

Good Morning. It is wonderful to to be here this morning with you for the first time. Most of you know that I will be joining the St. Paul's community as your intern beginning this August. Martha thought it would be a good idea for you all to get a bit of an introduction to me, and I, as a good intern-to-be agreed. So I am here so you can get to know me a bit and I you, maybe so we all can find out what we are getting yourselves into, So good morning, I am grateful for your invitation to join this community.

The process of this homily, getting it to this morning, is actually a great introduction to me. Does anyone here think that some of the key Episcopal tools are complicated? The Book of Common Prayer, the Revised Common Lectionary? Does anyone here find the Bible a bit complicated, even confusing? Paul says we are confused, but not perplexed. I don't know about you, but I am perplexed at times, like this time, this week. So you know those calenders we get from the diocese that have the saint's days on them? Well on the back of each month the lectionary readings are listed. I had read the lessons for this morning some weeks ago, and I needed to email them to Deb just to make sure all was well. I was in a hurry, so I just copied the citations from the back of the calendar. So Friday night I sat down, away from home to work on this homily, and broke out the old BCP to sit with my Bible. And as i started reading, I noticed that the lessons in the BCP

were different than the lessons on the calendar. The Gospel was the same, I think that is what threw me off, and the Hebrew Bible, but not the Epistle. It was a different passage from Romans, and I can not see the relation to the gospel. It was Friday night. The bulletin was already printed... It all seems to be working out, but, by way of full disclosure, I'm kind of flaky about some sorts of details, and at the same time, the Bible IS, in fact, rather complicated.

I think a sure way to keep someone out of church is to hand them a Bible and say "read this." I have met enough non-Christians who proudly, if not smugly proclaim that they have read the Bible from cover to cover. My response is always, "Why?" That is not how to use the Bible. Many of us deeply appreciate Bible, and we do for all sorts of reasons. The Bible holds up stories of our faith, histories, poetry, prophesy, instructions, straight up law. Sometimes it is just beautiful and beauty in and of itself is revealing of God. One of the things I really appreciate is that the Bible forces us to consider things that we, given our druthers, would not. A voice with authority says something and we have to consider it. We need not agree, we might utterly disagree, like about Paul's comments on homosexuality or the myriad of awful statements about the role of women in relation to men. but we have to think about it. It is where we have evolved from. And sometimes we just get a bunch of stuff that we just do not know what to do with.

A couple of years ago I was finishing up at Harvard Divinity School. I had recently come over to the Christian team after nearly being ordained with the Unitarians. I did not have a job as graduation neared (read loan payments coming due), the love of my life was living in Thailand and my seventeen year old chihuahua was going blind and was becoming incontinent. It was a difficult season in my life. By the grace of God, I was scooped up by the Brothers at the Society of St. John the Evangelist and lived for the summer in one of the little forest huts up at Emery House and worked on the land and prayed with the community. It was fantastic.

So the end of my time there approached, Windy came back from Thailand and came up to the monastery. She was raised in a parochial school, not one like the Episcopal Seacoast Academy up in Portsmouth which is very cool, but St. Mary's down in Danvers. Nuns. Roman Catholic nuns. Real Roman Catholic nuns with rulers. So Bible was not her thing, so to speak, and my religious conversion of the previous six years had been a presence in our relationship. Not bad, not contentious, but sort of like scripture: complicated. So she comes back from Thailand to be with me in an Anglican monastery. That's complicated. We go to morning prayer her first morning there, which if you have not experienced praying with the brothers, well, you must. We sat there in the chapel and started praying

the psalm together and sure enough, it was one of THOSE psalms. The angry God, smiting and broken shields, and desolation and babies being smashed on rocks and hoarfrost. I can so distinctly remember thinking, Oooiii. Why is this the first time we're in Church together this time. She, we recovered, and now all three of us, our daughter Hannah Maeve being the third, are now the caretakers over there in West Newbury and Win in on the Executive Council at the restart of All Saint's West Newbury with Trish Mansfield and Vicki Pretti.

But the point is that scripture is complicated. And it is further complicated by being good Episcopalians, blessed as we are with the religious imperative to hold Scripture, Tradition and Reason as the foundation of our approach to the religious life, the so called Three Legged Stool. This means that first, we must approach scripture, and second, we must approach it with a mind to history (tradition) and, third, we must approach it with our own reason, a critical eye. Scriptural literalism is not an Episcopal tradition. We need to engage scripture with our whole selves, taking and leaving what is revealed to us with prayerful mindfulness.

OK, I am off in the theoretical stratosphere somewhere, but where we are going, I need this foundation. Sometimes we are critical of what Paul says. Goodness, there is a lot of material to critique Paul with. We can agree that looking to the

Hebrew patriarchs for guidance about being a leader is not the place to go, certainly Issac and that scoundrel Jacob are bad examples. If you want to ask about how to be a good king, don't look to the bible for David's example (just ask Uriah the Hittite). We can all agree on that. But when we take Jesus to task, we, I better have my ducks in a row.

