



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
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Episode 010: Conversation with Bishop Wayne

This episode's host is Shug Goodlow in a conversation with the Bishop of Missouri, the Rt. Rev. Wayne Smith, on faith journeys, evangelism, fountain pens, Shape Notes, and Holy Week.

Shug Goodlow: Welcome to Jesus Hacked, a weekly podcast on storytelling faith. I'm Shug Goodlow, Head Verger and Acolyte Master at Christ Church Cathedral St. Louis. Today, we are talking with the Right Reverend George Wayne Smith, 10th Bishop of the Diocese of Missouri. Bishop Smith, good morning.

Wayne Smith: Good morning to you, Shug.

Shug Goodlow: You have been the bishop of the Diocese of Missouri since June 6th, 2002. How do you like us so far?

Wayne Smith: So far so good. The work of being bishop is relentless, but over these 15 years, I've discovered that the place and the people suite me. I'm glad to be bishop, but not just bishop anywhere. I'm glad to be bishop here.

Shug Goodlow: I'm very happy to hear that. Let's see if I can get this right. You were born in Abilene, Texas and raised a Baptist. How does a young man from the red soil of west Texas, who I assume was steeped in the Southern Baptist tradition, who attended Baylor University - which if I recall correctly, is a Southern Baptist University in Waco, Texas - how does this person find his way into the Episcopal Church?

Wayne Smith: It's not a straight line, as you might guess. I grew up in a farming community, about 20 miles south of Abilene. The whole community really was, almost entirely, evangelical in outlook and tradition. Some of us were Baptists, some of us were Church of Christ, some of us were Methodists. Not many of us were Roman Catholic. That's kind of it. The culture I grew up in was evangelical, not just the church. The truth be told, I did not know a way of being Christian that was not Fundamentalist. I thought that all Christianity was Fundamentalist, because that's really all that I knew.

I think that I had made a deal with myself, that since I couldn't wrap my mind around that intellectually. It just did not make sense to me. I had made a deal with myself, that once I was old enough, I would be done. I'd be done with Christianity. I was blessed to have Baylor University come into my life, because for the very first time ever, I encountered a Christianity that was not Fundamentalist. They took into account such things as the historical critical method. I had to take a Bible course - I had to take two at Baylor - and thought I'd just get those out of the way early. And took an Old Testament course and thought, huh, I have to pay attention to this after all.

Looking backward, it helped me to integrate and make sense of my young life, and to prepare a way for a life forward. As the custom among Baptists, I was ordained while I was still in graduate school at Baylor, and had charge over an open country church near Gatesville, Texas. As a result of some strange goings-on in the community there in Gatesville, it became clear to me that I could not - even though I had re-embraced Christianity - that the Baptist church could not be my home for a lifetime. Started looking elsewhere, and very quickly stumbled into the Episcopal Church. This is something I hear people who come to the Episcopal Church from other traditions ... I hear them say it all the time, "I worshiped there one time, and thought this is home. This is where I have belonged all my life, and I just didn't know it. Just didn't know it existed."

Shug Goodlow: You came home without realizing that you weren't home before.

Wayne Smith: That's just it.

Shug Goodlow: Wonderful. I've done a little research. It seems that you were the 975th Bishop to be consecrated in the Episcopal Church. Can you speak about the moment or the circumstances that lead to you knowing that you wanted to be a bishop? You were called to be a bishop?

Wayne Smith: I didn't have the sense so much that I was called to be a bishop, as that I was called to make myself available to be a bishop. I've known people who have had the "purple fever." They either had to be a bishop or they were going to die. I just did not have that. I had the sense that yes, I needed to be in a process - or two or three - and see where that leads. The first election that I was in, I was elected, and it was right here. So, I'm glad for that.

Shug Goodlow: Why did you want to be in this particular diocese?

Wayne Smith: Because I was nominated, and I did not know who nominated me until almost two years later. I thought maybe I was called to be in a process in another dioceses or two. That was not the case, but about the same time, I entered the process here. The more I learned about Missouri, the more intriguing it was to me, and the more I wanted to learn. Again, it was not in a straightforward kind of way, but here I am.

Shug Goodlow: The presiding bishop, Michael Curry, was recently here. He spoke about the need for a revival of relationships, and speaks often about The Jesus Movement. How do you see our diocese being part of that? Being an active part of that?

