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Introduction

LEARNING TO READ THE Gospel, and to connect it to one's life, is a central activity in the Christian life, from beginning to end. It is in a sense the foundation of the entire Church, for this is where we hear of Jesus of Nazareth, of his conversations with his disciples and others, of his life, death, and Resurrection. We never stop trying to tune ourselves to the Gospel, to learn from it. This is a challenge for a whole life, because the Gospel does not offer a set of clear rules or other statements that can serve as firm and safe stopping places in the confusions of our existence, but almost the opposite: it is a set of perplexing puzzles and problems and difficulties that invite engagement of the whole mind, the whole self, in a process of transformation, from the center out, which never ends.

Despite the way they are sometimes spoken of, the four Gospels (which together we call "the Gospel") are thus not cozy, sentimental, easy, or comfortable texts but deeply problematic. That is in a sense their point: to disturb and upset us; to shake us out of the values and attitudes that our culture has established within us or that we have made for ourselves; to change our sense of ourselves and our world, and our place within it; to give us a new set of motives and hopes. The Gospels call for a reorientation that will lead to a different sense of the nature and purpose of human life itself—and not just life in general, but our own actual lives, our own ways of being in the world.

Think of Jesus' central commands: to love God with all our minds and hearts and souls; to love our neighbor as ourselves; to love one another as he loves us. None of us does these things or can do them. Yet they are the center of Christian faith and ethics. What are we to do in the face of this impossibility?

This book is an effort to read and connect with the Gospel in a way that makes the process visible, in slow motion as it were. Not that what I do is in any way a model; rather it is simply one person trying to do what we all try to do, offered as an effort with which the reader can compare his or her own.

In form the book consists of a series of passages from the Gospels, each of which was part of the lectionary prescribed by the Episcopal Church for a particular Sunday. Each passage is preceded by a brief introduction, often with some questions, and is followed by the sermon that I gave on that text as a lay preacher, itself followed by a brief commentary. The arrangement is chronological in the sense that it begins with my first sermon and ends with some of my more recent ones. Obviously the important texts here are the Gospel passages; everything else is meant simply to open them up for thought and response.

The Gospel passages that appear here are, as I say, the texts that I was assigned in the order in which I was given them, not chosen or arranged thematically or historically. This may seem a disorderly way to proceed. Why not begin with Mark, the earliest, and end with John, the latest? Why not focus on the structure and meaning of each of the Gospels as a whole, explaining its purposes and how it seeks to achieve them? Why not pursue one theme across all the Gospels?

My answer is that this is not how we live with the Gospels in our collective life in liturgy and worship or, for the most part, in our individual lives either. My idea of the structure of this book is that it should reflect the way we experience the Gospels in our actual lives, one short passage after another, each presenting its own difficulties of understanding, its own problems—often serious—for the person who wishes to connect the Gospel to his or her own life.

Think for example of the way in which most people find themselves caught up in the life of the Church. Very few people I think come to church for the first time because they are persuaded by abstract argument that the truths of Christianity are indeed true. In our lives outside the Church we do sometimes talk about such questions as the Existence of God, the Authority of the Church, maybe the Historicity of the Gospels, but I do not think these discussions lead many people to go to church.

What more often brings a person in the door is a confused and inarticulate sense of need, a desire for something perceived to be missing in life as it is ordinarily lived. This sense can be occasioned by many things: by the death of a friend or family member; by release from what had seemed like a mortal disease; by coming to know a person who seems more deeply alive than other people, and wanting to be with him or her, in the hope that some of it will rub off; by experiencing the birth of a child, the miraculous event in which there is suddenly present in the world another human soul, another source of meaning and experience; or maybe by what feels like simple curiosity but probably has much deeper roots than that suggests.

Despite the great variety of ways in which people are led into the Church and its life, I think there is something that almost all newcomers share: a sense that they do not quite know what is happening in the church they are attending or what it means; and a sense of confusion, even embarrassment at the oddity of their situation—what *am* I doing here? Often the new person is afraid, or shy, or feels vulnerable to criticism, including from his or her own logical and practical mind: “You can’t possibly believe this stuff: Why are you here?” He or she is likely to be awkward, ignorant, unsure about many things, among them both the central tenets of the Church’s system of belief and the meaning of the holy texts, perhaps especially the Gospels.

