

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

The Rev. Brooks Cato

You know, it's not often that I feel like a real Baptist preacher, but this week, this week I feel like I need a big, floppy Bible to thump while I'm up here. If we were good Baptists, you'd all have your big, floppy Bibles out there, too, and you'd be fact-checking my references mid-sermon. If we were good Baptists, you'd holler "Hallelujah" when I got things right, and some of you might mutter "Help him, Jesus" when I went astray. I imagine we'd hear a lot of help him Jesus-es. But we're not good Baptists. We're good Episcopalians. Which means, according to my big, floppy Book of Common Prayer, we keep a Bible of "appropriate size and dignity" reverently displayed. The copy we have dates back to 1798; it is appropriately sized, dignified, and almost certainly remains unopened by most of us here.

I know that's not true about our own copies of the Bible at home. Those, I'm sure, are well-worn. The gold has long since rubbed off the pages, and Jesus' red words jump right off the page and deep into our hearts. I know this to be true because at that great gathering of the church called General Convention in 2000, 2006, and 2012, the leaders of our church passed resolutions saying that we'd dig into those scriptures. In 2012, the wording went like this: "Be it Resolved, that every Episcopal diocese, cathedral, church and mission shall invite their entire membership and people beyond their church to read the entire Bible in 2013." On the surface, this sure seems like a silly thing to do. It's the downside of the bureaucracy in a hierarchical church like ours. As Christian people, doesn't it seem like "reading your Bible" is one of those basic principles? Well, here's the thing. Those resolutions didn't appear out of nowhere. They sprung up because folks started noticing that most Episcopalians lacked what we call "Biblical Literacy," that is, most folks in our churches don't actually know what the Bible says.

Instead, we go to those things that sound like they should be in the Bible. For example, "hate the sin, love the sinner." It sure sounds like the Bible, or at least it sounds like what we think the Bible sounds like. But it's not. "Hate the sin, love the sinner?" That was Ghandi. Or what about the slightly less controversial "Money is the root of all evil?" Sounds like the Bible. Pretty darn close to the Bible, but it's actually an edit of what's in there. 1st Timothy says that money isn't the problem, but *loving* money is. Surely, the comforting "This too shall pass" is in there somewhere. Nope, lovely as that is, it's from an obscure Old English poem. My favorite, though, is one that gets deployed All. The. Time. "God helps those who help themselves." Proverbs, right? Or maybe one of the Psalms? Wrong again. That's Hercules in one of Aesop's Fables. If anything, God helps those who can't help themselves. That's a major theme throughout scripture. James served orphans and widows. Job opened his doors to aliens in a strange land. Isaiah freed the captives, and Jesus gave hope to the poor. God helps those who can't help themselves, and God's people should do the same.

Now, I've been kind of hard on us Episcopalians and our varying degrees of scriptural familiarity. And maybe that's not entirely fair. Even Paul floundered from time to time. Those of you who have just finished grading papers are gonna love this one. The author of Hebrews unhelpfully begins a line of reasoning with, and I quote, "As someone has testified somewhere..." See, as Christians, maybe even as people, we need ways of keeping each other honest. That author certainly knew scripture, but wasn't the sort of person that could chapter and verse his way through a letter. That, or he just blanked on a citation mid-scroll. But at least he knew the stories. He may not have remembered where the next line came from, but he knew it was scripture. The church, at least General Convention, seems to be worried that we don't even know that much. Truth be told, they may be on to something. But I think they've gone about it the wrong way. See, we may be a church that loves having a hierarchy in some ways, but most of us don't like to be told what to do. Worse yet, folks like me tend to look

at resolutions promising to read the Bible with a touch of cynicism. Couldn't we just read the Bible instead of putting that basic Christian activity to a vote?

Probably, but maybe there's something to it. See, we live in a world today that puts immense value on the individual and what the individual can do. We like to imagine our accomplishments are solely the product of our own hard work. But more often than not, we've had help along the way. Maybe a mentor, a support system, or a discovery made years before our research came along. Our lives are interwoven, and so are our accomplishments. You may try to pick yourself up by your bootstraps, but you've gotta have boots first. I wish I was clever enough to come up with that on my own, but I've cribbed it from Martin Luther King: "It's alright to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps." We rely on each other, and in some ways, we have to rely on systems of support that help us along the way. For Martin Luther King, somebody needed to get that bootless man some boots. For the Episcopal Church, we voted to read this Bible, but we voted to read it with somebody. And in our Baptisms, we all promised to "proclaim by word and example the Good News of God." Well, we can't proclaim by word if we don't know the word.

Helpfully, this reliance on others is all over that Word. In Acts, the Apostles are down to eleven now that Judas is gone, but they know they've still got proclaiming to do. Now, Jesus told 'em to go from place to place two by two. With some basic math, those Apostles knew eleven wasn't gonna cut it, and they needed another to round things out. So, they elect Matthias. Now that the Twelve are twelve again, the work of proclaiming the word can begin. And twelve going out by twos rocks my world. Twelve is big, by the way. Twelve is the tribes of Israel, it's the gates of Jerusalem, it's the angels of Revelation. Twelve is the number of completion, fullness, and unity. Twelve is all the people of God. Not eleven with a lone-wolf tribe off to the side, but a full, well-rounded, totally realized twelve. So our Twelve Apostles go out in pairs, no one left on their own, the dangers of the road averted with the help of a friend. Someone to carry the weight for a while, someone to keep you honest, someone to ask questions, bounce ideas off of, even struggle with the idea of God. And it worked, because they didn't go it alone. You know, in our Bible Study on Thursday, we talked a lot about what's in the Book of Acts. It's jam-packed with action. There's earthquakes, jailbreaks, thousands baptised in a single day! As far as I'm concerned, Acts is the "So-what?" of the Bible. The Gospels show us Jesus. Acts shows us what to do with that Word Made Flesh.

Now, we might not be good Baptists. But we are good Episcopalians. So I'm thinking maybe, just maybe we oughtta start reading our Bibles. I know, it's a wild idea, and I apologise that I didn't put this to a vote earlier. But we can do this, together. I've got a handful of Bibles to my name, and I'm sure most of you do, too. If you don't have one, let me know, and we'll get you hooked up. On your way out today, grab a friend, someone to keep you accountable, and let's do this. Let's read those Bibles. I had a professor in seminary that said, "If your Bible's in such good shape that it doesn't flop, you aren't reading it enough." That seems as good a measure as any. So, to get those Bibles floppy, let's read this thing. We'll start with Acts, the action movie of the Bible, and we'll go from there. And don't worry, I'm not turning you loose to figure this out all on your own. We're going to do this together. We're gonna ask each other questions, keep each other honest, try to make sense of all this God stuff, and we're going to do it together.