



Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri
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Episode 024: Jesus got me. Gayle Fisher-Stewart's faith story

From a childhood in the Episcopal Church, to a quest for something not boring, a deviation from sociology class to joining the police force, to God calling while reading Sunday papers on the deck..."You should be in Church."

"I said something I cannot say here. I got up, went to church, and have been back in church ever since, still having some struggles with what church is and what church is supposed to be. There were times when I just wanted to say, 'I'm out of here again.' As I've told people, I think the Lord said, 'I need to yolk this woman or she'll be out of church forever.' It's been like a deep sea fisherman ... You know, how you get this fish that's too big to bring up on the first try, so you let it out, and then you let it get tired and you bring it back in. This is like, twenty years that God has been playing ... 'Okay, eventually I will get you up on the deck.' Finally, God got me. I said, okay fine I'll do this. It just so happened that the bishop of my diocese had just changed the process. Under the old system, I would have been too old to be ordained. I was in the process at 62, which I thought was totally insane because all my contemporaries are retiring from the priesthood and I'm starting. I'm in rookie class with 24 year olds going, 'Something is wrong with this picture.' That's how I got there..."

Debbie Nelson Linck: Welcome to this week's installment of Jesus Hacked, our weekly podcast on storytelling faith. Today, we are honored to welcome the Reverend Gayle Fisher-Stewart, PhD. Ms. Fisher-Stewart is the Associate Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in Washington DC. She was ordained to the priesthood in November of 2015 after serving and retiring from the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington DC for twenty years. I'm your host, Debbie Nelson Linck, a long time parishioner at Christ Church Cathedral, St. Louis. Welcome, Reverend Fisher-Stewart.

Gayle Fisher-Stewart: Morning, how are you?

DNL: I'm very good, thanks.

GF-S: Good to be here.

DNL: Good, good. It's good to have you. I'd like to begin our conversation with you sharing your journey of serving as a police officer. Why did you become a police officer and what was this calling?

GF-S: It was not a call. It was I didn't have money for school. I was sitting in sociology class at the University of Maryland, realizing I did not have money to come back the following semester. Instead of paying attention to the professor, I was reading the Want Ads. I saw that the Metropolitan Police Department was hiring. I immediately left class-

DNL: Oh my gosh.

GF-S: Yes, I just got up and left. I needed money. Got on a bus, went and took the exam. This was not one of these things where I always wanted to be a police officer or there's people in my family ... My family looked at me like I was crazy. Like, "Really, you do know that four years ago, cities burned and the police were at the epicenter. Why do you want to be a pig?" I'm going, "Pigs pay money." I need money. I need money. That's how I got into law enforcement. I hadn't intended to stay. I said, well, I'll do about five years then I can make sure I'm out of school. Then, they had this carrot that if you do twenty years, they will give you a check every month for the rest of your life.

DNL: Nice.

GF-S: Yeah, really nice. I said, I can do twenty. I can do twenty. That's what I did. I did twenty years. I joined in 1972 and retired in 1992. I did not give them a day, not a second, not a moment longer. I said, "That was the contract we have. You give me my check. I'm out of here. I won't bother you anymore." From then, I did some consulting and taught at the university level. Twenty years later, I found myself with a collar around my neck.

DNL: Let's talk about how the journey from being a police officer and meeting some financial obligations and being able to get paid and have a pension afterwards ... How did that lead to being called to the ordained ministry?

GF-S: As my mother said, I went from the devil to the Lord. I'll just let that rest a minute, because to a lot of people, the police were seen as not being very good people. I had struggled with the Church. I was Episcopalian as a child. I was in and out of church because a lot of times, I couldn't figure out what this church stuff was all about. In fact, I said church is really boring. I went through that phase where I just ... "What are you all doing and why?" I was in and out of church. For a while, I sort of left the Episcopal Church and I was looking at the Want Ads, trying to see which preacher - apparently not Episcopalian - but preacher was preaching somewhere else. I would travel around to hear good preaching.

