

# Getting Off the Outrage Gravitron

*A sermon on Luke 11:4 & Colossians 2:13-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 July 2016*

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## Message

If we delight in shaming and punishing wrongdoers, we will not recognise the scandalous love and mercy revealed in Jesus, but instead find ourselves being harshly judged by an outraged condemning god who we have created in our own image.

## Sermon

At the outset, I need to acknowledge that this sermon is heavily indebted to Waleed Aly and his [prophetic words on \*The Project\* this past week](#). In fact I seriously wondered whether I should just play you the clip of what he said and leave it at that for tonight's sermon, but since the clip has gone viral on the internet, many of you will have already seen it. I do want to point out though that if any of us are thinking that God only speaks the gospel message through Christians, go and watch that clip again and ask yourself whether Waleed's words would have sounded out of place on the lips of Jesus.

Actually, Muslims hold Jesus in very high regard as a prophet, so perhaps it should be no surprise that a faithful Muslim might express things that sound like they could have come from Jesus. I have no doubt that God sent his message through Waleed this week (and not for the first time), and that makes him a prophet, although I suspect that he would reject that label. So have most true prophets. As we say in our church covenant, we are called to attend to the voice of God no matter who God may speak to us through, whether stranger or friend.

There has been some backlash against Waleed Aly's words too, as of course there always is when prophets speak the truth. We mostly prefer to leave our comfortable lies unchallenged, and we've been known to crucify the prophets if they won't shut up.

Waleed Aly spoke about forgiveness, and in the language of social media he called us to send forgiveness viral. Forgiveness is a topic that also comes up in two of tonight's Bible readings, so I am going to pick it up, and take my lead from Waleed in asking what it means against the backdrop of something that has dominated the news lately – the cycles of outrage generated by various high profile expressions of fear and intolerance.

There is no doubt that the world is becoming a scarier place. We could argue over whether that is because the levels of violence and disaster are actually escalating, or whether it is just that the growth of instant global communications means that we now hear about frightening things that we would have once remained ignorant of, but either way, we are certainly confronted by more and more reasons to be anxious about our own personal safety and about the future of our society and our world.

When we are genuinely afraid, we become defensive and we become hostile towards those we perceive as a potential threat. So, as Waleed pointed out, when we see the likes of Pauline Hanson expressing defensiveness and hostility, instead of simply lashing back, how about we begin by acknowledging and seeking to understand the fears that are driving them. This was illustrated even more clearly in the controversy over Sonia Kruger this week. Her comments on morning television about feeling that we should close our borders to all Muslim immigrants were extreme, but they came in response to a horrific terrorist attack, and when

we are extremely afraid our reactions tend to be extreme. At least Sonia Kruger was sufficiently self-aware to name her fear as the driving force in her thinking.

She is not an evil person. She is a frightened person who responded in an irrational way. Fear is not conducive to rationality. All of us are prone to irrational responses when we are under threat and feeling terrified. And as Waleed acknowledged, carefully illuminating the factual and logical flaws in her response will not do anything to address the underlying fear, although sometimes it is still important to do that.

What is even more certain to make things worse is what actually happened – the unleashing of a whirlwind of outraged condemnation that sought to shame her back into silence. If someone is afraid, and you attack them, what do you think is going to happen? How do you expect them to react? When you attack them, you contribute to the fear. You become part of the problem, not part of the solution. Attack, counter-attack, further counter-attack, and on it goes, escalating at every step.

In Thursday's newspaper, Randa Abdel-Fattah wrote [an article](#) criticising the view that Waleed Aly had expressed. She said that she found "the fear thesis" unconvincing and deeply problematic, and she proposed a more systemic understanding of how racism is constructed in relation to privilege.

To me it seemed that her argument didn't disprove "the fear thesis" at all, but instead it helped us to understand why fear is directed where it is directed. When we feel terrified in the aftermath of something like the Nice attack, why do we generalise our fear to all Muslims rather than to all truck drivers or all divorcees or all young men? She helps us answer that question by exposing the systemic racism that defines certain categories of people as "other" and "dangerous" and less deserving of freedom than us, but it is still true that it is fear that is pulling the trigger.

But really, the rights or wrongs of "the fear thesis" was not Waleed's main point. Even if he was wrong about why people sometimes say abhorrent things, his main point was about how we respond to them when they do. His main point was that it is time we all got off the outrage gravitron, because when we ignite firestorms of outrage and attempt to shame the guilty, we are simply pouring fuel on the problem. We might make ourselves feel better, he said, but we are exacerbating the problem, not reducing it.

Expressing our outrage at the sins of others makes us feel better because it reassures us that we are the good ones. We must be good because we recognise wrongdoing, and it outrages us. We must be good because we are righteously offended by the racism or sexism or homophobia of "those" people. The level of our outrage shows the measure of our superiority to "them" with their ignorant and abhorrent attitudes. This is a huge self-delusion, of course. Tearing other people down does not make us better people. It turns us into mirror images of their worst behaviour.

