

July 15, 2018
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10, Year B, RCL
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
Psalm 48
Ephesians 1:3-14
Mark 6:14-29

Preaching rule number 1 is this: Preach the Gospel, which is to say, preach the Good News. Remember, the Greek word *gospel* translates as *good news*. When a sermon is literally said and done, the listener ought to be able to identify at least one nugget of Good News. As a preacher, I was trained to check my sermon by asking myself the question: What's the Good News?

For some of us, preaching rule number 2 is this: Address people's concerns. This requires keeping up with the world and knowing your congregation. This is the only way to preach the Good News that the congregation needs to hear.

Stating the obvious, to offer Good News, the preacher first has to find it. On a particular Sunday, depending on the assigned readings and depending on what's going on in the world, finding it can be pretty challenging. Sometimes the preacher has to do a lot of digging. You have to keep shoveling away, all the while asking, What's the Good News?

For a digging case in point, consider the readings and the world today.

Our Gospel reading from Mark is one of those annoying Bible passages that blame poor behavior by men on women. This is not the only story in which women are temptresses who lead male dupes down a path of destruction. In this case, the historical record makes it clear that Herod did just fine on his own when it came to corrupt leadership. The women aside, this story is about an act of political and personal violence, committed for ego maintenance and self-gain.

An act of political and personal violence, committed for ego maintenance and self-gain ... does that sound familiar? Times and places and names may change, but we hear contemporary versions of that story every day.

What's the Good News?

Years ago, I began asking myself that question as a budding preacher about my sermons. Now, I ask it frequently, about just about everything; it has become an unconscious habit, and it's not about preaching. I suggest you should try it. The questions we ask shape the way we see the world and understand our place in it. A Gospel question helps us to view life through a Christian lens.

To find the Good News for today, I looked beyond the assigned Gospel passage. In the bigger picture, the Good News today is the same as it was when Mark wrote down his Gospel: Jesus Christ our savior gives us a different path via which lies the salvation of the world, and that path is the way of love.

Many of us Episcopalians are trying to figure out just what that looks like in our place at our time. It was a hot topic at the General Convention of The Episcopal Church, which wrapped up on Friday.

National church politics may seem far from your radar screen, but I urge you to take some notice. The national church as a body is responding to huge changes in the cultural contexts in which our churches operate. Here at St. Thomas's, we have the demographics to get ahead of the curve.

I started to offer you an overview of General Convention. Instead, I decided to play a video of our Bishop Ian Douglas offering up his own.¹ You may have to come closer, but let's give this a try.

[Play the video.]

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's 30-minute sermon for the opening General Convention Eucharist was a beautiful thing. Stream it if you can. He rolled out a new initiative called, "The Way of Love: Practices for a Jesus-Centered Life." It's based on the concept of a "rule of life"—that is, a commitment to living one's life in a particular way. The idea of a rule of life comes from monastic communities, most famously the Rule of St. Benedict for Benedictine communities. I'm going to pass out cards with the logo on it, and then I'll give the brief description of the parts.

- **TURN** Pause, listen, and choose to follow Jesus
- **LEARN** Reflect on Scripture each day, especially Jesus' life and teachings
- **PRAY** Dwell intentionally with God each day
- **WORSHIP** Gather in community weekly to thank, praise, and draw near God
- **BLESS** Share faith and unselfishly give and serve
- **GO** Cross boundaries, listen deeply, and live like Jesus
- **REST** Receive the gift of God's grace, peace, and restoration

After worship, I'm going to scurry upstairs and occupy one of the tables in the Lounge for conversation. Please join me there if you'd like to talk more about it.

I'll finish by saying that there was some great stuff coming out of General Convention, and there was some stuff that was disappointing. But in this, as in everything, it's important to keep asking the question, What's the Good News? And know this: the Good News is always love: love sought, love cultivated, love shared.

Notes

¹ "Bishop Douglas Reflects on GC79," July 13, 2018, Episcopal Church in Connecticut, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkUfhUxO70> (accessed July 14, 2018). You might also watch "Bishop Ahrens Reflects on GC79," July 13, 2018, Episcopal Church in Connecticut, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0EVrMb9o7g&t=1s> (accessed July 14, 2018).