

Lordy, there's a whole bushel full in today's readings that need attention. I'm gonna hit a couple quickly, and then we'll lean into that Gospel. I'm not gonna go into James all that much since we all definitely went home and read it after last week.

In Esther, she rejoiced that those plotting evil against her people got theirs because her people were enslaved. Under the exile of an invading empire, an official called for their eradication, but between her prayers, her cunning, and her commitment to her people, Esther swayed the king to do right. In the Psalm, the people rejoiced after winning a great battle against overwhelming odds. They said they won because God fought on their army's side against another army.

It can be tempting to hear these passages and others like them and assume they connect directly to today. Esther is no Bibi. The disproportionate response, intentional targeting of civilians, and growing mountain of war crimes are not justified by these scriptures or any like them. They aren't justified outside of scripture, either. While some argue that the "Just War Theory" is an oxymoron and the Geneva Convention doesn't have any teeth, much of the world has agreed to follow them. Yet many are afraid of calling a spade a spade when it comes to Israel. It's absurd that naming wrongdoing by the Israeli government necessarily equates to anti-semitism. It's not anti-semitic to say you shouldn't bomb hospitals. Now, I know many point to October 7th of last year as the start of this war, but zoom out. That's like showing up to a baseball game at the Seventh Inning Stretch and assuming that that's when the game started, ignoring the scoreboard, all the unfair calls, the injuries, the weather, and the crowd noise that came before. These scriptures tell the story of ancient people trying to be faithful while living into the fullness of their humanity for better and for worse. They do not justify modern atrocities. Whole books could be written on those passages alone, have been written on these passages alone, but today we're gonna move on.

You ever read the Bible and wonder how we got from there to here? I ran across a claim the other day about a growing trend I suspect y'all won't find surprising. It stated that there are more and more arguments suggesting women's culpability in the ways men treat them. No surprise, right? What's amazing to me is the sense of invincibility so many of these men have developed, and with that comes a lack of accountability. Unless men do right; then we get to claim it. "She was beautiful, but I behaved myself," Good for me. I get credit for that. But I do something wrong, and it's her fault. (Sidebar: when I wrote this, my first draft didn't say "if I do something wrong," it said, "if something goes wrong." Even when I try to make a hypothetical point, I deflect the blame! Y'all, this stuff gets down deep in us, and it's really hard to cut it out.) How did good Christian souls go from Jesus to that? This is not a new problem. It's not like the Church lived by the gospel for two thousand years and then started backsliding around 1980. We've gotten this wrong for a mighty long time. Also, for the record, I don't think anyone should go home and gouge out their own eyes or anyone else's. But we do need to remember that self control and accountability are Christian virtues; finger pointing and victim blaming are not.

Now, this is a delicate line. I've been in church communities where accountability is used as a guilt-laden tool for control. We don't do that, either. It's not about controlling, it's about honoring dignity and personhood while recognizing that my words and my actions affect other people. Where I grew up, and even in a few places up here, accountability used as a cudgel's far from a rarity. If y'all haven't seen the damage it causes, you need to know it's out there. Because even though we don't beat people with our religion, the same cannot be said for all of Christendom, and that vitriol spreads to us by association. If we aren't clear what we're about, we become them in the eyes of the world. Put differently, Jesus says that putting stumbling blocks in

front of little ones is about the worst thing you can do. He gives some examples and how to prevent them. Cut off that temptation at the root. Notice he doesn't say get rid of the object of the temptation but the thing about you that makes that object tempting. In other words, the problem isn't outside of us. The problem is part of us.

But in many places, the application of accountability is all backwards. There's a church I know of that was pretty big with lots of families and a whole gymnasium set aside just for the youth group. One of those kids, a friend of mine, was gay, and one day he worked up the courage to talk to the youth director about what being gay meant for his life in the church. The youth pastor told the head pastor, and the head pastor called the parents and outed the kid. One of them grounded him and the other, I'm really sorry to say, the other parent beat him. Later, when the three of them met with the pastors, the kid--complete with black eye and battered soul--was told he wouldn't be allowed back in the church until he gave up homosexuality in favor of Christianity. And when they did this, they used the language of Mark's Gospel. The kid was cut off and cast into the outer darkness. Nevermind the breaches of trust and safety from the adults. The leaders forced cruel and unnecessary accountability onto the child and set an enormous stumbling block in his path. And they were lauded for removing a temptation from the community. I'll let that seep in for a second. Because a child was gay, he was a temptation for the adults, and rather than address their own temptations, they got rid of him, a lamb cast out by wolves.

