

Reflections on EfM
George Jones
St. Giles' Episcopal Church, Jefferson, Maine
July 18, 2010

I want to say thank you to my friends from EfM who have come here from Rockland to my graduation and to John Van Sicen for inviting me to speak. And for everyone's forbearance in listening to me.

There is no final exam in EfM. But this feels mighty close. I am acutely aware of the question: who am I to stand before you and explain anything about God, or Jesus or the Bible? I had a rich experience in EfM, it changed my thinking, and that is what I am going to share with you now.

Our Rockland EfM group actually began here at St. Giles a few years ago and counted among its members Lee Burns and Isabel Polk. At that time they both were on their respective journeys to the diaconate. I want to recognize both of them, particularly Isabel who was a mentor to our group and who has passed beyond into the great mystery. May God bless her.

EfM stands for Education for Ministry, and what this program does is parallel the curriculum one would receive in seminary, although we did not cover public speaking or parish finances. I got involved in EfM because my knowledge of the Bible was extremely deficient and I wanted to do something about it.

I knew there was an Old Testament and a New Testament and Genesis and the Gospels. Somewhere in there too was the 23rd Psalm. But that was about it. The Bible to me was as mysterious as it was authoritarian. It seemed to me monolithic in nature and like most things poorly understood, a bit frightening. I was in EfM to try and remedy that, but I was to learn EfM is much more than Bible study.

There are four years in the EfM curriculum and in each year the Old Testament, the New Testament, church history, and theology are examined in detail. When I began I did not think about that. I just wanted to learn about the Bible.

The text of the first year begins: “The purpose of this course is to train you to be an effective minister. Christian ministry takes many forms. Some of us are called to be ordained. Most Christians are not ordained, but they are ministers nonetheless. Jesus told his followers to preach the good news to all nations.”

In that first year we were given two maroon looseleaf notebooks, one containing lesson activities and the other a companion guide to our reading of the Old Testament. Into the book of Genesis we did not just wade, we plunged.

Right at the beginning I made what I considered an amazing discovery. The first books of the Old Testament, known as the Pentateuch, are not a unified work, not a seamless dictation of the Word of God, but the collection of many oral and storytelling traditions, woven together over the centuries.

Scholarly linguistic analysis has yielded several sources, or voices, within the scriptures, labeled the P, J, E, and D sources. For instance, the P source is so named because passages attributed to it are concerned with ritual and temple worship and so can be surmised to have been written by priests. I know this does not come as news to many of you, but to me it was the first of many revelations I had during EfM.

I was amazed that such analysis was not considered heretical. That one could, to borrow a phrase from my colleague Jim Bowditch, “unpack” the Bible and still be faithful to God.

I went through the first year and my immersion in the Hebrew scriptures. I don't think I ever did so much concentrated reading in any other time of my life. This is the story of a patient and loving God who perseveres, making covenant after covenant with the human race who always default and return to their own devices. It is filled with hair-raising tales of war and love and betrayal and murder and prostitution and jealousy and blood and dismemberment but also poetry and romance and patience and hope.

While I was making my way through the Hebrew scriptures, other members of my EfM group were their second, third and fourth years. That is one of the great things about this program, the brilliant juxtaposition of our separate studies. We would read our respective assignments and discuss them together, but that is not all we did.

The other maroon notebook contained exercises to spur further introspection and discussion. Some of these are called Theological Reflections. We began doing these at the behest of our mentors. Many times they seemed strained or painfully self-conscious but as time went on and our gears became greased we began to fly along and open into new territory. The purpose of these was to think theologically, that is, take scripture and insert it in the practice of our daily lives. Sometimes we began with scripture and moved into an anecdote that illuminates it, sometimes we did it the other way around.

I should also mention that at the beginning of each year we were asked to write a spiritual biography, taking a different theme each year to look at our own lives, the people and events that have shaped them and show where God has led us.

After the first year I had no idea of not continuing. Having made it through the Old Testament (no mean feat, I assure you), I wanted to get the maroon notebook

for the second year and see what it had to say about the New Testament. Oddly enough, EfM has a warning for those going on: the New Testament may seem anticlimactic because it is not as unknown as the O.T. to most Christians and the surprises one encounters may not seem as dramatic. This was not the case for an ignoramus like me. The study begins with an analysis of the Synoptic Gospels, those of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Such analysis was made possible by the same methodology of source criticism that revealed the J, E, P and D sources I spoke of earlier.