The way a particular church typically addresses such a person is not by trying to explain everything in clear and rational terms, which cannot be done, but by welcoming the person into the experience of the place. This experience itself will probably seem rather haphazard and random: you are exposed bit by bit to liturgy, to scripture, to prayer, to various sacred days and rites, to the social relations that bind the congregation together, to the feelings of belonging and hope and caring that seem to surround you. You are joining a community that has a life of its own, its own way of doing things—with a history that in some sense goes back two thousand years—and you are plunged right into the middle of that life, that history. The process is not orderly or rational. It is experiential. You may find that it is deeply important to be part of it, and still feel that in a profound way it does not make sense. Or you may not like what you see, and go away.

If you do keep on, in time you will gradually come to understand something of what is happening, just as you learn a language in a foreign

country. You will learn what others do in the liturgy or other service, and what you are to do as well—when to stand, when to kneel, when to look at the prayer book, if there is one, or at the hymnal or other book of sacred songs. You will know what to say and to sing, and bit by bit it will begin to make some sort of sense. You gradually find your bearings. You may start to use this language first to ask questions and think about possible responses to them, then to define your own place in the world and your own hopes for your life. If all goes well, you will find that this world takes on meaning, in an ever deeper way.

But it is likely that understanding at an explicit level, theological understanding, will still seem to elude you, and of course you will never understand all that you wish you could. Reading helps, but there is a sense in which abstract reasoning about God and the Gospels and the Church is only thinly connected, if at all, to the actual experience of the life to which you are being exposed.

How then are we to think about what we are doing, what we are learning? This is a lasting and difficult question, and one to which this book is addressed. For most people the answer lies in their own experience: as they read the Gospel texts or hear them read, and try to expound them or hear them expounded, they find themselves more and more at home with a certain kind of thinking and of life—including a certain kind of criticism, doubt, and argument. This process, however, like the whole life of the Church, is not intellectually ordered in a coherent way—say from the general to the specific, or from first things to last things, or by other categories of thought or experience. It is all jumbled up, one thing after another, and learned all at once, as I say, like a language. That has at least been my own experience.

The aim of this book is offer you as the reader, in slow motion as it were, an encapsulated version of the experience of learning to understand, and to use, the fundamental language of the Christian Church, particularly as it derives from the Gospels. My thought is that the experience of working through these Gospel passages, and comparing your own responses with my own, might help prepare you for the real experience of joining a church or make more intelligible the experiences of church life that you may have already had.

I hope it is not too surprising to be told that most of what I say about the life of the person discovering the Church, and beginning to live on its terms, is true of all of us in the Church, even the most experienced. For we are all on the edge of understanding; we all face doubt and mystery; we all are in one sense beginners, starting again in what we hope is a fresh way every day of our lives.

As a friend once wrote to me, all of the Christian life, from the first glimmer of interest to the death of the greatest saint, is a process of learning to read the Gospel and trying to find ways to connect it with our lives. We are always disciples, we are always learners. The Gospel is not so much a resting place stocked with answers as an invitation to engage in a process by which our life will be transformed, from the inside out, through and through. By definition such a challenge can never be met fully in this life.

So this book is addressed not just to those on the edge of the Church, at the first stages of discovery, but also to those who have thought about these matters for a long time and lived with the puzzles and problems they present. We are all engaged in a life of change and growth we cannot wholly understand. We are all learning how to connect our selves and lives with the Gospel.

In the sermons reproduced below I am myself trying to learn how to read the Gospels, and how to think about them, especially in connection with ordinary experience of our own time and place. If you are merely curious, or your interest in theology and the life of the Church has barely begun, I hope that you can take this as a piece of the life you might experience if you continued on. Indeed, I hope that you can think of this as an invitation to do just that—if only because you find yourself disagreeing with what I say in these sermons or thinking that they are simply inadequate to the task they have set themselves.

Likewise, if you have deep familiarity with the texts, and have lived with them long, I hope that too you will find it of value to read and think about them once more, and compare your own responses with what I say. In doing this, I hope you retain some of the anxieties of a person new to the Church, for these feelings are entirely appropriate to the task of the life we have before us, whatever our preparation may have been.

As a person of long experience with the Gospel texts you may of course find yourself judging and criticizing what I say, and, as I say above, that would not be a bad thing but a good one. Such critical responses and disagreements would in fact be important engagements in the very life to which I think the Gospels call us, which should certainly be a life of intellectual and moral responsibility for what we say, for what we believe, and for what we do.

