It’s pretty hard to be pious from inside the intestines of a fish. And it’s hard to be taken seriously as a preacher when you smell like you’ve been regurgitated by a sea monster. Tough weekend for Jonah!

Now, some of you had pretty rough weekends at Centre. I hear that there have been comparable odors on some Monday mornings at the Phi Delt house.

But Jonah wins the award for “worst weekend in recorded literature” —barely surviving a tempest, thrown overboard by angry sailors, swallowed by a fish, regurgitated onto hot sand, traipsing the desert to a city he hates, and ending up so bitter he wants to die.

Think of Jonah’s story as the most famous cartoon of its time, a satire designed to entertain with comic imagery that ridicules human folly. In fact, to get the feel for this story, imagine Jonah as the Bible’s Homer Simpson. That voice echoing inside the belly of the fish is Homer’s. Like all the best cartoons, Jonah entertains the kids on one level while also saying something profound to adults.

It might also have something to say to the class of 2008. As Kerri Howard said so well at the Honors Convo, your Centre experience was about crossing the boundaries of your comfort zone, encountering and incorporating what is different. Like Jonah, you’re embarking on a journey, and your choice of destinations will make all the difference.

First, a word about context: Jonah was written after the Jews returned from exile. When their captivity ended, their first task was to rebuild a Jerusalem that had been left in ruins.

Their prophets had proclaimed a stirring vision of what their restored society could look like: It was a vision of openness to others, and universal inclusiveness. II Isaiah spoke of the new Jerusalem being a light unto the nations, a model of social justice where the needs of the widow, the orphan, and the alien would be met. The prophets envisioned a city that would welcome people of all nations, united in the common pursuit of peace.

But rebuilding was difficult, with enemies all around, so the returned exiles built a defensive wall around the city. And then a priest named Ezra became governor and focused on preserving the distinctive religious identity and national security of his people. With Ezra, the city turned in on itself. He banished foreigners, and decreed that foreign wives would have to be deported unless they converted.

The Other became the One to be Feared; the excluded Other. The new city only reinforced boundaries; they were not to be crossed.

So Jonah, the reluctant prophet with the voice of Homer Simpson, is called to Nineveh. The storyteller’s agenda is clear when the first sentence labels Nineveh a “great city.” This would be like a Centre basketball player wearing a Battling Bishops T-shirt from Ohio Wesleyan. Or a U.S. Marine praising Saddam Hussein. No Hebrew thought Nineveh was “great.” Nineveh was hated. Ninevites were menacing and different. Nineveh deserved the worst.

Yet the story begins with the Hebrew God concerned for people beyond the constructed boundaries of Jerusalem, beyond that narrative of a special identity as God’s chosen ones. It’s obvious that this story won’t be about Nineveh at all. It’s a story about Jerusalem, Ezra’s Jerusalem—the one now surrounded by a wall.
Now, as you’d expect of a Homer Simpson figure, Jonah is freaked out by the call to encounter the Other and goes in the opposite direction. He heads for the coast, buys a ticket, and gets on a boat to Tarshish. **Tarshish**—a city of comfort and ease. In the Bible it’s a trading nation, known for grand sailing ships that supplied silver and gold as far back as Solomon’s time. It’s the city of luxury and power.

And for Jonah, it’s as far away from the call of the Other as possible. In **Nineveh**, Jonah can save a people from destruction. In **Tarshish**, Jonah can avoid responsibility for the Other. 

Jonah purchased a ticket, and he got on the boat to **Tarshish**.

Of course, the life of avoidance is a shipwreck, tempestuous chaos below the surface, because *Jonah has missed what it means to be human*. Even after the great piscine regurgitation, Jonah still hasn’t digested the meaning of his responsibility. 

This time, he *does* set out for Nineveh, but not out of concern for *Assyrians*. 

*Now*, he can’t *wait* to preside over Nineveh’s demise.

So he gleefully preaches their destruction—with the harsh certainty of religious and national superiority. The voice here is no longer Homer Simpson’s. He’s Amos Tubb teaching history; he’s Patrick Kagan-Moore at your first Centre convo; he’s Tom McCollough (during *any* given lecture)

But to Jonah’s *dismay*, the Ninevites are ready to put an *end* to bloodshed! They fast; they repent; they renounce violence. Imagine the picture: *even their livestock* covered in sackcloth and ashes, kneeling to pray. *Everyone* in the story is more pious than Jonah—from the pagan sailors on the ship, to the obedient fish, to Nineveh’s repentant cows! And now, *Assyria, of all nations*, will join the human movement to the ways of justice and peace.

…”Jonah, however, is seething. Nineveh won’t be destroyed after all. He throws a tantrum: “I *knew* you’d spare them, Lord. You’re all about *love*. That’s why I ran to Tarshish in the *first* place. Just take my life. I wanna die.”

Lots of *drama* with Jonah…

Jonah can’t open himself up to *commonality*. So he sets up an enclave on a hill *outside* the city, *away* from those who *remain* “Other” within *his* framework of meaning. And surveying it all from above, he *yearns* for their destruction.