The leading hypothesis is that the gospel of Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke are somehow derived from it. But there is also a hypothetical, shadowy, source lurking about, the mysterious Q source, a lost work that is purported to have influenced all of them. What is clear is that four men named Matthew, Mark and Luke and John did not sit down one day and each write the story of their acquaintance with the man called Jesus. I find this fascinating, the thought that what seems set in stone is not, that all this is a mystery that is still unraveling and that our investigation of the mystery itself in no way detracts from the core of the story, the life of this amazing man Jesus.

Worrying that I am going on too long, I am going to cut to the fourth year where the most amazing discoveries awaited me.

I'll start out by saying that when I resumed going to church about 12 years ago, I found the passage from John 14:6 particularly daunting: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." It seemed a very challenging ultimatum. At the time, I saw Jesus as an accessory when what I really wanted was to know God.

The fourth year study of EfM is where the sciences of philosophy and theology are examined, places I have never been. I never realized how many ways there are to think about and approach God and his Son. In so many ways our culture and traditions determine how we do this. It has been thrilling to go beyond this, to be introduced to people who have given their whole lives to pondering our relationship with God. I feel I have entered into new worlds, and although I am most decidedly no scholar, they have illuminated my thinking in a profound way.

Here are some examples that I, a child of the '60s, came across and frankly, blew my mind. How about this from Immanuel Kant, a 17th century philosopher? "What if knowledge is not a matter of conforming the mind to reality but conforming reality to the mind?"

Or this from another philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher, who said that theology cannot yield a description of God because God is not phenomenal object. He proposed some stages of human consciousness, beginning with the animalistic stage and rising to what he calls God-consciousness, where the world and self achieve unity. And in that place, according to him, is Jesus himself, the perfect fulfillment of human nature.

The perfect fulfillment of human nature. I had never thought of this before. Of course I had heard how God gave us his only begotten Son, but I hadn't assimilated the truth of this, of how perfect Jesus is, the model of what God wants for us. Schleiermacher says Jesus is humanity brought to perfection. The second Adam. Contrast this revelation to the George from 1997 who didn't like Jesus getting in the way of God.

Karl Barth, a German philosopher and theologian who was active in early years of the last century, attempted to make a distinction between Christianity and religion. “Religion is the human attempt to reach God. Christianity is God’s act to reach humankind.” The Bible is a finite historical document subject to critical investigation. The divine Word that is contained within is not.

I am sure many of you will agree that these are nothing if not thought-provoking concepts. Are you ready for one more? It comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another German theologian, but one who had the misfortune to live during the reign of Hitler. Bonhoeffer thought the world had come of age, that it had outgrown its need for religion. No, he was not an atheist or an agnostic — far from it.

He meant in the coming of the Word made flesh, we as a people have come of age. Bonhoeffer wants us to stop relating to the world as children, but instead to use this great gift of self-awareness we have been given. Our greatest sins – and this wonderful phrase comes right out of Chapter 30 of the EfM Theological Choices – our greatest sins are not born out of our weakness but out of our of strength, the strength of responsibility. He says, we have to live in the world as if God did not exist. That has been God’s plan all along.

Whew! Bonhoeffer wasn’t repudiating the existence of God, he was saying it is time for us to grow up, because God, through Jesus Christ, has given us all the tools we need. This is all the more amazing coming from a man who was shortly going to be hung by the Nazis.

Whether you agree or disagree with any of this, it is still food for thought. We are culturally bound in our concepts of God, his Son, and our salvation. It is okay to let a little fresh air blow across our minds.

But how do I put all this together? How do I take this information and go out and become a minister? I ain't no saint. Or a philosopher. I struggle daily with all kinds of stuff, worry about my well being and that of those I love, and I frequently get overwhelmed.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke makes me think of summer guests. In the winter I talk to friends from away on the phone and say, "You must come us next summer, we'd love to have you!" Now it is July and everyone is taking me up on the offer. It has happened before and things can get more than a little dicey in my cramped kitchen with me cooking for the masses. In the past I have been a little like Martha, trying to do it all, and getting a little annoyed by all the demands being placed on me. And the Marys having a good time in the other room. This year, I am going to take that better part that Jesus offers. I'm going to see through the trees into the forest and remember that impulse of love that made me invite my guests in the first place. I am going to minister to them and to those I need to serve and worry less about it being reflection on my self-worth than what it really is, a gift from God and my gift to others.

EfM has set me thinking. Thanks be to God for the gift of knowledge.

Amen.