

Rev. Dr. Julia Burkey  
When the Prophets were Children  
January 30, 2022

Present with us here in Madison at UW on Tuesday evening was Nikole Hannah Jones, whose retells the history of this nation with boldness and truth telling, especially around the legacy of slavery with her 1619 project. I know UW gave her a warm welcome, but she posted a photo of the weather forecast, showing -5 with a caption just saying “no.” She speaks of the importance of teaching children the truth, of critical race theory, and her work is some among the CRT people are seeking to ban.

She said, “So, we are at a time when we are seeing these waves of antihistory laws being passed across the country. And I think it can be easy to think that these laws are just about what some kid might get in a school textbook, but they are much more dangerous than that, because what type of society bans books and bans ideas? That's not the sign of a healthy society.”

When I paused around her words- that the laws are seeking to ban truthful information from being included in children’s texts books. I remembered the power of children, the power of educating kids, the danger those who want to maintain racist and authoritarian power know, that children and youth so powerful.

We cannot underestimate the power of education, of creative expressions, of activism of young people, the ordinary young people doing extraordinary things without the public gaze, and young people people who rise to fame and change the world, like Amanda Gorman, the Greta Thurnburg, the Malala Yousafzia- who Amanda Gorman said she was so inspired by.

It reminds me what Howard Thurman said to his daughters on Daytona Beach, Florida when they wanted to use the swings in a time of segregation, “It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. At present, only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of Florida – it takes all these to keep two little Black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how many weapons and how much power people are willing to use to control you and keep you in the place they have assigned you. You are two very important little girls. Your presence can threaten the entire state of Florida.”

This is a church who knows the power of children. Not in a “children need to save us and fix climate change and heal the future,” sort of way, but in a holding space for the gifts of youth, for playing, imagination, even for rebellion, story telling, for creativity and music making, nurturing the gifts of youth in what is at times, when paying attention, a very serious and scary world.

The youth and the children feel this deeply. From what Tammy reports to me of her observations with youth and children when it comes to racism and climate change is that they feel it. They feel that their thriving and destiny is inextricably linked to everyone else’s. The don’t just think about it, they *feel* the injustices of racism and the terror and reality of climate change and it affects their

mental health. We don't need to protect them from these feelings, but accompany them, hold space for their emotional and embodied reactions to injustice, and learn from them how to heal. Add the pandemic on to this- and children, parents, families- as resilient as they are- and they are incredibly resilient and adaptable- there's still so much care needed and containers of tenderness and kindness and healing. What can the church offer the racial Justice movement, one of my visions is offering a space of healing, a container to feel fully together, to not have to rush kids on our agenda, but to follow their lead, to see the world from their perspective, to continue building up this intergenerational community of love.

One of the gifts of church is to hold our stories in context with the stories of history. Of the many sacred texts and many sacred stories, the Bible is ours to make meaning of and with. It is ours to interpret, be confounded by, argue with, defend, and be in genuine relationship with. And today we have two stories from the Bible, one from the prophet Jeremiah and one from Jesus, from a time when the prophets were children. When people who know them were doubting them, or when they were doubting themselves. Our youth are in excellent company, with Jeremiah, who says to God, "but I am just a boy!" And God who all but cradles him in God's bosom to say I believe in you. Telling our children a story about a God who believes in us before we believe in ourselves.

And then the story of Jesus, where those who knew him already, could not hear the prophetic words from his mouth. As he stands up in the synagogue to preach people whisper, "isn't this Joseph's son?" Prophets aren't believed in their hometown. Sometimes our children need to go elsewhere, college, sports, theater, out of the comfort of their homes and families, for their gifts to unfurl. Others grow up in unsupportive contexts, in homes or churches that do not support them. We must strive to the best of our ability and with the help of God, to be a safe place, where children know they can be themselves, are safe and loved and respected.

We know how powerful and important youth and children are, and so we must also be a community who is not neutral in the face of injustice, so we can nurture their theological imaginations and hold space for them to learn and experiment with the ways they might be gifted to impact the world.

Because we know how powerful children's minds are, I want to end with telling the story of a children's book. Nikole Hannah Jones, a prophet of our times in my opinion has an incredible children's book inspired by the 1619 Project called *Born on the Water*, which she wrote collaboratively with Renee Watson and was illustrated by Nikolas Smith.

It begins with a child in school with a project to trace her ancestors, and she can only trace three generations back, and feels ashamed, not knowing where she came from. And so her grandmother pulls the whole family over and tells the story which is told through incredible poetry and art in the book. The authors say that their hope for the book is to show that "Black Americans have their own proud origin story, one that did not begin in slavery, in struggle, and in strife." The book begins in the rich cultures of West Africa, where they had a language, religion, math and science, knew how to dance to worship and celebrate – and then how they were stolen, kidnapped, and details the horrors of the Middle Passage, and identifies the people who survived as, "those who were born on the water," before the evil ship came to Point,

Comfort in Virginia in 1619, when American Slavery began. They tell the story of birth, the first birth of a child, who represented hope, born to “ordinary people who were not free but believed in freedom, who gave birth to a child not of Africa, not of Europe, not the Native people already here, but a child of the new people formed on the water.

They claim that “The first Black child born in the land that would become the United States as the first truly American child.” It tells a story of resistance every step of the way, how hard it was to be treated as less than human, the lies made up to dehumanize, that it is forever wrong to own human beings, and forever wrong to treat human beings like things. And the people fought back for 250 years, with the biggest resistance as staying alive.” The Legacy of those born on the water is one of survival, people who became teachers and librarians and scholars and authors and pastors and doctors and activists and counselors, who created blues and hip-hop and jazz, who were inventors and athletes and nurses and cooks and farmers and dancers and poets and scientists and so much more. And because the people survived and fought, they finally got freedom, America has equality in the law, and America finally began to live up to its promise of democracy.”

The book claims the first true American, and that any of America’s greatness is owed to those who survived and fought for freedom.” The child who was once ashamed is filled with great pride, by this story her grandma tells her, “this is why we say, Black Lives Matter, why we celebrate Black Girl Magic, and why we believe we are our ancestors wildest dreams.”