Wayne Smith: I think that it's a little bit complicated because ... Michael confuses me when he talks about revival. When I think about revival, I think about the things I experienced during my childhood, which was mostly - God forgive me for saying it this way - it was a boring week of long sermons and even longer altar calls that I had to endure. That did not then, and does not now, have much appeal for me.

I think that spiritual re-engagement and making the story of Jesus Christ known and available to others, even and maybe especially to those who will never become a part of us --maybe never even become Christian--I find that extraordinarily interesting. Spiritual renewal, spiritual availability for others. I think that our diocese is in uneven ways, let me admit that first-- uneven ways, has been making itself available through servant ministries of one kind or another. Food ministries, for example, really proliferate in this diocese.

It's a way of making Jesus available, where people have not always known him. Also, it's a way for us to find Jesus in those whom we might not expect. I think that is a good thing.

Michael has been using The Jesus Movement as shorthand for talking about some of the things that the Episcopal Church does, and does well, and for challenging us to take additional steps in who we are and what we're about. For example, saying the word "Jesus" and saying Jesus' name without any embarrassment ... Being conversant with Scripture and being willing to speak in scriptural terms.

Sometimes, those of us who have grown up come from fundamentalist backgrounds, have had Scripture used to badly as a weapon against us, that we shy away from engaging it very much at all.

I think that, in talking about The Jesus Movement, Presiding Bishop Michael is encouraging the Episcopal Church to reclaim the name, reclaim the identity. Maybe more importantly, to reclaim the story of who Jesus was, who Jesus is ... Making sure that we know He's alive, available to us.

Shug Goodlow: I often wonder what are we, as Episcopalians, so afraid of in saying "Jesus" and "Amen."

That brings me to another point. Parishioners are not especially shy about projecting our anger, anxieties, and expectations on one another or clergy and our bishop. Can you share some wisdom on how we can handle those kinds of situations, or how you have handled such things? I think we can all learn from your example.

Wayne Smith: I have acted out a time or two in that regard in my own life. I think that they're - and this is a spiritual practice that I find helpful. Don't always manage to engage it, but I find it helpful. Attributing the best of motives to people whom I encounter, instead of assuming that they're out to get me, for example, or that they've got an agenda. But, expecting, anticipating the very best of motives. I find myself most badly used when anything that I say is taken at its worst construction. It's a generosity of being with one another I find helpful, and something that I aspire to.

Shug Goodlow: Along with that, one of our most charming traits as humans is that we want everything now. Could you speak a little bit about how understanding the importance of "*kairos*" - God's time - not ours, can help us?

Wayne Smith: There is such a thing as *kairos*, and I've experienced it. It's God's "now". It doesn't mean that it's coming in the next split second. Often, what we get is simply a foretaste - a very important foretaste - of what God is doing now and what will do in the time to come. To get a little theological about this, the ancient Christian writers call the eucharist "the antepast of heaven," the hors d'oeuvres of the banquet that God has put in place for us. That banquet that comes at the end of the age. We

don't get the whole thing. There is still some waiting to be done, but we have that important foretaste. And not just a foretaste, but a part of that meal itself.

I think that in an impatient age and an instantaneous kind of culture, where we click on something and expect the page to load and are disappointed when it doesn't, that the virtue of waiting is something that can easily be lost. I think that waiting is an important spiritual virtue, and to use that word again, I think it's even a spiritual discipline.

Spiritual fruits are seldom, in my experience, instantaneous, but they are something that happens over the long haul. So, patience is good.

Shug Goodlow: Yes, it is. I hope we hurry up and have it.

Wayne Smith: Yes, ma'am.

Shug Goodlow: Hold on to your miter, Bishop, I'm about to change courses in midstream here. I'd like to know you from a little bit different perspective. Can you tell us about your interest in Shape Note singing? It was something I had never heard of until I met you.

Wayne Smith: First of all, I have an interest in singing, full stop. I think that a world without song is just a sadder place.

I really like congregational song, which is to say that I like to sing with a whole bunch of other people. I don't get to sing Shape Note or Sacred Harp as often as I would like. A function of my calendar, I just find myself busy all the times when the local group, the St. Louis Shape Note Singers, gather to do what they do. It is never a performance, which is one of the blessings of it. There is, therefore, never any performance anxiety. If you have anxiety about shape notes, that's your own fault. It's not something that is implicit, in the way that we sing.