Jonah could have danced in the streets to the amazing sounds of music he’d never heard before, but he’s still in the belly of the beast, sulking in the realization that his people don’t own the Truth; that the Divine Reality is as big as the sea itself, *far bigger* than the boundaries of nation or race or religion.

From his perch on the hillside, Jonah is buffeted by waves of anger and fear, swallowed up in the cramped, decaying spaces of his own selfishness.

**The Other has made a claim on his life,** and he’s still sailing in the opposite direction, drowning in the certainty of national and religious pride.

Jonah had made it to Nineveh, but he never crossed the confining boundaries of his long-held assumptions. He is *Jerusalem* behind a wall; he is *Tarshish* with a beautiful view.

**The call of The Other.** It’s *louder* now. In our globalizing era, we stand in closer proximity to those who are *different* than ever. They’re on our TVs; accessible on the Internet; producing the goods we consume… They’re also *among* us. And you have been among *them*—in Mexico and France, Japan and England, Russia and Indonesia, India and Nicaragua. The world is smaller, closer. 

Ironically, in the name of *oneness*, globalization presents us with otherness as never before.
The new proximity raises an urgent moral question—how do we live among radically different others with respect; how do we break through difference to find commonality?vi

Of course, there have always been Others—the foreigner, the alien, the believer of a different creed, the ghetto resident, the single mom on welfare. But we’ve usually managed to construct neighborhoods designed to avoid proximity; or to construct narratives that label the Other as unacceptably different. Whether neighborhood or narrative, we’re settled. To open myself to the Other is to be unsettled.

From within the worldview held by those just like us, Others have no compelling narratives of their own. As long as they remain objects of my knowing rather than subjects of an encounter, I will never encounter the Other, I will never experience humanity to its fullest —their humanity, my humanity… …the voice of the Other is silenced; the presence of the Other invisible; the identity of the Other suspect, marginal, inferior.

Jerusalem’s wall. The ticket to Tarshish.

Today we understand that proximity and difference are moral problems. Post-modernity’s gift is the deconstruction of our illusions of both separateness and superiority. Your education has taught you that constructed boundaries of race, gender, religion, and class are fragile, ambiguous, radically historical—and you know from the study of history that when we miss that fact, we are prone to the brutalities Jonah was wishing upon the people of Nineveh. So Hitler could say that Jews are indeed a race, but they are not human. When Hutu broadcasts in Rwanda labeled Tutsis as cockroaches, descent into the moral madness of genocide was quick.

When we read Jonah against itself, in the searing light of our modern age, the danger of absolute certainty is obvious. Certainty always needs the balance of respect for human worth; human commonality. The hope of our era is that proximity might teach us humility.

Post-modernity’s danger, on the other hand, is a splintering of identities and narratives; a fragmentation that reinforces difference without recognizing commonalities. For the human worth and connectedness we affirm in the stance of humility is ultimately derived from a realm of value beyond the human.vii You see, in our face to face encounter with difference—especially with the suffering Other—there is something more than meets the eye.

Matthew’s parable of the ultimate judgment puts the mystery this way: “When you feed, clothe, house and tend the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do it unto Me.”viii

Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas lost his father and brothers in the Holocaust. His work reminds us that every encounter with the Other is marked by an imperative, an ethical claim on my life, perhaps even an accusation—and hence, a new awareness of my own selfhood, my responsibility, my humanity.

As social beings, we exist in the inescapable demand of the Other.

Some of you know the story of an encounter I had in Bangladesh where I spent a summer during college. I was a 21-year-old student in Dhaka during one of the 20th century’s worst famines—and I was shocked by what I was seeing. Even two years after floods wiped out the country’s rice crop, trucks were picking up hundreds of bodies off the city streets every morning—people who had died the night before. Everywhere I went, I was confronted by crushing, demanding need.

One day, I was walking down the street and saw a man lying on the sidewalk—so emaciated you could see every rib. He had a bowl by his head with a few coins in it. And just like I had to do a hundred times a day, I had to make a choice. On this day, I was late for work, preoccupied, probably thinking that a few extra coins wouldn’t help. But I looked for a moment into this suffering man’s eyes, and he looked into mine—a look that haunts me to this day. And then I passed by.

In the late afternoon, I returned by the same road and the man was still there… but he was dead.

And (like Jonah) I was thrown overboard.

I had missed the call to responsibility, the call to be human.
Later, swallowed up inside the cramped confines of my dorm room, I dreamed that the only two people on earth were that man on the street and I. In the dream, the scene repeated itself, but when he died, I was left with nothing but the human will-to-community.

*This is* the meaning of Jonah’s nights in the belly of the beast.

It’s the story of the Fall and the Flood.

It’s Matthew’s parable of the ultimate Judgment.

For in neglecting the call of human need, one risks losing humanity itself.

Response to the call of the Other *is* what it means to be fully human.

So here’s the question as you graduate, standing with this ticket in hand, facing a choice between two cities: How will you respond to the *claim* of the Other on your life?

