



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
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Episode 009: The window that started conversation

Mimi Shipp is our guest today. She's a member of and the Parish Assistant for Ministry Support at Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Webster Groves. And she's sharing the story of Emmanuel's resurrection window, a memorial to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.—how it came to be, the difficult conversations around it that helped shape the future direction of the parish. This episode's host is Deborah Nelson Linck.

Deborah: Welcome to Jesus Hacked, our weekly podcast on storytelling faith. I'm Debbie Nelson Linck, a long time parishioner at Christ Church Cathedral, St. Louis. On today's episode, we're talking with Mimi Shipp about the Martin Luther King window at Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Webster Groves, Missouri. Mimi is currently the parish assistant for ministry support. Welcome, Mimi.

Mimi: Thank you.

Deborah: Recently, I attended the Absalom Jones celebration where Mimi told the story of Emmanuel Church's resurrection window, given in memory of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, in June of 1968. Mimi, please share how the window came to be.

Mimi: Dr. King died on April the fourth. There was a regular vestry meeting on Tuesday, April the ninth, 1968. On the agenda that night, there was a

section on the agenda called King Memorial and Church's Stance on Race. The rector at the time was S.T. Denkinger, and he basically started out talking to the vestry members, saying some people had contacted him and he had contacted other people, and that they had come up with \$700 for the total of \$1100 to install a new, one of the memorial windows. We had done an addition to the church in 1965. There were three windows that were added at that point. One of them had not been installed yet. It was originally to be done as a memorial window, basically when someone died. I think there were a few people in the parish who thought it might be done for a family member.

Then, all of a sudden this tragic death happened. Some of our parishioners had actually participated in, marched, at Selma, and had planned to and had marched at the march from the Arch to Forest Park on Palm Sunday that year. What happened was, they came forward and said, "We want to do this window and we want to do it in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." As you can imagine, there was some controversy about that.

Deborah: Tell us, what were some of the concerns of the members of the congregation or the vestry? What kind of things did you ...

Mimi: In reading through the vestry minutes, what's interesting is that they're not antiseptic. You have to understand. If you knew some of the people from back then, you could sort of figure out what was going on. Just the tenor of how they ... the words that they used, you could tell there was a real struggle that went on at this meeting. What I think happened was, I think that there were people who thought that was a lot of money. \$1100 at that point and time was a lot of money. It would be equivalent of about \$6000 in today's world, in today's money. I think people thought that was too much money to spend. I think that there were people who thought, and would never probably have said this in public, but, there were people who probably thought, "Well, I was going to do that in memory of my family member who was, maybe, sick or near death," or something like that. Then, I think that there were people who thought it was a little controversial.

Deborah: Was there fear?

Mimi: There was probably fear. We still have parishioners alive who went through this and were there. Probably at least a handful of them who remember this, some remember more than others. I would have to say, there was probably some fear, but there was not any fear with about three quarters of the vestry. There was absolutely no fear at all. They felt like we had to do this. It was almost like the opportunity was there. It presented itself. If we don't do it, we'll regret it. You can kind of hear both sides of that when you read through the minutes.

Deborah: Did the congregation have input in this?

Mimi: That's probably one of the biggest things. That was the concern. As I said before, the rector came to the meeting and said, "People have come to me and have offered anonymously." That was the other thing. That was all done anonymously. The donations were done anonymously. People have talked to him or he felt like he could go talk to people and get the \$1100. There was some concern that it happened in a small group and the parish didn't get a say.

Deborah: A lot of the newspaper articles from that time that talked about the window, talked about the anonymity of the people who were donating funds for that. Was there a reason that they wanted to remain anonymous?

Mimi: The reason is that, I believe that they did not want it to be any one parishioner's push. They wanted it to be accepted by everybody. They felt like if they had names on it and had names associated with it, that then would be the concern and there would be a lot of conversation around that. They didn't want any conversation around that.

Deborah: Was there a discussion that the window should be made quickly because Martin Luther King was assassinated in April of 1968, and then the window was dedicated in August of 1968.

