

Now, I know it's not everybody's idea of a good time, but I'd love to see our Bible Study grow. We meet Thursday mornings from 9:30 to 11:00. You don't have to stay for the whole thing, and there's really no prerequisites. And if you can't make that time, we record every session and put 'em in the weekly Notices so you can watch 'em at your leisure. One quick caveat: I'm out of town this Thursday, but that should give ya time to clear your schedule and join us next week. See, here's the thing. I grew up in the Bible belt where Biblical literacy is king. You were expected to cite scripture by chapter and verse. You were supposed to memorize as much as your brain could hold and then cram in more. There was a bit of a hierarchy of passages to memorize. John 3:16 was a good starting point, and from there, you'd get things like the Beatitudes or the Creation Narratives or the White Horse from Revelation. My uncle used to have trouble sleeping, so instead of counting sheep, he recited the Begats of Jesus's lineage. He got so good at it, that it stopped working, though, so he did it backwards instead!

Problem is, there were lots of passages we didn't memorize. And truth be told, that's understandable. There's a section in Numbers, for example, that lists what the head of one of the tribes of Israel gave for the completion of the first Tabernacle. It's basically a giving statement. And then, they repeat the passage nearly word-for-word 11 more times so it's clear that all 12 tribes gave the same. It's not pointless, but it is mind-numbing and not exactly the most inspiring daily mantra. It's one thing not to memorize those, but it's another thing to ignore or discard them altogether. Biblical literacy isn't great in the Episcopal Church, but I'd argue it's not that great in the Bible Belt either. More words memorized, sure, but maybe not really "inwardly digested." For what it's worth, the Sunday Lectionary is a point of pride for folks like us, as well it should be. But there's a fallacy surrounding it that says, if you attend church every Sunday for three years straight, you'll hear the entire Bible read out loud. The truth is our Sunday Lectionary only covers around 25% of scripture. So, much as we may love and benefit from it, it's not the complete scriptural deployment device we often think it to be. I'm working on figuring out how much we'd ingest if we used the full Daily Office Lectionary, but I'm not there yet. It's more, I just don't know by how much.

Anyway, all that to say, that's why we need Bible Study. It's an active way to consume the entirety of our sacred text. We started moving through each book several years ago, and now we're only two books from completing the whole thing -- but it's still not too late to join up! It's been a rollercoaster. Right now, we're studying Jeremiah. And Jeremiah's a weird prophet. Most of the other prophets say things like "If you change the way you're living, if you serve the poor, love the foreigner in your midst, and follow God, things'll get better." But Jeremiah, sometimes affectionately known as The Weeping Prophet, has a different message. "Because you didn't change, because you didn't serve the poor, because you didn't love the foreigner, because you didn't follow God, catastrophe's coming and there's nothing you can do to stop it." As you might imagine, Jeremiah was not popular. The people tried to kill him, he was arrested, some said he was a spy, and even those associated with him found themselves in danger all because the truth he spoke was the last thing everyone else wanted to hear. What they wanted to hear was that everything was going to be alright. They even insisted he was a false prophet while all the other prophetic voices preaching hunky dory sermons were the real ones. Remember that old saying, "you will know them by their fruits?" They came to learn, sadly, that Jeremiah was right and they just couldn't hear it. Well, up until a week ago, it felt like Jeremiah was a blowhard and a bit insensitive to those who were already suffering. But after this week, I'm beginning to wonder. 'Cause the reality of our world looms with January on the horizon, and while I'd love to tell y'all everything's going to be hunky dory, Jeremiah seems a bit more relevant. Things are about to get very hard, I'm afraid. I want to be wrong by

the way. I want to be so very wrong. I want to be proven wrong from January 6th on. And if I am, I'll happily eat a whole entire crow.

A quick sidebar: if you aren't feeling the same way, I completely understand. But I'd also like to suggest that your lack of fear is a sign of the privilege you carry. If you don't worry about who controls your body, if you don't worry about deportation, if you don't worry about the risk of walking to your car alone, not to mention dating, that's ok. I'm glad you don't have to worry, but please know that there are many, many people who do worry about these things. A lot. I want all those people to be wrong about all those worries, too. And yet, I feel the need to be so very ready. We've got 71 days to get ready. For what, I don't know, though public statements sure give us an idea.

