

*Based on Luke 9:1-6. Shaking the Dust*

In the early 1960s a man named Johnny Zander found himself out of a job.

As luck would have it, the Juvenile Corrections Center had an opening to work with young people in the court system, and Johnny was more than qualified. God had given Johnny great gifts for healing and for exorcising the demons that hold far too many young people in chains. He was the perfect candidate for guiding young people into putting their lives back together in the midst of their struggles. So he interviewed for the job, and he interviewed well. Right up until the moment the interviewer said, “I’m sorry, Johnny. I can’t hire you. You’re black.”

It was legal back then. The privileged white class fostered a false sense of purity—supposedly sanctioned by Scripture—that fueled the separation of the races and perpetuated a second-class citizenship for people of color. It was designed to make men like Johnny believe they were worthless. Far too often, it worked.

But Johnny knew he was gifted in the eyes of God. He was well-schooled in Luke’s Gospel, including the text before us today. Johnny held on tight to his dignity and his calling, he shook the dust off his feet as a testimony against the racism of the employers at the Corrections Center, and he went to work for the House of Neighborly Service in South Tucson instead. There he was well-received, proclaiming the kingdom of God and offering a healing and hopeful presence with young people in that ministry. A legacy that continues well into the present day.

But that is not the end of the story.

Five years later, the job at the Juvenile Corrections Center opened up again. By all rights Johnny’s rage against the blatant racism of his earlier application could have been rekindled all over again. And perhaps it was. But that did not stop Johnny from doing what he thought was right. He applied for the job again. And the same person who turned him down the last time around interviewed him for the position. But this time, Johnny got the job. And by God’s grace, he accepted the position. And by God’s grace, Johnny Zander “went through the villages” of the lives of the young people he served, bringing good news and curing diseases in body, mind, and spirit. A true witness to the gospel of God’s justice and love.

We in church and society are in a similar position now that the Juvenile Corrections Center was when Johnny applied for his job there. For decades even our own denomination was bold and blatant and unashamed in our homo and trans phobia, just as the man who interviewed Johnny the first time was. Now, in the wake of great strides in both church and society for the full inclusion and celebration of the LGBTQIA+ community, much of it thanks to congregations like SPC, we find ourselves in the midst of brazen backlash led by our siblings in Christ who wish to foster a false sense of purity based on sexual orientation and gender identity, sanctioning a second-class citizenship with a mis-reading of Scripture.

Far too many faithful LGBTQIA+ disciples of Christ, like Johnny, have needed to shake the dust off their feet as a testimony against us and have sought out other homes and villages where their gifts would be welcome. As painful as that is for those of us who try desperately to preach and teach and LIVE a different understanding of The Way and Spirit of Jesus, we must honor them for their choice.

But here's the thing. At least in the church, including in this church, we really did change our minds. We really did. The change in the hearts and minds of Presbyterians in the votes that finally eliminated our constitutionally sanctioned homo and trans phobia was sweeping and solid, encompassing parts of the country we in the More Light movement had written off as forever rigid and intolerant. All three presbyteries in the state of Alabama supported the change. Southern Louisiana supported the change. Shenandoah Presbytery supported the change!

I would argue, in fact, that the reason the church changed is because the More Light movement learned something from the likes of Johnny Zander. We learned that while shaking the dust off your feet is a fine strategy for survival—and in fact a requirement of dignity in the face of oppression—God hasn't given up on the possibility of true and heartfelt change, and we should not either!

When the More Light movement goes places we have never been before, we prepare ourselves for the possibility of receiving a welcome where before there has only been rejection. Which is why as many of us who are able must stand strong in the Spirit of Jesus as we enter full force into this backlash, which is fierce and painful and even life-threatening, even as I pray fervently it is but a momentary bump on the path to an even more profound justice.

As many of us who are able must stand strong in the Spirit of Jesus as we go to the West Virginia legislature to affirm God's vision of gender-affirming care for transgender youth as we did in February. As many of us who are able must stand strong in the Spirit of Jesus as we go to the Shenandoah Presbytery to affirm our denomination's welcome for people of all genders, as we did last month. As many of us who are able must stand strong in the Spirit of Jesus as we go to the Jefferson County Commission to affirm the morality of simply being transgender, as we did this past week.

And when those votes do not go our way, we must come back here to this safe haven and widen the doors of welcome even further than before, proclaiming what we, from our own experience, know to be true: In the Way and in the Spirit of the Jesus we know, there is, indeed, for everyone born, a place at the table.