting themselves and the business world for bringing tourism to Long Beach.

The goal of life for all three Abrahamic faiths – Islam, Christianity and Judaism – is wholeness, salvation, shalom, salaam. And the more stories we hear and the more we seek to know and understand all of our neighbors, the closer we will come to that wholeness.

Amen.