Thanks to, well, everything, that scene in Mark reads a little differently today than I'm accustomed to. See, usually I read that Widow's Mite bit and think about pledges. Makes sense, we usually hear it this time of year. But there's something else going on I've missed every time before. Look at the first half of that reading when Jesus warns us to beware of the scribes who make a big show of their religion while they, and I quote, "devour widow's houses." When the widow arrives and drops her two cents in the coffers, it's not just that she doesn't have much money and gives anyway, it's that her faith is so deep, she gives even without a roof over her head to the very institution that's taken that roof away. It's predatory. Go with me on this for a second. I know how we're "supposed" to interpret this. For a mighty long time, it's been a story about a tiny gift from someone in need representing a greater witness than large gifts from the wealthy. But if you read it closely, Jesus doesn't actually take us there. He doesn't even say this is good. Let's read it real quick. Feel free to follow along in those bulletins. We're at the Gospel, and I'm gonna read a lot of it. "As Jesus taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses.'" Skip on down just a tad. "A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then Jesus called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'"

See? He doesn't say it's a good thing that she did that. He draws attention to the situation. Maybe he does mean it's good. I mean, it is quite the act of faith on her part. But maybe he draws attention to it to show just how upsidedown the situation is. She has nothing and gives proportionately more than anyone else there, likely to her detriment. We don't hear from her or about her again. Maybe she goes home and wins the lottery! But more likely, she has no home to return to since her home was long since devoured by the wealthy. More likely, she leaves with her last two coins given away and has nothing left to live on. I'm afraid for so many people like her who have so deeply bought into abusive systems that they'll give everything they have to be in the club while that very same club devours them. Now, if the world was all hunky dory as those optimistic prophets liked to say, this situation would be just fine. Because the Temple would take all those gifts from the wealthy and the poor and use them to help widows like her. That's one of the greatest mandates in scripture: serve the widows. But they don't. It's reasons like that that lead Jesus to flip tables and chase people out of the Temple with a whip.

But this isn't the only story in scripture. The Bible covers a lot of ground, so maybe it's helpful to look at what scripture says on the whole. The most frequent topics covered across both the Old and New Testaments are God (obviously), caring for the poor, mercy, justice, forgiveness, redemption, and love. Fundamentally, that's what our faith is about. And the truth is, none of that has changed over the last week. We're likely to have plenty more opportunities to practice our faith. Who'll need our help may have changed. How much'll be needed is probably amplified. But the core of what we're about has not changed. Ya know, Christianity has

always been at its best when we've aligned with the oppressed. We don't do well when we get in power and relax so much that we settle into the comfort of inaction. To live into Christianity with integrity, we serve the poor and flip the tables of the broken systems that prey on them.

The scariest part of all this is that pushing against those in power puts us at risk. It's not easy to do this. It's not comfortable. Especially if you don't think you're affected directly, especially if you feel like you finally get to be comfortable, it's tough. It's tough to go against your creature comforts, but remember that while our systems allow some of us to have comforts at the expense of others, it's more than that. Comfort isn't the only thing on the line. True physical safety is on the line. You may be more comfortable while the widow gives the last she has. You may be comfortable under the same system that crushes those you'd rather not see. Your comfort may come at the expense of another's life. There's a great line that our job as Christians is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." I wonder about that scene with the widow and her mite. Jesus drawing attention to her may be a comfort, if she saw him look her way. She was, if nothing else, seen in her affliction. And you better believe the wealthy didn't like it one bit that their gift was judged to mean so little. I guess I bring all this up because I'm feeling a real sense of needing to get back to the basics. What is it that Christianity stands for? What is it that you and I stand for? Why bother with all this Christianity stuff when it can be so easily co-opted? I even heard from someone last week that wondered if Christianity even mattered anymore. Honestly, fair point. If we aren't doing what we say being Christian makes us do, then yeah, we don't matter. But y'all, if we do, if we take Christianity to heart and let it afflict us, we will be vitally necessary in the coming world. If we let it afflict us.

I'm gonna do something a little out of the ordinary and change up the bulletin right here in the middle of my preaching. Things are getting wild today! See, I can't think of anything more helpful right now than a reminder of that affliction. Pick up those prayer books and turn to page 304. We're gonna do the Baptismal Covenant instead of the Nicene Creed this morning, so when we're finished, we'll go straight into the Prayers of the People.

Okay, on page 304, I'll start and y'all answer.

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Father?

People I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

Celebrant Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

People I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

People I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread,
and in the prayers?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to
the Lord?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every
human being?

People I will, with God's help.

May we be so afflicted.