Your education at Centre has prepared you for success in every way our society defines it. You have a *ticket to Tarshish* if you want to go there—the city of comfort, distant from the cry of the Other. The temptation is to build enclaves of security and wealth, far from Nineveh’s streets. You’ll decide whether your achievement builds barriers of class and education between you and a world of need, or whether the call of the Other is a claim on your life.

Your class already knows the reality of a needy world. After your first semester here, the Indian Ocean tsunami took 220,000 lives. We watched in horror, knowing that these distant people *are* our neighbors, and you fasted to raise money that saved lives.

During your college years, you saw that defining the Other through exclusivist frameworks of certainty can lead even the best nations to torture the prisoner, to build *walls* that keep out the Other, even to abandon their own citizens to the floodwaters of human need.

In your sophomore year, while the nation sailed toward Tarshish, Hurricane Katrina revealed what was submerged below the surface of the proud national story of the American Dream. Katrina swallowed our illusions about fairness and equality and spit them out on the shore of our collective consciousness, with a commanding call to act.

Of course, the poor were forgotten long before they were abandoned to the ravages of the storm. For America is still a scandalous *tale of two cities*. It’s the tale of a consumer society enjoying unprecedented luxury and wealth, while 36 million of our fellow citizens live in poverty, 1 in 5 of our children, millions uninsured, facing foreclosure, struggling in the underpaid jobs that make the good life possible for most of us. You see, crossing the boundary of your comfort zone may mean just crossing the street, or venturing across town.

Unfortunately, at *Centre*, that most intractable boundary of all remained unassailable —the seating pattern in Cowan. (So we’re tearing it down and starting over). But some boundaries *have* been crossed here on campus. At the Life Stories convo, you witnessed Jeff Fieburg, a *chemist*, making us grateful for the field of *botany*.

And, as Kerri said, there have been many significant boundary crossings. For some of you, a night in a homeless shelter revealed an unknown world in our midst, an invisible reality. At first, the barriers between worlds seemed insurmountable. Let’s face it, no matter how hard they try, Ben Stewart and Jake Hill will *not* blend in at a homeless shelter. (Somehow, Will Rall fit right in). But the face to face encounter with the inhabitants of a different world does reveal an unforeseen commonality, a human connection—a claim on us.

Now, as you graduate, suffering Others in the distant lands of Myanmar and China make new claims on our compassion. At the same time the looming global food crisis, though less visible and less dramatic, is likely to shake our world with a tectonic shift more devastating than we’ve seen in decades.

For the *one billion* people living on *less than a dollar a day*, exploding food prices could mean starvation, while we in the rich countries feed a growing percentage of the world’s food supply to cars and cattle rather than kids.
The voice of the Other cries out from the streets of Nineveh.

Jonah got on the boat to Tarshish because he couldn’t open himself to the notion of a broader community—an inclusive community characterized by compassion for the stranger, the other, even the enemy. The ticket you’ve purchased with four years at Centre has prepared you for both the boat to Tarshish and the streets of Nineveh. The charge to the class of 2008 is to put this education to use in the service of the common good.

I’ll never forget the day when many of us stood in the municipal dump of Managua. In that hellish place we encountered a community of children—children who live in the stench and rot of a globalizing consumer civilization, children who live in that other city.

We discovered there the meaning of the words of Martin Luther King: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

This is the epiphany of the face to face, the glimpse of shared humanity that is both revelation and responsibility.

It was the insight that led Christian monks to hide Levinas’ wife and daughter, saving them from Hitler’s holocaust. It’s the reason Burma’s Buddhist monks are going without food so others may live. It’s the reason you went to the Gulf Coast and the valleys of West Virginia. It’s why you lobbied to end torture, why you taught English at Centro Latino, why you shaved your heads for kids with cancer, why you built Habitat houses.

The charter for the new city you’re modeling as a response to the call of your era, is summed up succinctly in the simple wisdom of our ancient traditions:

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

As Elie Wiesel said it so memorably at the Opening Convo of your sophomore year, the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. And the antidote to indifference is to cross the boundary, to encounter the Other, to make one city out of two.

Class of 2008, we’re proud of you. Our hope is that your Centre education has taught you not only the love of wisdom, but also the wisdom of love.

Amen.
The biblical text does say “fish” and not “whale.”

The return of the Jews from exile began in 538 BCE when Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to go home. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE.

Isaiah 42-43, for example.

An 8th century BCE prophet named Jonah is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible (II Kings 14:25). The dating of the book of Jonah as post-exilic is likely, but not certain. Ezra’s governorship was probably during the reign of Persian king Artaxerxes II. Hence, if this dating is correct, the book dates from the beginning of the 4th century BCE. Many scholars believe the book is influenced by the Isaiah school (II Isaiah). It should also be noted that Ezra’s policy was primarily religious and not racist. Concerned with purity, he feared the corrupting influence of those who worshipped other deities. The Deuteronomists had identified this corrupting influence, and the apostasy that resulted, as a primary cause of the Babylonian exile.

This had always been a theme in the Hebrew prophets. See the striking example in Amos 9: 3, 5-7.


Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics*, 104, 215. This is Schweiker’s call for a theological humanism.

Matthew 25:31-46

A phrase borrowed from Emmanuel Levinas.