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APPROACHING THE GOSPELS TOGETHER



The following was submitted by Barbara Dundon on the life of Helen White who died on January 11, 2018. She was 86.

Helen White thought she knew what it meant to be a teacher. She moved to Philadelphia from Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1954 to pursue a graduate degree in music pedagogy at Temple University. “Scholar” was in her DNA. But then Dick Hawkins, the rector at St. Thomas’ Church, Whitemarsh, introduced Helen to Mary Morrison, a teacher of the Gospels who led an unorthodox approach to the study of scripture. Morrison asked questions.

“I had never experienced anything like this before,” said Helen. “In my mind if you were certified to teach, it’s because you mastered your subject and told your students everything they needed to know about it. This was totally different. Eventually we began to make the connection that this was how Jesus teaches, by asking questions. It was as if you took my head off and handed me another one. Really!”

In a move that shocked everyone, Helen abandoned plans to pursue a doctorate in music; she “dropped her net” to follow Jesus.

The surprise that Helen experienced, her “aha moment,” is one that characterizes the experience of hundreds of people who have been part of the Biblical studies classes Helen White led in the Diocese over the past 40 years and which continue under the mentorship of her “disciples.”

Take Gary Glazer, for example. Although raised as a Jew, he was “Episcopalian curious” and began attending a Biblical studies class at St. Martin-in-the-Fields with his wife Cathy. In Helen’s introduction, she suggested people read the texts as though for the first time.

“For me,” says Gary, it *was* the first time!” He only missed two classes, when he and his wife went to Italy. “It was extraordinary,” he said. “Helen was extraordinary.”

In 1917, more than a century ago, Theologian Henry Burton Sharman first introduced this novel approach to the study of the Gospels. It involves reading the texts from Matthew, Mark and Luke (the synoptic Gospels) side by side, noticing the differences in the narratives and reflecting on what catches one’s attention.

Helen learned the approach from Mary Morrison, who taught Sharman’s process to groups at the Quaker study center Pendle Hill, in Wallingford, and at Trinity Episcopal Church in Swarthmore. Over time, it came to be known as “Approaching the Gospels Together,” since the texts are read in parallel and reflected upon in a group setting.

Bucking tradition, a skill at which Helen was adept, she eschewed the term “Bible study” in categorizing the work, concerned that people would stereotype the process and, so, miss its contemporary relevance.

In a recent interview, she described how the process created an “aha moment” for parishioners at Christ Church and St. Michael’s, Germantown. The group was reflecting on the story when Jesus, early in his ministry, returns to his hometown of Nazareth and is rejected by the people.

Helen tells the story:

“He says in Luke, ‘Today in your hearing has this been fulfilled.’ The first thing that the people in Nazareth say, ‘Isn’t he wonderful? He’s our boy.’ Then the muttering starts. ‘Who does he think he is?’” The people begin to mob the streets of Nazareth and threatened to push him off the brow of the hill. When we looked at that at Christ Church and St. Michael’s, the thing was going on in Ferguson, Missouri where the forces were coming at people being treated unfairly or who are not acceptable. The final line really knocked everybody out. ‘They were ready to push him off the precipice of the hill, and Jesus quietly walked in the midst of them peacefully.’ We started talking about 21st century. Do you see why this is so significant and real? It’s more than just telling stories about Jesus.”

In November, 2017, at the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania Convention, Helen White was honored with the Bishop’s Medal, a tangible testimony to her lifetime ministry in the church and her legacy of “opening the Scriptures” for all to hear Jesus’ life-changing words.

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