Mimi: Right. What happened was, the three windows were originally designed by Frei Studio. There were three original designs already done. The resurrection window had been designed by Robert Harmon. I think, what happened was, when this all occurred, they went back to Frei Studio and to Robert Harmon, and he made a few tweaks to it, but it was always supposed to be the resurrection window. It was always supposed to be about oppression as well as the resurrection. That's part of the reason I think some of these parishioners felt like it just was ... A gift from God had landed in their laps. We have to make this happen.

Deborah: There was a newspaper article that reported: The vestry labored long and wrestled hard with this decision before accepting the window. I know how I received the information was through sitting through your presentation. Can you describe for people what the window looks like?

Mimi: It's predominantly red. It has, at the bottom, images of the Red Sea in Egypt. In the middle of it, it has representations that talk about ... There's a trowel and bricks. There's the chalice. There's symbols of the Cairo symbol and the Christian symbols are in there. The very top of the window, it gets brighter in color and it's a little more lively yellows and whites and blues. There's a symbol at the very top that represents, it's more of a stylized peacock that's an ancient symbol for resurrection.

Deborah: I was surprised when I actually saw the window. We were invited to the back of the church to view the window. I guess the image that came to mind for me was that there would be black figures in the window, very much like the window in Birmingham in the 16th Street Baptist Church there. There is an image that was given by the people of Wales that was a black Jesus image. I was kind of anticipating that this had some black imagery in it. When I got back to the window, it was very abstract symbols in the window. I wondered how people kind of perceived that. Did they receive it like I did? Because, I really felt like, walking through the church, I never would have picked that out as the resurrection window.

Mimi: Right. In all three of those windows, they're very modern. They have a real modern feel to them. The one thing that I might do, is just tell you that when Robert Harmon ... Let me just read real quickly. When he wrote about this window, what he said, "It's hope that window, both through images, color, line and form, and because of the person to whom it is dedicated, will speak to the need for exodus and resurrection in our daily lives." I think the key here is that it was about the resurrection piece of it. To me, that's how he symbolized that we need to be thinking in a different way. I think that's the way. That's why, I guess, for me, I just automatically felt like, of all the windows we have, that's the one that would've spoken to me about Dr. King more than any of the others we've got.

Deborah: What are people's reactions upon learning about the window? As I said, going through the church, I wouldn't be able to just pick that out. What are people's reactions when they find that you have this resurrection window?

Mimi: People do one of two things. They either say, exactly like you, "What? I would never have figured that to be," because it's got so much imagery in it. I think the other thing that happens is, at the very top, there's some musical notes. The musical notes are to the tune, We Shall Overcome. Once people figure that out, then they're like, "I get it now."

The other thing, I think, that happens, and I think a lot of people, when they kind of look at it, they start to really think about the Biblical aspect of the exodus and oppression and things like that, in a very different way. This is a very abstract window. I think they start to think abstractly a little bit more about what happens. I think the other thing that happens is, some people, when they realize this, think, "Wait a minute." They start to put two and two together and the timing doesn't make any sense to them at all. Then, the next question they ask me is, "Did anybody leave?"

Deborah: Yes. Yes. The answer to that question is? Was there exodus?

Mimi: Yes. There was an exodus. There was. I don't know exactly how many families, but we did lose some families over that decision. I think that there were ... I think people probably knew who most of the people were who would've been interested. Even though it was anonymous, I'm sure that some folks did know who might have contributed to it. I do believe that it opened up people's eyes to thinking very differently about what a church can do.

Deborah: Do you think that the conversation surrounding the acceptance of the window shaped the congregation past that point?

Mimi: I do. At that point, Webster had gone through, I believe it was in 1954, where they closed the swimming pools because of segregation, or desegregation. There was a lot of controversy in Webster about all of that. I believe that it really made people start thinking about our stance on these sorts of things. It was interesting because there was a very eloquent response to not doing the window. That particular person is actually still a member at Emmanuel. I just sent him a copy of what his response was, because he had not remembered it.

His dilemma was, he really wanted the money to go to a summer camp for kids instead of that. That's a very noble thing to want to do. I think, all of a sudden, people had to look at things in a very different manner. It really caused people to really think hard and long about some things. One of the individuals who had been ... We know this because her family member told us. Over the years, we've learned this. One of the members who was very instrumental in making this happen went on to start a day care center. The first day care, literally, day care that took six week old infants and on up, so that women could work when they needed to outside the home. You've got to think about this. This was in the early 70's she did this. This was a big deal.

