



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 22, 2024
JEREMIAH 11:18-20; PSALM 54; JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8; MARK 9:30-37

THE GLASS HAS CRACKS IN IT



Mark 9:30-37 [*Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”]*

The festivities of last weekend around the consecration of our new bishop prompted my memories of the now five bishop

consecrations I have witnessed spanning more than forty years. The one which stands out the most occurred in January 2007, when

the then bishop of Arkansas was to be consecrated. The newly elected Presiding Bishop who would preside over that service was Katherine Jefferts Schori, the first woman to serve in that role, and the only one to date.

My two daughters, who were young teenagers at the time, were among a handful of kids from across the state selected to serve as acolytes for the service.

There was a rehearsal the night before, and at the conclusion of our work, I introduced my daughters to their new Presiding Bishop. She was courteous to me for a moment, then turned her attention—her full attention—to these two adolescents and chatted with them comfortably for several minutes.

I stepped back, with tears in my eyes, keenly aware that a glass ceiling had been broken for them. They have not known a time when women could not serve as their priest or bishop or Presiding Bishop.

That said, I've heard a good deal of grumbling in recent months about the fact that in the course of this current year our Church has elected a straight white man for Presiding Bishop and a straight white man as our diocesan bishop. Some have taken these as signs of recidivism. I am sure there are people who can't wait for me to exit my role as dean

in hopes that a woman might be called as the eighth dean of this place.

I get the longing for such things which might serve as demonstrable evidence that not only are glass ceilings being shattered but the inertial and devastating effects of patriarchy are finally sunseting once and for all.

Sadly, there is much evidence across society that such a sunset is nowhere close, but I might also urge us to be cautious against oversimplifying the criteria by which we measure such things. For patriarchy to wane, we need men who are allies in the cause of just change, not as sycophantic virtue signalers, but as colleagues committed to changing the systems from within, not just opting out or stepping aside.

I know I am treading on perilous ground here, to suggest such a nuanced read of the times, and I acknowledge that I do so as a straight white man who has enjoyed a privileged voice and vocation for much of my life. It is my hope that we have sufficient trust between us that you might be able to hear my words, not as arrogant castigation or cautionary judgment, and certainly not singling any person out individually, but as a true ally who longs for the Church and the world to be different, and who is willing to work for that alongside you within the system that has many rough edges still, rather than

leave it behind. And I do so as a person with many rough edges who longs to be better at what I am called to do.

So here's what I have to say, as uncomfortable as it may be:

It pains my heart that there are people in this diocese who refused to applaud when Phil LaBelle was elected bishop in this cathedral last May (as is customary in the moment), or who refused to stand and greet him as our bishop-elect when he was introduced, or who refused to attend his consecration last Saturday simply because he was not a woman.

It pains my heart that when the House of Bishops elected Sean Rowe as Presiding Bishop last June, on the first ballot, with more women bishops voting than ever before, there were some in the Episcopal Church—clergy and lay leaders—who took to social media with absolutely horrible diatribes and contemptible commentary on the character of Bishop Rowe and the obsequious nature of the House of Bishops.

Friends, one can be disappointed with an outcome AND respectful in the wake of it AND trust that God will use it and us for good.

When Jesus asks the disciples what they were arguing about on the road back to Galilee, he

uses it as a teaching moment. The disciples, especially in Mark's gospel, are notoriously slow in getting the big picture, which seems to me to be a real gift to us because Jesus never gives up on them, or by extension, us.

The journey of discipleship is marked by missteps and teaching moments, and more missteps and more teaching moments, where Jesus offers, sometimes gently, sometimes firmly, wisdom to go a different way, but always along the arc of the long journey to wholeness, which is the Reign of God, where we come to know our true identity as beloved children.

This is our destination, too, even when the signs of the times may not point in that direction with any measure of clarity or consistency.

I'm reminded that Dr. Martin Luther King famously said that he longed for the day when his little children would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

His words have been challenged and debated in the sixty-plus years since he first voiced his dream for the nation in which he and his children lived. I don't believe he was arguing for a color-blind society, as if that would ever happen anyway.

The fulcrum of his dream was to leverage the content of the character of his children, and by extension, ours as well, to plot a course together to the Promised Land. And the content of our character, as people of faith, is always oriented to our beloved nature as children of God. Full stop.

Last Saturday, our Choir School children sang at the consecration service, joining hundreds of adults in the room. I was delighted to see them there and to have them help lead our worship and work with much grace. I hope their memories of the day are laid down for the long term and that their dreams for this Church and world are gathered up in God's dream for us all.

Time will tell whether we are further along the trail toward justice than when my daughters served in 2007, but I am willing to stake my life on the hope that these children will bring the content of their character to bear on the Church for good, and that Jesus will be with us along the way, looking in the direction of the children, inviting us to catch glimpses of the Spirit at work in our midst, even if we look through the glass darkly at times.

The glass has cracks in it, and we press on together.



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