

At the risk of sounding like a preacher, if you can make it on a Thursday morning, y'all really gotta check out our Bible Study Class. I know, it sounds like just about the dorkiest thing in the world. We've even talked about a rebranding campaign to make it sound cooler. When I was a teenager, the last thing I ever wanted was to be seen as what I called one of those Jesus t-shirt kind of kids. Well, I say "when I was a teenager" but I'm still worried about being a Jesus t-shirt kid. Which is ironic because 1) I organize my t-shirts into two piles: Jesus and not Jesus and 2) have you seen what I wear every day? Anyway, you gotta come. I know it might be hard to believe, but it's actually fun. We dig into these old stories and try to make sense of what they might've meant way back when they were written and what we might make of 'em now.

You know, there's this old stereotype of Episcopalians that says we don't read our Bibles. As much as it irks me, there's some truth to it. There were several many books from scripture that I never read until I was in seminary. Um, y'all, that's not great. I was ready to make these promises for ordination before I even knew all the words. And maybe I was comfortable with it because that stereotype of Episcopalians has a grain of truth to it. I don't know all the reasons why we have that reputation, but I've got some ideas. Maybe we're trying to distance ourselves from extremist Bible thumpers? Maybe we're proud of our intellectual approach to faith and think the Bible isn't intellectual fodder? Maybe there's some painful memories woven into those old words? Maybe there's some worries woven in, too? Or maybe we're just confident that -- because we hear the readings on Sunday and grew up in Sunday School -- we already know the stories?

Whatever the reasons, it's striking that we say the Episcopal Church, really all of Anglicanism, is based on a sturdy three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. We put a lot of emphasis on Reason, Tradition gets its due, but Scripture we just assume is there, taking care of itself. I get it. Like I said, I didn't read any scripture on my own until high school when I asked my priest where to start. She suggested the Gospel of Mark, which I read and kinda went "meh." I didn't really pick up a Bible again until, well, until my Old Testament class in seminary. And that was the game changer. It wasn't the reading itself that did it for me, it was reading in community. And it was reading in a community that made space to look at a verse, a chapter, even a whole book with disgust or longing or wonder. Now, I'm not saying our class is seminary-level stuff. I don't have those kinda chops. But what I am saying is that that class is as much about curiosity in community as it is about God. Anyway, y'all should come. It's a grand time, and as Christian folk, we probably should be taking a look at what our stories actually say.

That was admittedly a long way of introducing something we talked about in Bible Study a while back: Christian Ethics. I think ethical frameworks are fascinating. Most of the time we do ethical conundrum solving at a subconscious level. But once in a while, we actually have the opportunity to reflect on just such a conundrum with intention. So, there's basically four kinds of ethical frameworks that we lean on in the Christian tradition. God knows, there's more, but these are the biggies. For any of you hardcore ethicists out there, I am absolutely simplifying, so bear with me.

There's utilitarianism, which is the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It's a powerful and compelling argument, but it has its pitfalls. On the one hand, yes, lots of people benefit. On the other, there's a cold calculus that goes into it. As Christians, we really should pay attention to utilitarianism, because it's sorta what lands Jesus on the cross: immense suffering by one in exchange for all of humanity's release. That's as utilitarian as it gets. It's also what allowed our leaders the ethical wiggle room to drop the atomic bomb. Also, Ursula LeGuin has a great short story on utilitarianism and the suffering of queer kids called "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas."

The second ethical framework is called deontology. Basically, this one says something is ethical because it's legal, and it's ethically wrong if it's illegal. That makes a lot of sense, and it's super straightforward. This works great, assuming the people making the laws are good and concerned with everyone's well-being. It's also the same framework that allowed Jim Crow laws to wreak havoc. On a similar note, it's the same framework today that says an undocumented Guatemalan fleeing persecution in his home country is "illegal" and shouldn't be here.

The third is the Kantian framework, which says something is ethical if it is just. Legality is less of a concern here. It's how the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. could say "an unjust law is no law." Now, all of these frameworks are great, but they each have a downside. And this one's downside relies on who decides what is just. "It may be illegal, but it's the right thing to do," is a mighty slippery slope.

The final framework is what's called "virtue ethics." We have Aristotle to thank for this one. Effectively, every group has its own stories that define its own virtues, and from there, ethical decisions are made by measuring what you're considering doing against your group's virtues. A few years ago, when the administration placed harsh bans on immigration, opponents quoted the plaque on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses." Beautiful, not legally binding, but absolutely "virtuous" in our American stories. The downfall of virtue ethics is similar to that of Kantian ethics: it all depends on who is telling the stories. That's it! That's the four: utilitarianism, deontology, Kantian, and virtue ethics.

What's really cool to me is, once you get familiar with these frameworks, then you start to see how people use them AND you get to see what happens when two people using different frameworks argue against each other. And that's exactly what's happening in Luke. The leader of the synagogue sees this woman come in looking for help, but there's rules in place. In his mind, he's not thinking evil thoughts. He's not sneering and plotting and trying to kick a lady while she's down. He's just embedded in the deontological worldview: something is right because it follows the rules, and the rules say you can't heal on the sabbath, so she'll just have to wait until tomorrow. No biggie, we'll do it then. To quote the first Book of Common Prayer, "of necessity, there must be some rules."

But Jesus comes at this differently. He's approaching this moment from at least three of these ethical frameworks. First, he comes at the argument from the same deontological place as the synagogue leader. "You say there must be some rules, but you break them yourself in other ways. How is this any different?" By pointing out the hypocrisy, he's also using the Kantian framework: if it's so easy to break this rule over there for a donkey, surely you can break the rule over here for a human being. That's what's actually just. And finally, he comes at it from a virtue ethic space, too! He leans on Abraham and his hospitality and the Hebrews' escape from bondage as a foundation for why this woman should be welcomed and freed.

See? Isn't this cool? I mean, *I* think it's cool. Maybe I'm just a book-learnin' nerd, but that's the real fun of Bible Study. It gets us into this stuff and makes us parse out our assumptions and the meat of what's actually on the page. Oh I dig it. Ok. Wonderful, but who cares? Other than a nifty intellectual exercise, why does any of this matter? Well, from the atomic bomb to the exclusion of queer kids to Jim Crow to the Civil Rights movement to immigration reform, I hope you're beginning to see why it matters. And I know we need to keep church and state separate, Lord do I know how much we need that separation, but I also know that we cannot encounter the world without our frameworks. And I hope that the faith we learn here and represent out there provides a mooring for the stories we tell and the lives we live.

And those stories, no they are not always smooth or easy or even all that palatable, but they are our scriptures. And yes, we can ignore them and hope they go away, but they won't. It's a whole lot better to know them and to deal with them. All that to say, you should come to Bible Study. It's deeply gratifying and challenging and life-giving. And it bathes us in our story. It challenges the faith - reason spectrum, it shakes the

foundation of belief and assumption, and ultimately, it brings us closer to God and, by extension, to each other. After all, this isn't just any story. This is our story.