One morning, I was sitting on my deck one Sunday morning, not at church, and I heard this voice that said, "You need to be in church." I said, "Yeah, right", and continued to read my paper. "You need to be in church." "Yeah right, you leave me alone." "You need to be in church!" Okay, if I go in and I call the church and service has not started ... This is the church I had left ... I would go to church. I had never dialed this number before in my life. I went in and dialed the number. I found out later that it was the priest-in-charge who answered. I said, "What time is service?" He said, "10:30." I looked at my watch, and it said 8:30.

I said something I cannot say here. I got up, went to church, and have been back in church ever since, still having some struggles with what church is and what church is supposed to be. There were times when I just wanted to say, "I'm out of here again." As I've told people, I think the Lord said, "I need to yolk this woman or she'll be out of church forever." It's been like a deep sea fisherman ... You know, how you get this fish that's too big to bring up on the first try, so you let it out, and then you let it get tired and you bring it back in.

DNL: Let it out, yeah.

GF-S: This is like, twenty years that God has been playing ... "Okay, eventually I will get you up on the deck." Finally, God got me. I said, okay fine I'll do this. It just so happened that the Bishop of my diocese ... She was a new bishop and she changed the process. Under the old process, I would have been too old to be ordained. I was in the process at 62, which I thought was totally insane because all my contemporaries are retiring from the priesthood and I'm starting. I'm in rookie class with 24 year olds going, "Something is wrong with this picture." That's how I got there.

DNL: When you were a police officer, back to that, did you hear that calling then in the midst of being a police officer?

GF-S: As I think back on it, because you have to do this spiritual journey, I was hearing it but I was not listening. I was far from church, but never far from church and never far from God. I would study, I would read, I would listen to other folks but I just couldn't get God and the church together in one place. I really didn't see the relevance of church in people's lives. People were struggling. I came on policing, again as I said, after the '68 riots. It was four years before I came on. There was discrimination on the police department. There was discrimination against women. Dealing with all of that, plus seeing how the police treated people of color and other marginalized people in the street, it was a struggle.

Like, where are you God in all of this? He kind of like, shut down. Let me do my twenty, get my check, I'll let somebody else worry about this.

DNL: Did any of that shape the kind of police officer that you were?

GF-S: Yeah. My identity was never a police officer. It was a job. I think I can look at it differently. I could challenge people when they did certain things, and say, "Fine, if I get fired, I just get fired. I'll find another job." I never became a police officer. It was a job. It was not part of who I was, as it is for a lot of police officers. That's who they are. You take away their guns, it's like cutting off an arm or something, where I would say, "Hey, you want it? It's messing up my clothes anyway. You got it. Now give it back when you're getting ready." Yeah, it allowed me to really see policing for what it was and what it could be.

DNL: You've answered this call. You've entered seminary. Where did you start the new leg of your journey?

GF-S: I went to seminary before I heard the call, because I had questions. I had questions. I said, "Okay, the only place I can get these questions answered is to go to seminary." I went to Wesley Seminary, which is a Methodist seminary because I had heard about the professors and some of the courses. The ordination was not on blip screen at all. I was just going to get answers. I always say that Wesley changed me, changed who I was in terms of how I saw God and how I saw the Church. Still, ordination was not there. I said, "Well, if I teach a Bible study or something, that will be enough."

Once I graduated, I had left the Church I went back to, and was going to another Episcopal Church, but they had asked me to come and teach a Bible study. I would do that while attending the other church. After I graduated, I went back to this church and started attending services. They had this priest. He said, "Oh, you've been to seminary?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Okay, well you preach every other Sunday." I said, "No I can't." He said, "Why not?" I said, "No. I don't have any preaching courses." He said, "It's okay. You'll be fine." He kind of got me back into the Church and the service. Then he said, "You really need to be ordained." I don't want to be ordained. I don't want that. I can do what I'm doing. Finally, the hook ... God said, "You're up on the deck now. I've got you. This is what you really need to do." That's when I said yes. Of course, the Episcopal Church, although I had graduated from a seminary, said, "We must now make a proper Anglican out of you." I had to do an Anglican year, so I went to Virginia Theological Seminary for that year.

