

A few years ago, the Pew Research Center published a Religious Landscape study.<sup>1</sup> In it, was what those of us who are part of the Episcopal Church already know, that nearly three-quarters of Episcopalians are over the age of 50, and almost half are over 65 – there are not very many young people in the Episcopal Church today at all.

There's been a lot of hand-wringing over this, and all kinds of explanations and reasons why offered. Whatever the reason, one thing is super-clear, a bit chunk of my generation, Gen X, were either not raised in the church or they left as soon as they could make up their own minds up about it.

This has left us with a generation gap – and means that if younger folks do show up, it can be hard for them to find their place when they're the youngest by 30 or 40 years.

There's a popular, *young*, Episcopal priest in Texas, the Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dahl, and she recently posted an article about younger folks in the church.<sup>2</sup> Rev. Lizzie says that, in her experience, young people do want to go to church. She says “young folks are ... hungry for church.” The church just has to be ready for them. Rev. Lizzie goes on to talk about tech, websites, social media, stuff like that, stuff that makes up the world today, the world younger folks in particular are fluent in.

While I agree with Rev. Lizzie that the church needs to be ready for younger folks, I'm not sure I entirely agree with her on how it should prepare.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/episcopal-church/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://revlizzie.substack.com/p/young-people-actually-do-want-to>

The focus and attention of each generation will surely be different, the world we live in is always changing, but I'm not sure bringing the outside world into the church - having the church mirror the current moment, is the answer.

Instead, I think it's on us, Episcopalians, to prepare by truly understanding this way of being church, why it exists, what it offers the world. What are we doing here, and why are we doing it like this?

This Episcopal way of following Jesus can seem very peculiar indeed, folks can find worship weird and so hard to connect with – but it's precisely those things which seem most odd that orient Episcopalians, together, toward the mysterious, eternal truths at the heart of Christian faith.

This church has a language, it's a way of speaking to/responding to the truth of God in Christ. And that 'language' can be sensed, even by a newcomer, if everyone knows it; and it can be missed entirely, even by the church's faithful, if it's only spoken by a few.

It's really hard for anyone to make clear, in a meaningful or transformational way, God's remarkable self-revelation in Jesus Christ. How do we 'make sense' of the impenetrable mystery of unending life in Christ, or the freedom offered by the forgiveness of sin through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. How about the deep peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, that will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus?

The truth is, faith is hard to make 'sense' of, it's hard to share simply. And so the Episcopal Church backs away from trying to do that.

Instead, Episcopal worship centers symbol and symbolism to orient us, together, toward the deep mystery of God.

All through our liturgies, are symbolic words, gestures, and actions, everywhere in this space and on our bodies, there are objects, symbols of our faith.

These symbols are a 'language' of meaning-making for transformation, and they are absolutely not unique to the Episcopal way of being Christian. Symbols are a critical part of every wisdom tradition and every faith expression on earth.

Symbols are the deepest and most ancient of all human languages. Many symbols have such depth of meaning they're shared across cultures, across spoken language, and through time.

Scripture is loaded with symbol – think of the shepherd, the vine, the lamb, bread, water, wine. And Jesus teaches in parables, symbolic narratives, like the parable of the sower we heard today.

You can define or break down the meaning of a symbol, but that will strip it of its power and purpose. The symbols of our faith, the symbolic language of Scripture, has arisen from a shared *experience* of our life in God, it's the engagement with that experience that gives a symbol its power to teach and transform.

Symbols hold the potential to affect how we *feel*, and how we feel is bound up with how we think, and how we think is connected to what we do, how we live. Symbols can be prompts for our transformation, if we speak their language, if we let them.

The clerical shirt I wear can be seen just as a kind of uniform for my job, identifying me as a priest. But when I put it on, I'm aware, I *feel*, what the black fabric represents, it's the color of mourning, I'm reminded of my call to die to my own self and live now fully in service to Christ and Christ's church. The white is a symbol of that new life in Christ available to all through baptism. This worn symbol changes how I feel, and that changes how I think, and that changes how I live. That's the power of symbol, this is the language of the church.

In our parable today, Jesus speaks of the good soil, where seeds that take root will bring forth grain. We can interpret this as Jesus saying to us, be the good soil. Be good. We understand that good soil is a good thing, so this all makes sense. It's a good idea, we get it.

But 'getting it' likely won't change anything.

When we engage with the symbol of the good soil, it draws in our feeling-selves, here, we can sense a quality, an essence to the symbol, its implications:

The Gospel takes root in this good soil so that it will bear fruit, so that it will yield an abundance for the nourishment of others. As a symbol the good soil calls on us to imagine, sense, feel being prepared and receptive, ready, what might be needed for that? And it has us mindful of what will grow, if we are prepared and ready, and what just won't, if we're not.

It has us feel, and our feeling is bound up in our thinking, and our thinking is bound up in how we live.

Jesus' parables hold layers of simultaneous meaning and implication that can only be captured all at once by a symbol; and symbols can endure, regardless of the current moment.

I don't believe it's our job or our call to keep this institution alive, but I do believe it's both our call and our obligation as followers of Jesus to be the place, both individually and collectively, where the Gospel can take root and bear fruit and nourish the world.

Here, communal worship and prayer, the sacraments and the sacramental rites are the primary ways members are formed spiritually, and as disciples. This way is rich in symbol and symbolism, an ancient language that absolutely has the power to transform our being and so our doing in the world – if we can speak it. And we can only share it with others if we have fluency ourselves.

So let's commit to learning this language together so it might work on our hearts, be a source of transformation for our lives.

Let's commit to learning together, deepening our knowledge together, so we're prepared, as people and as a parish.

The sower will sow wherever the sower will sow, when the seed lands, when it falls here, let us and let this place be ready, let us, let this place be the good soil.