

Kind of a strange sermon today, a movie review,
some thoughts on the demonstrations at Emory,
and some thoughts on our lessons.

Last week I got the chance to go see a documentary called,
“The Philadelphia Eleven.”

It was about the first 11 women to be ordained priests in 1974,
before women’s ordination was approved by the Church.

Because their ordinations were both
an act of faithfulness and an act of protest,
the Church struggled with how to talk about them,
and settled - sort of - on calling them valid but irregular.

Valid, because the ordinations followed the liturgy for ordination
and because three bishops were there to lay hands on them
and convey the sacrament of ordination on them.

But also irregular, because the Church had failed to approve
the ordination of women the year before,
so the ordinations occurred outside
the doctrine & discipline of the Church.

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I hope you will watch the documentary one day,
but if you do I hope you will watch it with a discerning eye,
because the film is equal parts inspiring and disappointing.

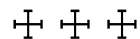
The inspiring part was getting to know most of the 11 women
who stepped into that historic moment.

To meet them as the wonderful and flawed people that all priests are.
Some of them leap off the screen with their strength and their resolve.

It's also important for people like me
who never knew an Episcopal Church without women priests
to hear and see what they endured.

The most visceral example was when one of the priests told about
a person coming up to the altar for communion
and clawing her hands as she offered the Blood of Christ.

That's probably not even close to the worst thing those women endured,
but I doubt I'll ever forget that image.



What disappointed me about the film, what made me nuts, honestly,
was the simplistic lens it uses to tell the story.

The film doesn't tell the story of a Church going through the difficult
and all-too-slow process of overcoming old ways of thinking
that were impeding the spread of the Gospel.

No, the film tells the story like you are watching the first Star Wars movie,
like it's the story of these virtuous, ragtag rebels
taking on the evil and repressive Empire.

Everyone we meet who opposed either the ordination of women generally
or the protest ordinations specifically
are painted in their worst possible light.

They're caricatured as fools or villains.

In fact, the tone of the documentary is so simplistic
that the people watching it with me that night
started to behave as if they WERE watching Star Wars,
booing and cheering right on cue
as the heroes and villains walked across the screen.

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Now, there were heroes in the campaign for women's ordination,
just as there were people who acted terribly,
who wounded not only those 11 women and their callings
but also wounded the Body of Christ as a whole.

But a lot more people involved were neither hero nor villain.
Real life is almost never a battle between
the noble champions of Good and the wicked disciples of Evil,
so surely the Body of Christ shouldn't be reduced to that, either.

I'll always be grateful to have met the Philadelphia 11,
but I don't know if I'll ever watch the film again.

It was a reductive lens on a group of people
who were so much more than the filmmakers wanted to acknowledge.

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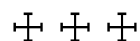
Watching that documentary probably colored
how I watched the news from Emory this week.

Emory plays a huge role in the life of Atlanta and of this parish.
We've got so many Emory students, alumni, employees,
and faculty in our parish,
to say nothing of how many of us rely on Emory healthcare.

So it was more than just another news story for a lot of us this week
when people protesting the war in Gaza
and the training center in Atlanta
started spray painting the campus and setting up encampments.

It was more than just another news story
when state police were called in to disperse the crowd,
when the campus went on lockdown,
when chemical irritants and tasers were used to subdue people.

I know not everyone here has been following this story,
but if you have and if it has generated a strong reaction in you
like it has in me, make sure to remember the humanity
of the people on the opposite side
of wherever your sympathies have led you.



See, the protestors are rightfully outraged at the death toll in Gaza,
particularly the death toll of the civilians trapped in the war zone.

And they're worried about the potential for a militarized police
right here in Georgia.

Both of those concerns seem to me worth taking very seriously.

On the other side, the pro-Israel people who counter-protested
are also right to worry about the threat of violence against Jews,
especially since the cookie shop in Emory Village where they met
was vandalized earlier this year and has received several threats.

Emory administrators are right to be concerned about the risk of violence,
about the safety of the community they are tasked to protect.

And the police who were called to disperse the encampment
are not faceless thugs or puppets of oppression.

They are people ordered to do their duty
in a highly volatile situation.

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Watching that documentary the week before all this happened at Emory
reminded me that whatever was going on,
whoever was involved, it wasn't simple.

It wasn't a popcorn movie fight
between the good guys and the bad guys.

No matter how desperately we want it to be so,
clarity and simplicity will not be a part of these conflicts.

The Emory community didn't experience Thursday in one way
and don't think about it the same way now.

I know I was scared when my wife texted,
saying that her building was on lockdown
and that she heard there was tear gas outside her building.

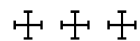
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I wish I could tell you who to praise and who to condemn.

I wish I could point in one direction and say,
“There. That is the way of righteousness.”

Maybe when I was younger...

But watching that documentary on the Philadelphia Eleven
and reading our lessons this week HAS reminded me of a few things
we should consider as this continues to play out.



The OBVIOUS thing to remember, and I’ve said this already,
is that not one of these conflicts is between the virtuous & the wicked.

There are at least 4 different issues dividing several groups of people,
and underneath those issues are all kinds of unconscious forces
like race, class, populism, and generational tensions.

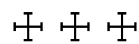
And in the midst of those issues and forces
are people trying to pursue the good as they understand it,
while they fight the temptation
to ignore the humanity of their opponents.

That’s the obvious thing.

The IMPORTANT thing to remember is that while followers of Jesus
are NOT called to be passive in times of conflict,
they ARE absolutely called to root all of their words
and all of their actions in the example, the teachings,
and the promise of the One who is our savior.

I am the Vine, Jesus says. We are just his branches.

Especially when your convictions put you into conflict with others,
Christians must live out those convictions
as followers of the one who would not turn to violence,
who would not turn to hatred,
who would not scapegoat others,
as followers of the one who instead gave himself
as an offering for the sake of the world.



Finally, remember that as Christians our ultimate witness,
our ultimate demonstration of our convictions,
our ultimate means of changing the world or preserving it - is love.

“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters,”
1st John tells us, “are liars.”

“You cannot love the God whom you cannot see
if you hate a brother or sister standing right in front of you,
including the ones you only see on a screen.”

Christians will never be immune from conflict,
SHOULD never be immune from conflict,
even conflict with one another.

But the commandment is clear:
even when you are deep in conflict,
those who love God MUST love their brother and sister also.

Amen.