DNL: Calvary Church, where you serve as Associate Rector, has an interesting history and its own challenges. Tell us a little bit about the church's history, as well as some of its unique challenges, and how you help members of that faith community to confront obstacles and continue to grow.

GF-S: Calvary is one of the historically black churches in the District of Columbia. We know how historically black churches come about ... People try to go to the white churches and find they're not welcome, they still want to be Episcopal, so they form their own churches. Calvary has been in DC for a while. Not as old as St. Luke's, where you've had Alexander Crummell, or St. Mary's, which is the

first historically black church in DC. Of course, Alexander Crummell was required of St. Mary's. Some will disagree, but [inaudible 00:10:44] St. Luke's. It is a historically black church. Of course, long history of being at that location, which is about four blocks to the east. Now, it's in its present location.

The challenges at H Street, the H Street North East area that we're in, is gentrifying. We're supposed to go out there, and as Prophet Jeremiah says, "Seek the welfare of the people where you are." We're going, "These folks don't even know we exist." We're here on Sunday and they go by us with their yoga mats going to wherever they're going. It's an aging population. We don't have a lot of young people. Trying to rediscover the mission of the black church and what that means and how we are supposed to look, and overcoming some of the fears of historically black churches ... If we invite others in, then we won't be black anymore, as opposed to if we focus on the mission of the black church, it really doesn't matter who's sitting in our pews because we hold our allegiance to the mission. We can still be a black church and we can still have our customs and our traditions, but we focus on what God is calling us to do in the communities in which we serve.

Regardless of what the community looks like, there's still pockets of poverty. There's still folks who need a decent education. There's still all those issues, in addition to bringing people in who might not look like us, who need to hear the Word. Who need to hear the Word. It's helping the church rediscover what that mission is and what that looks like for today, which is going to be different than it was fifty years ago.

DNL: Tell me a little bit about that work of doing that. How did you go about that?

GF-S: First, it's kind of figuring out ... Asking what is it that people want in terms of church and a relationship with the Lord. Change is difficult for any organization, so we talk about, perhaps we need to be doing something different or we need to look at the worship style. There are folks who will say, "I've been in this church fifty years and I like it the way it is." If you don't change, you will die. Sometimes, you say well ... Sometimes you need to die because out of death comes life and you will have a resurrection. We put on a series of workshops, bringing in Kelly Brown Douglas, who's now going to be the Dean at Episcopal Divinity School, to help us look at what was the call to the black church. That's the black church, regardless of denomination.

What are we supposed to do? It's tied up in the mission of Jesus of Luke 4, which is, "the spirit of the Lord is upon me and He has anointed me." These are the things we're supposed to do. If we do these things that Jesus says he was called to do, then it doesn't matter the race or the ethnicity of the people in the pews. We're focused on that particular mission. We've had a series of workshops with Kelly. We also had a forum on 'Young Black Male, an Endangered Species?' What are we supposed to do as we look at the plight of young black males in our communities broadly? Having these informational sessions, getting people refocused back on the mission ... That the mission is not about us so much trying to gain, as one of my friends say, gather up brownie points so I can get to Heaven. What are we supposed to be doing in the world and in the situation in which we find ourselves?

DNL: What is the Center for the Study of Faith and Justice at Calvary?