So lets look at Matthew. Where we are in the book is that Jesus has summoned his disciples and is giving them their charge. He is telling them what they need to know to do his work in the world. And he starts out strong. "a disciple is not above the teacher, , nor a slave above the master, it is enough", more or less, for them to be like the teacher or master. He is saying don't be above, be like, be of the same level. Replacing a master with a slave that is placed above the master is just a continuation of the same old way. Level the field, bring us all together. Slaves and masters are unlikely to be friends, but break the cycle of domination. Great.

Then he goes on to express a vision of the true nature of things. That God is all encompassing, and this nature will be revealed in due time. Even a half cent sparrow is part of the creation. That sparrow, so inconsequential that he relates it in the same category as a hair on our head, is integral to the system, to the world as it

is, to the point that the death of a single sparrow is noticed in the big, big scheme of things. Preach it brother.

BUT. and it is said that it is all bull-cocky before the but, BUT, Jesus goes on to say something that, well I just don't know. I just don't know. He says "do not be afraid, for you are of more value than many sparrows." OK, so I am not claiming that animals have the same rights as a person. I am not saying that value of your life or of your child is even comparable to the life of a bird. We ate chicken sausage with breakfast this morning.----- Shrug -- So see where I am coming from. I'll tell you what, though, it is thinking like this, thinking heirarchically about whose lives we value and what we do about those values that have gotten us into the global pickle that we are in. Maybe it is not even thinking like this, but rather it is this thinking, enshrined as it is in scripture which is too often read without a reasonable, critical eye, that opens us to interpretations of the world like this.

It would seem that we are in charge. It would seem, in the big scheme of things, that we are all deciders. If we want something in the world to change, we can do it. We want a new field to cultivate, call in the plows. A new road, the bulldozer. A new house, get the chainsaws and saw mills fired up. You want a hamburger, pull someone out of the feed lot. Our society, or more deeply, our western culture,

thanks in part to passages in the bible that tell us that we have “dominion” over the earth and her creatures and that we are of far greater value than a sparrow, has developed an amazingly narcissistic view of the world. It is all about us. The technical term might be anthropocentric. Humans at the center. We are more valuable than a mere sparrow, absolutely. Jesus tells us so.

What if the metaphor Jesus had used was that of a bee. A mere bumble bee. We are worth more than a bee, than a whole backpack full of bees. Fine. But take the bees away and we’ll last how long? What percentage of our calories are dependant upon bees? Besides grasses; wheat, rice, corn, and the like which pollinate via the wind, bees are pretty critical in the cycle of annual plants, the center of our sustenance. Unless we all want to get out in the fields with little paint brushes and dab every flower on every tomato and squash and potato and broccoli plant, we’re going to be eating a lot of bread.

Again, I try not to be an extremist about things like this, but, there’s the but again, what Jesus is saying literally in ways does not match what is being said more broadly in our Gospel today. “What you hear in the dark, tell in the light, what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops”, we are utterly immersed in God. We live in a world where the number of hairs on your head matter. We live in a

world where the dropping of a sparrow from the sky MATTERS. A drop of rain's path as it runs down the canopy of a tree has a consequence in our world. This is the essence of the metaphor of God. All of IT, the drop of rain, the sparrow, the hairs on your head, the chunks of the Arctic ice pack falling into the ocean, the third grader on a field trip to the Arboretum, all of it matters because all of IT is in relationship. All of it is connected in the world, and this being a world of God, IT is all connected in God. It is all about relationship. What you ate for breakfast this morning puts you in relationship with whom, or what? The soil in which the grains were grown, and the billions of life forms living there. The wind and the rain and the folks upstream from that soil. The farmer who owned it, the workers who actually grew it, the herbicide and pesticide manufacturers who sold the chemicals to treat the fields, the oil companies who supplied the fertilizer manufacturers, the food processors, their employees and stock holders, the truckers who shipped, the grocer who sold it, the marketing firm, the federal employee who inspected it... and that is just the Cheerios, let's not even get started in the web of relationships we have when we add milk to the bowl. What I do, what you do, what Willow and Basil, our border collies, do, has an impact on the world. Our actions, every being's actions have reverberations in the creation. "...not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father."

Just because we are the end user, the highest trophic level, the ones who make decisions about the fate of other living things does not, as our gospel might lead us to believe, make us better than a sparrow, or a clod of soil, or a drop of rain. We are in relationship. What I do, what you do, what we collectively, as a church, a Commonwealth and a nation do, has an impact on the world around us, human and otherwise. So it is not what we can do that matters so much as what ought we to do.

God knows, in God's way of knowing, the difference between what we can and ought to do. The God I know hugs with open arms, sort of like being wrapped in a warm towel after a bath, you know a big, soft, warm towel that just embraces you? All encompassing, comforting, cozy, very, extremely real. The God I know holds us like Windy holds Hannah Maeve when she is nursing at night. We all long for being held that way, Freud made a career on that kind of longing. And that longing is able to be fulfilled, every day, every moment, right now. When we can understand as the underlying fact of life that all of this, this world that we perceive through our senses, is one massive web of relationships of which the little nodule we individually occupy is but one of an infinite number of nodules, some occupied by our families, some by friends and strangers, some by sparrows and blue whales, some by mountain ranges, all loved immanently by God. This is the Gospel truth

about the true nature of things. When we live with this understanding, that we are desperately and lovingly immersed in relationship, we feel the love God wrapping around us, and we are leaning into the world that Christ offers. AMEN.