

SERMON- Proper 23 (C)

Charles R. Cowherd

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Psalms 66:1-11

2 Timothy 2:8-15

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

October 7, 2022

Luke 17:11-19

OPENER:

Famously, the Episcopal Church is known as “the church where you don’t have to check your brain at the door.”¹

A slight twist on that is: “The Episcopal Church will never tell you what you have to believe.”

With an Election coming up, it sometimes becomes: “An Episcopal priest will never give a sermon about who you should vote for.”

I have even heard it said to folks “Don’t worry, in the Episcopal Church, we will never ask for money.”

If you follow that train of thought to its logical conclusion, you get the sense that you could leave here completely unchanged by the experience. That the last thing that Church would want is for you to spend an hour here and be converted, or have your feathers ruffled, your mind invigorated, or your soul to have to leap.

In fact, you do have to do all those things....

just off the top of my head, on your average Sunday morning, in the Episcopal Church:

you have to confess your sins in public,

you have to proclaim the ancient and obscure mystery of faith,

you have to stand up and sit down 15 times,

You have to pray for political leaders that you don’t like.

you have to sing with the choir, as with no professional musicians singing at you,

This all after dragging yourself out of bed and putting a smile on your face.

And you will be asked to give!

NEWCOMERS

I have been talking with a lot of NEWCOMERS recently about joining St. Timothy’s and what goes into that.

In my conversations, I had mistakenly fallen into the way of thinking from the start of my sermon.

¹ Cursory Google Search: [Keep these words in your heart: scripture engagement, part 1 – Seven whole days Straining at Gnats in the House of Bishops | The Anglican Planet; Things Episcopalians say \(2\): “You don’t have to check your brains at the door.” – Covenant \(livingchurch.org\)](#)

I had basically said: “You are already a member. Just keep showing up.” In every instance, people wanted more than that. So I modified my pitch.

It’s interesting that people actually seek more out of church membership, expect more out of Sunday morning, than we think.

STORY

The story goes that Frank Griswold, after being elected Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in 1998, quickly realized how difficult his job was going to be. Early in his tenure, he returned home after a long day feeling physically sick and worn down from the stresses of the job. He was having trouble sleeping and, after a few hours of tossing and turning, finally woke up his wife who asked him what was the matter.

Bishop Griswold told her that he could not sleep and said:

“I think that this job is killing me.”

His wife paused then replied: “.... isn’t that what it’s supposed to do? Go back to bed!”

That was her blunt wisdom, maybe the kind that only can be delivered in the most intimate of relationships, but it was her way of saying, I suppose:

EPISTLE:

Remember Jesus Christ, (who was) raised from the dead, a descendant of David-- that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship.²

Those are Paul’s words to his friend and colleague Timothy.

To be sure, Paul’s point is not to seek out suffering or to cultivate it as a sign of your righteousness.

Rather, it is a recognition that that’s what a life following Jesus looks like and that, sometimes, we need to be reminded of that.

The Griswold dialogue sets it before us: you have signed over your whole life to this thing, you have picked up your cross and followed Jesus with one destination.

BULLETIN

That’s really heavy. Pledging sounds pretty easy in comparison

² 2nd Timothy 2.8

To take things down a notch: let's talk about the Bulletin.

There is one school of thought, that we should provide the most welcoming, inviting, accommodating bulletin known to the planet, a bulletin that is hospitable and a reflection of God's indiscriminate love for us.

OR another school of thought: NO BULLETIN, no help. Instead there is a crease on page 355. Good luck after that. We sing hymns, we have many hymnals. Good luck with that.

If you want to be a mature follower of the Risen Christ, you are going to have to put in the work, you are going to have to get at least a paper cut or too.

STEWARDSHIP

We live life in between those two extremes of course.

And I don't know if I have been here long enough to ask you to suffer, and I also think St. Timothy's knows what suffering is like.

So I don't know if I can say: "when you fill out your stewardship card for 2023, you should feel it.... It should hurt a little bit."

Maybe next year.

Paul though, he does have that relationship with Timothy, and so when he writes this letter, he does not need to hold back.

This is his late-night advice, his pick-me-up speech, his half time talk.

Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus after Paul had built the church up there and things did not go well; controversy and discord and heresy abounded.

Timothy needed help.

Paul responded with some interesting role models.

He said "Be like me"—knowing full well that he was sitting in prison awaiting death.

Paul said "Be like Jesus"—who had been crucified as a common criminal. Timothy must have replied with a deep gulp and sigh, maybe thinking about polishing off his resumé and finding another career. Timothy had no colleagues nearby, no institutional wisdom, not even a Bible yet. He was on an island and Paul gives him simple advice that can be summed up in one word: "REMEMBER."

SUFFERING:

Back to Bishop Griswold, he once talked about how his time as presiding bishop had changed him: "Spiritually, this has all deepened my companionship with Christ. It has also made very real to me the whole notion of sharing Christ's sufferings in

order to share Christ's resurrection.... (D)ying and rising, which is the basic paradigm of Christian life, seemed in some ways a bit abstract before I became the presiding bishop, and now it seems very, very real indeed."³

Frank Griswold's time as Presiding Bishop coincided with declining membership, economic recession, the 9-11 attacks, and the seemingly all-consuming debates over human sexuality.

Some combination of these must have been on his mind when he had that late-night conversation with his wife.

CONCLUSION:

For some reason, when it comes to the God that knows and loves, that knowledge, understanding, companionship happens so often via our sufferings. C.S. Lewis spoke from experience and memory when he wrote,

“God whispers to us in our pleasures,
speaks in our consciences,
but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”⁴

One way to hear that is the Eucharistic Prayer that we will say today at the Table, Prayer B, is, by most estimations, the most frequently used in our Prayer Book. It is the prayer that most emphasizes Christ's life and ministry, his time here on earth and how he shared in our suffering

Listen to it today, even as you have heard it a million times.

That prayer was written, in large part, by Frank Griswold.⁵ He knew all this—the need to remember, the reality of suffering—his wife was just smart enough to not quote it back at him.

She chooses strong words, “speaking the truth with love”⁶,
in the style of St. Paul
who reminds Timothy that the word of God cannot be chained,
that “remembering” who we are, and to whom we belong,
will break those chains and empower us to do the work that God has called us to do
in this world.

AMEN

³ Frank Griswold interview by Kim Lawton (October 6, 1994) *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* (PBS)

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2004/11/26/november-26-2004-bishop-frank-griswold-extended-interview/7263>

⁴ C.S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain*, (London: Macmillan, 1941) pg. 81.

⁵ Hatchett, Marion J. 1981. *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*. New York: Seabury Press. 375.

⁶ Ephesians 4.15