I ran across an interview last week with a podcast host, Rhett McLaughlin. He's not one I'd usually quote, but he gets this one right. McLaughlin was talking about why, as kids in the church grow into adults, why so many of them leave. A few caveats: 1) He's speaking in the second-person. Know that I'm not trying to make this super pointed about *you* specifically. This is about Christianity as a whole, and Episcopalians are very much included in this indictment. 2) He's talking about kids that grew up in church and left, not the ones who never came. And 3) it's kinda long. He says,

Your kids are not leaving the church because you didn't train 'em enough. Your kids are leaving the church because you trained them well enough to develop a sense for good and justice. You let them read the words of Jesus. And they got it. And they recognized that the church doesn't seem to be interested in those words. They're not leaving because they don't know the truth, they're leaving because they do. This isn't even necessarily something that they would articulate. If you want your kids to stay in the church you don't need to change your kids, you need to change your church. If your kids can't find Jesus, the Jesus that they know from the Bible, the Jesus that you taught them about, if they can't find Jesus within the walls of your church, they will go looking for him. You might think your kids want something outside the church, something out there that they want more than Jesus. I think it might be simpler than that. I think your kids who left the church just wanted Jesus, and they saw that the church at large wants something else. If you just take the words of Jesus, the life of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus at face value, you have to do some very athletic mental gymnastics to find a way to reconcile the way the church looks today with any of those words. They just can't put those puzzle pieces together in a way that makes sense.

There's this misconception floating around that churches are like clubs for the holy. No wonder so many churches feel the need to cut off and cast away those that don't live up to their ideals. But I think it's better to imagine churches as hospitals for the injured. Some of us come here for convalescence, some for healing, some to take our medicine, and some to face the hard realities of what's to come. We don't come here because we're perfect. We come here because we're not. And we come here fully ourselves. What needs cutting off isn't decided by the group. What needs cutting off is personal to each of us. And sometimes what we've been told

needs cutting off might actually need embracing. Take that kid from before. He didn't need to be cast off, he needed to be loved. Same with the Palestinians desperately in search of safety in what once were safe places.

Churches have a long line of doing beautiful things throughout history, and we've got an equally long line of bringing about horrific catastrophes. It's all part of our history. So, as a church with a heavy emphasis on tradition, maybe it bears reminding where that word comes from. The Latin root, *traditio*, means "to give across," and this gives us two words in modern English: tradition and treason. Tradition is giving across time. Treason is giving across sides. Just because the church has done things a certain way doesn't mean it's always good, and sometimes it's even counterproductive. A big part of our work is figuring out what's worth passing down and what's worth casting off.

People know what churches are supposed to be, even when they're not a part of one. People know what Jesus taught, often more so when they've left the church. And I think we know, too. I've pushed a lot lately on the task ahead of each of us, the task of sussing out what's true and what's fallacy, what's Christ and what's culture, what's holy and what's hypocrisy. I'm not pushing on this for fun. I'm pushing because it is vital to our survival. People know what churches outta be, and every time they see one failing to live up to that standard, their critiques are reaffirmed as yet another example of churches getting Christianity wrong. It shouldn't be a surprise when churches get things right.

These days, we are gaining a reputation of being one that gets there a lot of the time. We're not perfect, not this hospital, but we're trying so hard to get this right. A friend of mine gave us maybe the highest compliment I can recall last week. He said, "I don't agree with you about God, but I admire what your church actually says and does." That's about the best we can ask for, that when the world sees St. Thomas', they see our integrity, our compassion, our love, and our God. And if it's not actually that, cut it off.