GF-S: After the killing of Michael Brown, I went to our rector and I said, "Look, we are a historically black church. This is an issue for us. If we don't do something or say something, then we are really not living up to our call." We put on a forum ... 'Ferguson, Could It Happen Here?', bringing in members of the community, bringing in law enforcement officials. Everybody said, "Yeah, you get the right spark, you get the right or the wrong interaction and Ferguson could happen here, and what are we called to do about it?" After that, you go, oh what are next steps? It helps us get back into our particular call.

I submitted an application to the Episcopal Evangelism Society for a grant not thinking I would get it. We do grants all the time, right? I got a phone call from the Executive Director, saying, "We like this. Can you tweak it a little?" I'm like, really? Okay. I got a grant for almost five thousand dollars, which allowed me to develop the Center, and also to bring in Kelly and do the other forums that we've had. The Center looks at the intersection of faith and justice ... How does our faith intersect with God's justice? Also, with what we see as justice in the world. Sometimes, they are at polar ends of the spectrum. We provide a safe space for the discussion of difficult issues.

Two weeks ago, we had Derek Hyra, who's a professor at American University, who wrote the book 'Race, Class and Politics in Cappuccino City', where he look at gentrification in Washington DC. How do we deal with that? How do we deal with gentrification? We have people who are feeling, "We've been here since the riots. We haven't gone anywhere and now because white people are coming in, all of a sudden we have a Whole Foods." You have a trolley that looks like ... It's really a bar hopping trolley for millennials to come in. We've been asking for services for fifty years, and now all of a sudden the services are coming in. How do we do that? If we're supposed to evangelize and spread the word to everybody, we're going to have to deal with those issues.

As a Church, we have to be able to provide this safe space where people can come and say, "I feel put out. My home was paid for and I might have to move because the taxes are going up, and I can't afford the taxes." How do we look at those issues and share information between people who see themselves as different, so we can really do what we're called to do in the world?

DNL: Have you seen growth because of this renewed mission of your Church?

GF-S: We're not so much focused on growth. We have had more people come into the Church, but to say we went from 50 to 150 ... No. That takes time. We still have to, like most churches, really get outside the doors of our church and spread it actually in the community, which means we need to find out what are some of the needs of the community. Truth be told, for some folks in the community, church is not an issue. Church is not an issue. We can do everything we want, it does not guarantee we're going to bring people into the Church. If we are true to our mission, then it's really not about growth. It's about what we do to help those who are oppressed, those who are marginalized, those who are in need. Those within our own community who are suffering ... Sometimes, we look out every Sunday and folks look kind of happy but sometimes we don't know what's

actually going on in the lives of our members. How do we balance the needs outside with the needs inside?

DNL: I think that's a challenge of a lot of churches. Where you've not seen number growth, necessarily, there's inward growth.

GF-S: There's inward spiritual growth-

DNL: Spiritual growth of your congregants.

GF-S: Right, where people say, "I never thought about that before", or this past Sunday somebody said, "Okay, you just walked down the aisle and sat in my pew this morning."

DNL: I know that church well.

Let's talk a little bit about your vision for this new commitment of the Church of reconciliation and racial healing in the Episcopal Church. What do you bring to this commitment of the Church to work toward creating the idea of a beloved community?

GF-S: To me, the Church, particularly the Episcopal Church, is well situated for racial reconciliation because if we look at the secular side, you really can't have racial reconciliation because the two races that we're created - primarily as we look at racial relations - we're never one in this country. You can't put back together something that never was one. For the Church, God created the human race, that human beings have split into many different factions. As the work of the church to reconcile the races back to each other and also to God.

For me, the Church needs to step into that role of creating, providing safe space to talk about those issues again, and providing a template for the beloved community. We talk about the Jesus Movement ... I love the Jesus Movement ... but what does the Jesus Movement look like in individual parishes. It's going to be different in my parish than it is in the other parishes. How do we incarnate, how do we en flesh, the Jesus Moment? That takes work. That takes work. Number one, do parishes really want to do that, because it is hard work? What resources do we need to really say, maybe we need to step back? I was talking to the Rector ... I said, "I know this will never happen, but I would love it if we could shut down church for like four months. We're still going to have small group sessions. We still need that, but if we could just shut down and say, what should church really look like, and put that in place."

