

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH B. GARDNER

The Eight Sunday after Epiphany (B)



15 July 2018

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 89:20-37
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Recently I was asked why I don't do some things they think I should, or why I don't say some things from the pulpit they think I should.

And I thought I'd tell you my answer: **Jesus**.

When Jesus began his ministry, there was a Temple System.

Now this wasn't original to Judaism - in fact the Temple System was, and sometimes still is, part of religions around the world.

The Temple Model grants extraordinary power to

sacred men, its always men,
who interpret sacred texts
in sacred places
for the devout followers.

But the arrival of Jesus signaled the end of the Temple Model - not just for Judaism but for the whole world.

For example, there was no need for the Holy of Holies - where the Ark of the Covenant¹ was allegedly kept - because no one place could ever be more sacred than you.

Because God is in you - you are sacred.

Not the temple.

In fact, the person sitting next to you is more sacred than any single place in the world.

More than any cathedral or any church.

Not only did Jesus eliminate the need for sacred spaces, Jesus reduced all the sacred texts to one commandment: love.

He made a complex and complicated religious structure very, very simple.

With the Jesus Model

No one has inside knowledge.
No place is better than another.
No person is holier than the next.

That means You don't need me.

And You don't even need a church.

It is up to you.

I can't - and I won't - do your work for you.

But, what **I** can do is walk with you.

I hope I can help you see God in your enemy or in your neighbor or, even in you.

And what your **church** can do is offer a place where we can gather together to celebrate God working in and through you.

Now I think the Episcopal Church offers the very best way to do that.

We have prayers written for us by masters of the English language that can give us words when we can't find the right ones.

We have windows that teach us the stories of the Bible and show us the cloud of witnesses who came before us.

We have scripture set to music to teach us the stories of the Bible and help us respond with lament, thanksgiving, joy, sorrow, doubt, and love.

We have the bread and wine, which Jesus gave us, to nourish our hearts and souls to continue our work in the world.

We have beautiful buildings that bring together all of these elements in a truly magnificent way to help us see God in ourselves and in others.

One thing we don't usually have in our churches is the Bible.

We certainly don't have them in the pews.

Of course, the Book of Common Prayer is mostly comprised of words from Scripture.

But, we don't have the Bible in our pews because we expect you to have your very own Bible.

The English Reformation began, after all, saying that every believer had a right to read the Bible freely and openly in their own language.

The reformed English church became a Bible reading church.

Thomas Cranmer saw to that.

It is why we have our readings from a lectern with an eagle on it – so that words of Scripture can soar above the congregation.

And our freedom to read the Bible, as Anglicans, is to moderate it with our knowledge of tradition and our experience in the world.

Sometimes that moderation comes from hearing Scripture in church and listening to a preacher share some insight she gleaned through study and prayer.

That is why, for Anglicans, the Bible is a guidepost - not a hitching post.
But in order for it to be a guidepost, it must be more than just a couple of stories we hear on Sundays.

Jesus probably knew the entire Torah - the first five books of Moses - by heart.

He probably also knew the stories of the prophets by heart.

He knew the psalms.

In order to know Jesus, to truly know him, we need to know the Bible.

Not know about the Bible but to read the actual Bible.

Because I was raised as a good Episcopalian who learned everything I needed to know about the Bible from the 1928 Book of Common Prayer,

I struggle with reading the Bible.

That is why I do not suggest you go out and grab a King James version and begin with Genesis and hope to get to Revelation by Labor Day.

In fact, even if you love reading the Bible, I would never suggest you read it like that.

That is why your clergy are offering three books to help us wrestle with the Bible.

Tim suggested reading a book that uses the Bible to inform ethical choices and living a Christian life.

Elizabeth has a book about how to read the Bible - literally: how to look at the pages of a study Bible and find what you need to navigate the passages.

What do the footnotes mean?
Where can one find the chapters and verses?
How does one navigate the text?

My book is more about wrestling with the Bible - especially the difficult passages - and how thoughtful Christians sort through some of the teachings of Scripture.

Which I find really helpful.

Because I hear God speak through the Bible.

And like any good conversation partner, God challenges me.

And encourages me.

And comforts me.

And sometimes makes me doubt.

But wrestling with God through Scripture helps me know His Son better.
And knowing Jesus helps me be a better Episcopalian...

Which helps me live a better life.

I used to read stories like the one we hear today, and think, “yeah, yeah, yeah, let’s get to the Jesus part.”

Today’s gospel lesson is NOT about Jesus so stories like this often get glossed over.

Or worse, the preacher or commentator miss the point of the story entirely.

But if you spend some time reading the Bible you realize there is a lot more to this story than some lewd dancing and making good on a stupid bet.

Mark, the master of brevity, lingers over this scene with Herod and his killing of John the Baptist.

In fact, Mark WAS talking about Jesus but then inserts this long narrative backstory about sin and fear and ego and pride and power and rivalry and shame.

There is very little Good News in this story.

So this should make us pause and ask WHY?

Why did Mark include it?

Is it so we can learn something from the characters?

Is it a parable meant to challenge us or teach us?

Is there something we can learn from the political situation?

Is it foreshadowing the crucifixion?

If you take Jesus seriously, even if you don’t believe he is the Savior, then I think you must take the Scriptures seriously.

And if you don’t read the Bible then you don’t know the players or their stories:

Like the importance of Elijah who was a heralded prophet many believed would come before the Messiah to usher in this new king of Israel to give the Jews back their freedom.

Nor do you know that Salome, the daughter of Herodius by Philip, marries her uncle also named Philip.

Or that this was Herodius’s second husband because she was first married to Philip’s brother.

Things that broke Leviticus laws and why John spoke out in the first place.

Or that Herod the Great - father and grandfather to those in our story - had the sons of Israel killed when Jesus was born - he had 7 sons of his own - 3 of whom he killed.

The more I learn the more I realize there is more to learn.

This summer, take a few minutes to read the Bible.

Download a Bible app on your phone or iPad.

Listen to it.

Grab a new translation and read it.

If you don’t understand it, get another translation.

And read one of the books we suggested or a book someone else suggests.

Get immersed in the stories Jesus knew by heart.

Understand the politics and the philosophy and the history of the first century.

I think you will have a greater appreciation for the world in which God chose to reveal himself to humanity.

And I think you will find yourself in the stories and themes.

It may lead you to love God more deeply, love your neighbor more fully, and even help you try to love your enemies.

I love the Bible but I can't read it for you.

I follow Jesus but I can't be a Jesus follower for you.

But I definitely want to read the Bible and follow Jesus with you.

Amen.



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