

Why I'm Staying in the Episcopal Church

There are a lot of things wrong with the Episcopal Church.

There is nothing particularly remarkable about that statement. Every church that I know has something wrong with it. The remarkable thing about the Episcopal Church is that is ready to admit its flaws and imperfections. I suppose that is one of the reasons that I will stay with it. It is like me: an imperfect and sinful creature who (with God's help) is trying to grow in grace and understanding.

Many churches that I have encountered don't see themselves that way. They don't like to see themselves as an imperfect institution; instead they like to see themselves as the churches that have the simple, straight truth. They understand that they have the perfect book (the Bible) or the perfect leader (the pope) or the perfect message (Joel Osteen). If you have a tough human problem, they have a straight and simple answer for you. Are you in a destructive marriage? Stay in it, divorce is a sin. Are you gay? It is a sinful lifestyle; pray that God will heal you. Do you feel a call to the priesthood? If you are a man we can talk, if you are a woman we cannot talk. Are you a non-Christian? Heaven is simply not open to you. Hard questions met with simple answers.

The Episcopal Church has never worked that way. Our Church says the answers to the problems of life are tough and complicated. When we read about the life and ministry of Jesus we see a man who was often ambiguous in his answers, challenging his followers to think for themselves.

Jesus' ministry was about ambiguity. He stated that he did not intend to change one iota of the law. Yet in Galilee, his ministry was to the people of the land: The people who could not keep a kosher household, or obey all the laws of ritual purity. He spoke to them of God's love for them, and their place in the kingdom of heaven...in spite of their shortcomings on keeping the law. Ambiguity

Or do you remember the story of the woman caught in adultery? The law was simple...stone her. Jesus challenges the crowd with "he who is without sin cast the first stone." On the other hand, he tells the woman to go and sin no more. Ambiguity

St. Paul wrote to his friend Philemon. His runaway slave was with Paul, and the law of the day was clear. In running, Onesimus had stolen. He should be returned and punished. Paul never asks that this law be set aside, but he does let Philemon know that he would welcome Onesimus back to assist him in prison as a dear brother. Paul is ambiguous...not asking that the law be set aside, but giving Philemon the choice of either taking him back, freeing him, or sending him into Paul's care. Choice, Ambiguity.

Ambiguity is still with us. We have divorced people who are part of our congregations. We acknowledge that divorce is a tragedy and a sin...but often the best option. We see people who are on their second marriage after a divorce, yet that marriage seems blessed with the peace and grace of God

We have people who are gay, and are in long and committed relationships. Certainly God created us male and female to reproduce and carry on our species, but some folks don't fit into that norm. We don't reject them. Most of us have concluded that they had no choice about their orientation. They, like us, are God's children.

We see people who are Jews or Muslims who believe in the God of Abraham, but do not acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. Will God reject them from heaven? Most of us don't think so. Some churches feel they have a rulebook or a ruler that says who is out and who is in...we leave that up to God.

Episcopalians are short on law and long on grace. As in the biblical witness, ambiguity does not scare us. Episcopalians are ready to believe that God is more loving and forgiving than many churches assume. Episcopalians believe that God is working out his purposes in the world with the help of many people: Christian, Jew, Muslim and others.

It's not easy being an Episcopalian. Instead of just following the rules or just following orders from above...we have to think out each situation. We don't ignore the rules and the commandments, but we do understand that there are times when they have to be applied with moderation and love. We understand that probably not everyone is going to heaven, but we are willing to let God do the choosing and the excluding. We like to focus more on telling our members to keep their own lives in order, and not to focus on pointing out the moral flaws and shortcomings of their neighbor.

Anglican (Episcopal) Christianity can produce saints like William Wilberforce, William Temple, and Desmond Tutu. It can also produce folks that wander completely off the reservation like John Shelby Spong, although even he made some good points.

I can give you a long list of things that I find wrong with the Episcopal Church: I think we pick administrators and not teachers when we search for bishops. I think we have a less than perfect way of exercising the teaching office in our church. I think we too often follow the pied piper of our culture when we make decisions.

But I believe that we honestly are listening for God's call. I also believe that we are discerning and following the Holy Spirit. I also believe that we have been ready to bring the Gospel to difficult and new situations in our culture. Yes, the Episcopal Church makes a lot of mistakes, but it also does a lot of ministry. It takes the wrong path sometimes, but it usually sees its mistakes and is ready to admit and correct them. It argues too much with itself, but it has always been able to respond in a united way to the needs of people in the name of Christ.

Like me, this imperfect church has been able, through the mercy of God, to muddle along.

Some may seek out the Roman Church with its clear doctrine and detailed canon law. Some may seek out a bible church that will quote you a verse from the bible to answer your every question. Some may seek out a church with a doctrine that says God wants you to be rich, so you won't feel guilty about the amount of stuff that you have.

I will stay with The Episcopal Church. I believe that God the Holy Spirit is with us as we tackle the problems of today. We are going to make some mistakes as we minister in this world. But we will also do some effective ministry in the name of Christ. Perhaps I'm just a glutton for punishment, but I'll stay with the Episcopal Church.

Jesus understood the ambiguity of his situation in Israel. He upheld the law, but loved and offered salvation to the people who did not perfectly obey it. I think that same Jesus understands the Episcopal Church and our proclamation of the Gospel. I think he appreciates that we have shied away

from easy answers, and have struggled and wrestled with the ambiguity of humanity and faith. May God guide us in this struggle.

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