Shape Note music is, for those who have not heard it or encountered it or sung it themselves, really it's a participatory sport. No one wants to watch this thing, or listen to it, without joining it. They're great, big, open chords. The music is unadorned. It's almost shameful to sing with vibrato, for example. It's loud. It's very forgiving, as is the community. And, it's gorgeous. My experience of Sacred Harp is like crawling into the sound box of a cello. Not just hearing the music, but feeling the music all around and know that I am part of that music, also.

Shug Goodlow: Wonderful.

Bishop, you're the only person with whom I can sit and talk at length about fountain pens. I know you've been collecting them for years. What

got you interested in fountain pens, and do you have one or two favorites in your collection?

Wayne Smith: My favorites are whichever ones I'm carrying at the time. I probably have about 100 pens at any given moment, in my collection. I started writing with fountain pens off and on from the time I was in grade school.

Really in graduate school, I started writing more frequently, more regularly, with a fountain pen. I did that for one purpose. I have terrible handwriting, and have had awful handwriting all my life. But, there's something about a fountain pen that makes me pay attention just that much more, that will make my handwriting almost legible. There's been this sort of under the surface practical purpose of writing with a fountain pen. I also find just a pleasure with the touch of nib onto the paper.

About 20 or 25 years ago, I discovered the world of vintage fountain pens, and oh my goodness, they were cheap enough back in the day that a parish priest could afford to buy them and to restore them. I've restored more pens than I can begin to count. I've given away plenty of pens. In fact, in the past month, I restored and gave away a fountain pen. It's something that the restoration of pens and the writing with them are things that I find just pleasurable.

Shug Goodlow: I recently received ... It was either a text or an email about a pen that was being made available to me at the mere price of 278,000 dollars. I imagine things have changed quite a bit since the days that vintage pens were affordable.

Wayne Smith: You know that quarter of a million dollar pen is something in which I have absolutely no interest.

Shug Goodlow: No interest.

Wayne Smith: No, no. I like a pen that has been used, and it has the character of someone who has owned it and cherished it. There was a time back in the 30's, 40's and 50's when someone would have a pen, and that's the one they would use for their writing. Some of the pens that I have are just full of the character of the people who had owned them. If you have a pen long enough, the pressure of the nib onto the feed - that's the part just under the nib - will actually form the two together in a particular way that is suited to the writer who has used that for a decade or two. It's really interesting to know that, and to realize that, and to know you can't fix that ... You can't change it. It's even not a good thing to try to change that character that the pen has.

Shug Goodlow: I think we'll both agree that there's a certain joy that comes with that.

Wayne Smith: Yes yes yes.

Shug Goodlow: Well Bishop, this has been delightful, but I have one more question for you. Was there anything especially meaningful for you as you prepared for Holy Week and Easter that you would care to share with us as we close today?

Wayne Smith: Holy Week is, every year, a time of spiritual renewal for me. As the liturgy says, it makes it possible for us to enter into the passion of Christ's death and the mystery of his resurrection and yes, to follow in the steps of Jesus. I try to reflect on those things, and to prepare myself to be surprised.

For me, that is something that I encounter almost every Holy Week. It will come at a different point every year. Sometimes, it's during the foot washing on Maundy Thursday. Often, it's during the Good Friday service. People who know me, and this is part of my, shall we say, eccentricity, the Great Vigil of Easter is my favorite service of the whole year. Simply to sit in darkness and hear the reading of the Old Testament scriptures that seem like they're never going to end, to let the Scriptures overwhelm my awareness even to the point of boredom.

Also, I will almost every year, I hear something that I do not expect in the readings, or something that I've never heard before. I will think, "I didn't notice that in the Scripture." Understand, that I will have read that piece of Scripture dozens of times in the course of my lifetime, but there it is. God's surprise for me, this time around.

Shug Goodlow: Sir, you are a member of this large community of churches, yet you are as bishop not a member of any one congregation. I sometimes think you're almost like a man without a country sometimes. I for one want to let you know how grateful I am for your presence in our diocese. I thank you for your time this morning, talking with me. Again, thank you for being our bishop.

Wayne Smith: It's my joy, Shug.