Sometimes, it's difficult to go in a new direction if you keep going in the same direction. Sometimes, you just have to stop and say, "Let's really look at this. Let's have some deep discussions about how our church is going to look after these three or four months." While that idea has not taken hold, at least we have some people that are saying, "Let's think about this. What is it that we're supposed to be doing? What does the Jesus Movement look like?" It means that we need to focus on the historical Jesus, the human side ... We like to get to Easter, we like to get to the Resurrection, but sometimes we jump over the three

years of his ministry when he was out there, healing and serving and talking to people.

We need to go back to the three years of his ministry, of his earthly ministry, and say, okay, what was he doing? We know that because of what he was doing. That's what got him into trouble. If he was being this cool, quiet [inaudible 00:23:20] Jesus, they wouldn't have bothered with him. Because he was speaking truth to power, because he was upsetting people's lives, especially the political side, that's what got him up on that cross. Some folks would say, "Jesus died for my sins." I said, "No, Jesus died because of human sin." They didn't want to see, they didn't want to accept, what he was saying life could be like if you just follow me. Folks don't want to do that because that takes sacrifice, that takes giving up, that takes sharing. We know how difficult sharing is. Start talking about income redistribution, and people go all bananas.

Really, looking at how we teach and how we preach the example that we provide, that puts Jesus in a different light. One of my favorite theologians is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who said that when he came here in 1931 on a Sloan Fellowship, he said he went to the white churches, where he found Christ. But when he went to the black churches, he found Jesus. Jesus says we got to feed folks, we've got to polish folks, we have to create employment programs, we have to educate folks. That other Jesus in Heaven was okay, but I like this Jesus over here who actually helps people in their day to day lives.

DNL: It's really hard for me to grasp that you didn't feel this strong calling and this voice that you have, that you bring to our church now. That's so refreshing to me. That is a voice that I've not heard before and a new way of thinking about our mission and growing into who we are as a faith community at large. Where did this voice come from that you have, that you gift us with?

GF-S: God. I think it was always there, because as I look at my time on the police department, I was always about helping folks. Helping my own people grow, I worked at EEO, I worked in other programs that provided upper mobility for women. How do I help people become who they're supposed to be? When I left the department and started teaching, I would put in my syllabi, "I'm here to create change agents. You're taking my class because you want to change the world. If you don't want to change the world, perhaps you need to be in a different course." To help people see that the way the world is is the way it has to be, and if we get enough people moving in a direction that says, "We can change it" ... Human beings created what we see out there.

Human beings can create something different. I always say, "No child is born poor. They are made poor by human systems." We can change those human systems. There is no reason that anyone goes to bed hungry, there's no reason why anyone who wants housing cannot have housing. It's just that we have the resources, but do we have the will? I think that when the Church lives the mission of Jesus, we say, "No no. We know where the resources are. We know where the will is." That's what we're supposed to do. We preach that. We teach that. We become an example of that. If you do all of that, you don't have to worry about getting into Heaven. You don't have to worry about getting into Heaven. Do what we're supposed to do and Heaven will take care of itself. Some folks, it

takes a different way of preaching, a different way of teaching. You have to step out our faith that you're doing it as Jesus said, as Jesus would call us to do and take that risk.

DNL: In the midst of all the turmoil in the world right now, there's a lot of work to be done and reconciliation and dealing with our history and sharing our stories and ourselves. What hope does the work you're doing offer the church and communities?