Naturally in the course of this work a series of important theological questions arise. What I say about them is the best I can manage, based on my own experience and thought, as a lay person engaged with these texts. I am not an expert. I do not apologize for this, because I think Christian theology in the end must have its life in the minds and hearts of ordinary people struggling with the Gospels, with the tradition of the Church, and with their own experience. There is a sense in which the Gospels themselves have their real life, today, in the way we engage with them, individually and collectively. For me this is where theology too has its life, in our own engagements with its questions, and here I represent my own version of that activity.

There are a lot of specific issues, many of them debated fiercely, that I simply do not address. Who actually wrote each of the Gospels, out of what prior materials, with what agenda or bias? What connection is there between what appears in the Gospels and what actually happened in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth? Are the Gospel stories factually true? Do they faithfully record in Greek what Jesus said in Aramaic, and, if that is what we think, how can that possibly be? How should each Gospel be understood as a complete text, with a shape and structure of its own, meant to address a particular historical context? By whom, and in what process, were the four Gospels that we now use selected as authoritative? To what editing have they been subjected? Are the Gospels in fact the foundation of the Church, as I earlier said, or is the Church the foundation of the Gospels?

These are all questions to which scholars have devoted enormous energies. As an historical and intellectual matter they are of course of real interest. But they are not questions for the preacher, or at least not for me in that role. I have accepted the Gospels as they have come down to us, and as they are read in our liturgies and other services, for these are the texts upon which our common life is based. I assume for the most part

that the English translation is effective, though occasionally I look to the Greek for clarification.

I am asking a different set of questions from the ones listed above. At bottom they are these. How can we connect to the Gospel passage we have read? What sense can we make of it, in the context of our own lives? What sense of difficulty, what sense of truth, can we bring from it to our own experience? How can we build our lives upon it, both as individuals and as a community of Christians?

In speaking to these issues I try to be as honest as I possibly can. I make this perhaps unnecessary remark because of a striking experience I had when I first gave a sermon (which I did from notes, not a written text). I knew I had a life of doubt as well as faith and I was anxious about whether my doubts disqualified me from presuming to preach a sermon. When I stood before the congregation, and silence fell upon the room, I suddenly felt as though a bright light from heaven shone down upon me, telling me, not in words but in fact, that I simply must speak the truth, whatever it might be. I was not to protect myself with evasions, but to say the truth as it was given me to speak it, at any price whatever. Honesty had become a sacred and absolute duty. Fortunately, the truth I discovered was that, when put to it in that way, my deepest beliefs were and are rather orthodox. But I did not know that until this happened.

These sermons are the work of a lay preacher, not a priest or other ordained minister. This means, among other things, that I do not speak as a pastor to my congregation, guiding, prodding, reflecting on our common life. They are not pieces of a continuing conversation of the kind that a pastor has with his parish, developing its own set of themes and allusions, with its own past and future. I am not a stranger to the parish, of course; I know my fellow parishioners and they know me; but I am not their priest or pastor. Accordingly my sermons are more strictly text based than sermons often are—less addressed to current social or moral issues, less about the life of the parish and the larger world—and more directly focused on the question whether, and how, we can connect with the Gospel passage that is our reading for the week.

A further word about the sermons. In the 1990s I was occasionally asked by the rector of St. Clare's Church in Ann Arbor to give a sermon, as part of a general movement to involve the laity more fully in the liturgy. Perhaps I gave a sermon every two or three years. I loved

doing it, and when our diocese offered a course for lay preachers, I leapt at the chance. After a year and a half of training I was certified as a lay preacher, in 2001. Since that time I have given one or two sermons a year at St. Andrew's Church in Ann Arbor, which is now my home church. In addition, I have given several sermons each year at the Church of the Mediator, a small church in the Diocese of Western Michigan near the place where we have spent our summers and now spend an increasing part of the rest of the year.

The sermons that follow appear, with slight editing, in the form in which they were presented, except for the first three, which were not read but delivered from notes, many years ago, and which therefore I have had to write out for the first time. I have selected the sermons that I thought most useful for the purposes of this book, arranged in the order in which they were given. The comments that follow each sermon are meant to complicate any sense of completeness or finality that might otherwise be created by the fact that the sermon comes to a kind of conclusion, as sermons must of necessity do, and to open up further questions or lines of thought that might be useful to the reader, either working alone or in a discussion group.

My idea is that this book can be read slowly, perhaps best one unit at a time, and that the reader's own puzzles and responses can be taken as part of the experience it offers. If you approach these passages this way, you will be doing theology of an important kind. I hope you will find by the end that you have a way of thinking about these passages and the life of the Church that is your own.

Unless otherwise indicated, the passages from the Bible are all from the New Revised Standard Version, used with permission.