

**The Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 17, 2007¹
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
The Twelve Went With Him, as Well as Some Women**

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The Bible speaks to us in our surroundings today, even though the words were put to paper many, many years ago. I understand that to be a function of God's being within us, interpreting what we read and applying it to who we are and where we are and what we're thinking about. And I think the Bible is different from other books in that way, which is not to say that other books cannot be inspirational – for surely they can – but it is to say that Holy Scripture is deservedly in a category all by itself.

The Word of God – the Logos – is a very powerful entity. God speaks, and the earth is created. God commands, and it is so.

Of course, the stories told to us in the Bible had a meaning for the people to whom they were originally addressed. Our context today is different from what it was then, and so the “message” – the statement the Bible is making – may be different to us today than it was when originally written down.

This is not to say that the Bible says what we want it to say, or that the Bible changes from time to time, or that the Bible means only what we say it means. It does mean that we are not only allowed to think about the Bible, we are required to do so, for it is only in responding to God's Word that we hear it within us. And it is within each of us that God wishes to and does dwell.

¹ This is my first sermon as an ordained priest – ordination was Saturday, 6/16/2007.

Obviously, this approach means that each of us can read the same passage and find different meanings within it. That is the joy and beauty of the Bible.

This morning, coming to you as I am fresh from ordination as a priest, it is natural that I might pick up on things that don't jump out to others.

So after all of the readings today, with all of the different possibilities of things to say, I wish to comment on the last paragraph of the Gospel. "Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources."²

I hear of this remarkable gathering of people who accompanied Jesus and supported him in his ministry. Supported him as his friends. Supported him with their financial resources. Jesus seems always to confound expectations. His kingship is not what is expected. His teachings are radical. The demands he places on his followers to love one another go against the grain in most societies, not least our own.

But let me focus on the people, and especially the women, whom Jesus gathered around him. These people were really the first church, and they retained influence after Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead precisely because they had been so close to him. I think we can all relate to that, to how we come to know

² Luke 8:1-3 NRSV.

someone with whom we share a journey and an experience, and how we become authorities on how he would want something done.

Something happened to the church as time passed. Among many other things – and do remember that I am focused on one small passage from a very particular place in my own life – among many other things, slowly and then inexorably the influence of women and of the others marginalized by their societies was reduced.

The radical gathering that surrounded Jesus – women traveling without their husbands (if they had husbands), women with their own financial resources in a community which regarded them as property, women who had been prostitutes – all these people were loved by Jesus.

Time and time again Jesus demonstrates that he is going to spend his time with the outcast, the lowly, people who are not accepted by the society at large.

That is the radical nature of his message then and it is the same message today. The good news is to be preached, and more than that, demonstrated, to the people who need to hear some good news, to people who need to be fed, to people longing to be heard by somebody.

During the last six months, I have had a chance to see the church in a way not previously open to me. I have seen some things that distress me. Especially with respect to the criticisms that have been leveled against the Episcopal Church, I have seen people claiming to know the mind of God, claiming they hold the orthodox teachings, claiming they are right and we are wrong. Claiming that God is on their side.

Let me say to you that I don't think God takes sides. I think God is working with each one of us, wanting us to be the fullness of his creation, wanting for us all

the joys of life. Certainly when we do that which God would have us not do, he wants us to change. But God comes to us as a loving God, over and over again.

After all, God knows exactly what it is like to be one of us. We don't know what it is like to be God, even though we may act as if we do, but he knows about us. He knows our strengths and weaknesses. And he wants all of us in his kingdom.

So it was this past week that I thought about some of the changes that have taken place in the Episcopal Church in my lifetime. We have, I think, tried very hard to be true to the Gospel, to be true to the example Jesus gave us, and we have done good things. By that I mean that we look more like that group of people who accompanied Jesus than we used to.

We have changed the rules to allow women to serve on vestries. Amazing, isn't it? Somehow women could support the church financially, but we had managed to develop a way to keep them from serving on the church's governing bodies.

Women can be ordained. They can be deacons, priests, bishops, even attain the highest positions in our church – presiding bishop for Katharine Jefferds Shori and president of the House of Deputies for Bonnie Anderson.