Waleed Aly ended his piece by pleading with us to stop sending outrage viral, and instead see if we could, just for once, send forgiveness viral. I think that a fraction of the criticism of him here may be justified. Randa Abdel-Fattah wrote that "Dialogue, forgiveness and discussion may (just) make for a warm and fuzzy intervention into an increasingly hostile climate of racism." The trouble is that forgiveness is so widely misunderstood as nothing more than a

warm fuzzy that Waleed probably set himself up for misunderstanding by calling for it without carefully spelling out what it actually means.

Forgiveness does not mean doing nothing about wrongdoing. It does not mean pretending that it didn't happen or that it doesn't matter. And it certainly doesn't mean standing idly by and allowing the behaviour to be repeated over and over.

In the reading we heard from his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul says that God "forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands." That final image – erasing the legal demands – can help us get our understanding of forgiveness back on track. Forgiveness is about giving up the demand that someone be made to pay for the offences they have committed.

The contrast to our usual expectations could not be more stark. Often when we say that God is a God of justice, we mean that God will deal out judgements and punish evildoers as they deserve. Actually, if that's what we mean, then the God made known to us in Jesus is not a God of justice at all. Yes, God is a God of justice if justice means everyone having fair access to life, freedom and resources. But if justice means what it means in the Derryn Hinch Justice Party – that we want a justice system that will punish evildoers more and more severely – then the God made known to us in Jesus is not a God of justice, but a God of mercy, of forgiveness, of grace.

In fact, when Paul goes on to say that God "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them," what he is saying is that God disarmed our "justice" systems by exposing their inability to be anything more than legally sanctioned outlets for our outrage and our lust for retribution. God made a public example of them by exposing their inability to tell the difference between evil and pure love and goodness; by exposing their willingness to crucify the innocent when we need someone to vent our fear and hostility and outrage on.

Sonia Kruger was by no means innocent this week, but after expressing her fear in an ugly and irrational way, we rapidly formed an equally ugly social media lynch mob, pouring forth our outrage in a furious torrent and chanting for her crucifixion. We wanted to see her made to pay.

Those Brighton Grammar boys with their abhorrent sexually abusive Instagram page have far less excuse than Sonia Kruger and deserve far less sympathy, but the fact that our outrage is justified doesn't make public shaming the right thing to do. It doesn't seem to be the least bit effective in reducing the prevalence of such behaviour or in rehabilitating the offenders. If you think Jesus would have participated in shaming and shunning those boys, then take another look at the sort of people he forgave and invited to follow him. Jesus would certainly have confronted and deplored the behaviour, but he would have done it with such excruciating love and forgiveness, that the boys would have known themselves deeply beloved and been desperate to never disappoint him again. But most of us were still waving our fists with the lynch mob, and cheering when we heard that they'd been expelled. We didn't care if that just made them more dangerously resentful and somebody else's problem. We just wanted the kind of justice where offenders are made to pay.

Which makes the words of the prayer Jesus taught us all the more confronting. We heard them in tonight's gospel reading and we will pray them shortly. "Forgive us our sins, as we

ourselves forgive everyone who sins against us.” Perhaps we should be adding “as we forgive those who offend us and scandalise us and outrage us.”

Jesus is not actually telling us here that God measures our capacity to forgive and only offers us the same measure of forgiveness. God is not the least bit interested in measuring forgiveness. But Jesus is telling us that there is no point asking for more forgiveness than we are willing to offer others. Why? Doesn't that imply that God is measuring it? No, it doesn't. It implies that we are measuring it. It implies that we cannot escape from the systems that we create for ourselves. If we keep cranking the wheels of outrage and retribution, and demanding a system of justice where offenders are always shamed and shunned and made to pay, then we can expect that whenever we ourselves offend, we will be shamed and shunned and made to pay. Not by God, but by the world that we have created and fuelled.

The God made known in Jesus is a God of infinite love and scandalous mercy, but if we put our faith in strict systems of law and order and punitive justice, then we will project those values onto God, and whenever we look to God what we will see is the image we have projected. We will find ourselves being harshly judged by an outraged condemning god who we have created in our own image.

If we want to build a world full of the kind of love and forgiveness that we ourselves would like to be surrounded by – if we want to become part of the solution instead of part of the problem – then we need to look to Jesus, the ultimate and absolute revelation of that love and forgiveness, and follow his lead. And as Waleed Aly so prophetically said this week, that means getting off the self-gratifying gravitron of outrage that just spins us all further and further apart and fuels our fear, our hostility, and our abhorrent treatment of one another.

It means that even when we are shocked and dismayed and offended by the hate-filled words or actions of others, we choose never to keep circulating the anger and hostility. It means that instead of adding fuel and sending them back, we will suck them out of circulation and instead respond with forgiveness. And to finish with Waleed's image, it means hitting the like button and the share button as often as we can on forgiveness and love in order to, hopefully not just for once, send forgiveness viral.