It also led, eventually, to some women starting a food center, one of the first food centers in St. Louis County. I think it caused our parish to really look inward at: What are we doing and why are we doing it?

Deborah: I think it's difficult to view history with the eyes of today. How do you think the window is received now as race is a big issue that we're all discussing now? How does that look now to people?

Mimi: Here's what's interesting. Because it's our 150th this year, we've been doing a lot of research. The national church, as you know, asked all churches to research their history as it related to race and slavery and things like that. We started that, started researching several years ago. Because we've done so much more research this year, we have discovered that, yes indeed, our founders had ... There was an orchard that they were part owner in and that orchard was run by slaves. We cannot say

definitively. We don't believe, but I don't know that I could say 100% that church was built without slave labor. That discussion, to me, is what has opened up and has allowed us to talk more freely about that sort of thing. The window has allowed that to happen. The window works well with these discussions because then we can talk about what happened with the congregation and why they were upset and what ... Those types of thing. I think it's allowed us to have a little bit more open conversation without fear, without judgment and that sort of thing, in a safe environment that people can have an opinion.

The other thing, I think, that happens is that in reading through the vestry minutes, people were very nice to one another in reading through this. I think that we are not, maybe, quite there in 2017 like we were in 1968. I'm not sure we would've had the same kind of disagreements now that they did then. That's a little bit of a change that I've seen. The interesting thing is that everyone accepts this window and accepts that this is our heritage, if you will. I believe that it's caused people to really think twice about how we want to move forward and what our ministries ought to be.

Deborah: It seems like the window, the conversation surrounding the window and legacy of that conversation has continued to shape future conversations that you've had past the 60s well into 2017. Seems like there's a little bit of sense of pride, also, for that you had the struggle and conversation and were able to still have that window and it to be an important part of your church history. How do you share information about the window with newcomers who come into the church? You have this symbolic resurrection window that's there. How do visitors know that special thing is there?

Mimi: They don't. We don't share it well. That's one of the things that we're working on right now. I think it's hard for most churches to distill down to who you are in a single document, so we don't have a lot of information about that. What we have been doing, particularly this year, is providing more information to parishioners. In our Sunday bulletin, in our Sunday inserts, our announcements that go into the bulletins, we've been doing little history pieces all year so that people get some information about that. Where we are right now is, people want more. They want more. They want to know more.

Deborah: Good. Good.

Mimi: We're trying to figure out: How is a good way to get it out? How can we get it out to them and what should we tell them? We've got lots of wonderful things to tell. How is the best way to do it?

Deborah: In closing, I'd like you to do two things. One would be to share, when I walk into the church, where I would see the window, so people can be aware when they come rushing in to see this magnificent window, where they can view it, actually, in the nave of the church. Then, if you have any closing thoughts, anything that we didn't cover in our conversation.

Mimi: When you come into the church, it's at the back. It's the very last window. It's on the north side of the church. It's the very last window in the back. It's our last one that was made. The interesting thing is that most newcomers do sit in the back. We have had scavenger hunts about our windows. I have done that before where we've put things together and put it in the bulletin and given it to the kids, or to the parents, and say, "While your kid is sitting here, can they find the fish? Can they find the trowel? Can they find the eclipse of the moon?" Those types of things. Can they find these things in these windows? We've done a little scavenger hunt for the kids.

You remind me that we just need to probably tell more about that story and really what went on. The other thing I would just add is that there is a wonderful recollection by one of our parishioners who did do the march. I can't remember what they called it, but it was a Palm Sunday march, which was, I think, the 12th of April. I'm not sure, but I think it was. Yeah. It was the following week, because that was Palm Sunday. Because of all of this, several more of our parishioners that I think probably wouldn't have gone, went to that march from the arch to Forest Park. There was a really great reflection about that in one of our newsletters from 1968. I really think that the heart and soul of who this parish has become started, in my opinion, with that window.

Deborah: Wonderful. We have been talking with Mimi Shipp from Emmanuel Church, Webster Groves, about resurrection window, given to the parish as a symbol of racial justice and understanding in memory of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, in June of 1968. Thank you, Mimi, for sharing this faith journey with us.