GF-S: To tell the truth, because a lot of times, we really don't want to tell the truth ... As we look at racial reconciliation as one part of this picture, we have to be willing to make some broad statements and this country was created on the backs of black people and other folks who were not white, who were not straight, and who were not white. Once we start telling the truth, then we can start getting to the point where we can deal with the other issues. Until we tell the truth, and the role that for us, the Episcopal Church, played in all that ... Slavery started in Virginia, right? The Anglican Church was there, Jamestown, right? Jamestown was a parish of the Church of England. When you read some of the laws that dealt with black white relations back then, when there were violations, the money, the fines were paid to the wardens of the church.

We are caught up in that whole process, but folks don't want to hear that. When you go back and dissect the history and say, "We understand that", we're not going to beat ourselves over the head with that, but we need to understand where we are coming from in order to change directions. Then, the church can say we have acknowledged our role in this and these are the steps we're going to take to do the hard work of reconciling us and the church back to God, which is what we are called to do. It takes stepping out our faith and instead of putting bandages on the wound, going in and triaging it, cleaning it out, putting some antiseptic on it, then put the bandage so it can heal. Don't keep slapping bandages on it without doing the hard work of really digging in and dealing with the good, bad, and the ugly.

DNL: What do you think feeds and informs you on your faith journey?

GF-S: The children. The children. We've been at this before the Civil Rights Era, talking about race, talking about ending discrimination, all of these things. I look at some of the millennials now, who say, "We thought you fixed this. You were back there marching and protesting, dealing with politicians. We thought you fixed it." In some ways, they are hurt because they are dealing with stuff they should not have to deal with. If we don't do something, then as I look at my great nieces and nephews, the oldest one is 9, the youngest one's ... Their birthdays are today ... They turn 5. Do I want them to be having these safe conversations when they are 30 and 40 and 50? Or do we want a world where they can actually be who God is calling them to be without all of this baggage? My hope is just looking at the children, wanting a different world for them. It's difficult work and it's trying work. I sometimes kid, because instead of wearing the collar that goes all the way around, I wear the tab collar because I say, "Sometimes, I just want to pull the tab out. I don't want to play today." Then, you put the tab back in and go, "No, no, no."

DNL: Roll your sleeves up.

GF-S: Roll your sleeves up and pick up your cross and go in that direction, knowing that if the Church takes its rightful place in the world, and that does not mean that we become a theocracy. If the Church takes its rightful place in the world ... We can be Jesus-like, we can be Christ-like, without mentioning one word of Scripture, without mentioning Jesus' name. It's by our actions. We don't have to mention anything. If people see us ... They say, "Wherever you're going that you get whatever it is that makes you act like that, that puts that sense of joy in your heart and your face. I want to go where you go." Then you say, "Follow me. Follow me." It's just really really looking at what the church has the potential to be in this world, and in doing it. Then, we'll have the beloved community.

DNL: Absolutely. I would love to talk to you all afternoon, and on and on. I love your passion and your job and your work. Are there closing thoughts you'd like to share about your work or calling in the future?

GF-S: My future, and this is the funny part because we're supposed to retire at 72 and I'm already 65. I said, I have a whole lot of work to do. Then I say, oh, you may be able to retire according to the Church pension system, but you can't retire from God's call.

DNL: No.

GF-S: You can't retire until God says, "Okay, you've done enough." I don't think God will say that. "You've done enough." It's really being out there, dealing with the frustrations and also the joys, and looking at the faces of some of our young people saying, "I get it. I get it." Again, looking into the faces of our children, knowing that we really want a different world for them. I think that the Church, especially the Episcopal Church is so uniquely situated to do something. I always say, via the middle way, that doesn't mean we're confused. That just means we can be in the middle of things and reach out in all directions and pull people together so that we can have these important discussions.

DNL: We've been talking today with Associate Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in Washington DC, the Reverend Gayle Fisher-Stewart, PhD. Thank you, first of all, for the passionate work and energy you give to the Church. Thank you for gifting us with your time.

GF-S: Thank you. It's been a joy and a pleasure.

DNL: Join us again next week for Jesus Hacked. I'm host Debbie Nelson Linck. Until next time.