Malcolm Clemens Young Jeremiah 18:1-11

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Z33 Psalm 139:1-5,12-7

13 Pentecost (Proper 18C) Philemon 1-21

Sunday 8 September 2019 Congregation Sunday Luke 14:25-33

**The Life and Times of Bishop James A. Pike**

*“Behold, like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel"* (Jer. 18).

On this day fifty years ago, by the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, in the ancient city of Jaffa, the body of Bishop James A. Pike was laid to rest in a small churchyard. Carved on his headstone is a verse he often referred to from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor. 4:7).[[1]](#endnote-1)

For eight years Bishop Pike served here. He preached from this pulpit and the world listened. In retrospect most of those who knew him would agree that he was a human and earthly vessel for a transcendent power. On this Congregation Sunday I am going to share his story so that we can consider both what Pike failed to see in his own time and his ongoing gift to the world.

1. In the Gospel, huge crowds follow Jesus. He tells them to count the cost of becoming a disciple. He points out that a person who started building a tower without first calculating the expense would be ridiculed by his neighbors. That was exactly the situation of Grace Cathedral. For a generation (from 1932-1960) construction on this Cathedral had stopped with only half the nave completed.[[2]](#endnote-2)

When Bishop Pike arrived in 1958 the Singing Tower (on the north side) stood alone, disconnected from the half constructed building. A massive sheet of corrugated tin served as the temporary front of the Cathedral until Bishop Pike with Dean Julian Bartlett raised the money to complete the building. They are the ones who chose Jane Addams, Judge Thurgood Marshall, John Glenn, Albert Einstein and the others who are depicted in the stained glass windows from that period. They built this redwood and granite altar, and in many other ways we still live in the presence of their vision and values.

Bishop Pike was born in 1913. His father died two years later. He grew up with his mother as an only child and a devout Roman Catholic in Los Angeles. He went to college at Santa Clara, UCLA, USC and then spent a year at Yale. He was a naval officer and started a successful law firm. At the age of thirty he began to feel a calling to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. For two years he was rector of Christ Church, Poughkeepsie, New York and another two years was the chaplain for Columbia University. From there he spent five and a half years as Dean of St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City.

The diverse group of my friends who knew him well loved him.[[3]](#endnote-3) He was charismatic and unbelievably hardworking. As dean he preached every two weeks, wrote dozens of articles, essays and reviews while simultaneously writing seven books (from 1952-58).[[4]](#endnote-4) He routinely worked at all hours in a way Canon Darby Betts described as "beyond human endurance."[[5]](#endnote-5)

In 1955 Pike began hosting the first successful national television program by a Protestant minister. In the emerging Television Age he seemed at home home in front of the camera. As a celebrity at a historical high point of American interest in religion people recognized him. He was on the cover of *Time Magazine* and frequently in national newspapers.

Pike was narrowly elected bishop of this Diocese in 1958 and faced objections in the House of Bishops because he had already been married twice. In December 1960 he published an article in the Christian Century and began to publically question doctrines like the virgin birth, the trinity (which he called "a committee God") and the ascension. For six years bishops in the Episcopal Church formally debated about whether Pike should stand trial for heresy.

The mid-sixties were a time of terrible grief and turbulence for Bishop Pike. Although he began addressing his alcoholism, he was besieged by his critics and his work was not as well received as he hoped it would be.[[6]](#endnote-6) Pike’s personal relationships suffered greatly and he got divorced.

Seeking peace and a way to move forward Pike took a sabbatical with his son in Cambridge, England. Not long after his return he was speaking at the diocesan convention. When he finished his staff led him out of the pulpit to the parking lot that was out the north door. In the cold February night they told him that his son had taken his own life. The press was everywhere. Within a few months he had resigned as bishop.

Completely grief-stricken Bishop Pike became known for his efforts to communicate with the spirits of people who had died. He participated in a televised séance. Even in his own death the world was passionately interested in him. With his recently married third wife he drove out into the Judean wilderness using an inadequate map. Their car became stuck and they found themselves lost in the tremendous desert heat. His wife went ahead for help and was rescued by road workers but it took days for searchers to find Bishop Pike's body. He had fallen from a great height and died of exposure.

2. Jesus says that it can be difficult to be his disciple, that it might even feel like bearing our own cross (Lk. 14). Bishop Pike suffered both for the sake of the Gospel and because of his own demons. A thick curtain has descended and separates us from the people of sixty years ago. Massive social changes have made us strangers to that generation. Because of this it is hard to be fair in evaluating Pike's thought and actions.

Bishop Pike worked so hard that it damaged his personal relationships and maybe even inadvertently undid much of the good he intended. He probably loved controversy too much. He was on the wrong side of history when he claimed that President Kennedy's Roman Catholic faith disqualified him for the office of the presidency, and in his public criticism of Luci Johnson for deciding to be re-baptized as a Roman Catholic.

It is hard for me to imagine casually ridiculing the idea of the trinity while uncritically embracing what people of that time called the paranormal. From the hindsight of history, my problem with mid-century efforts to "de-mythologize" Christianity is that these approaches assume that we can somehow get down to something that isn't a myth. But some myth will always be there (whether you call it the nation-state, good governance, meritocracy, economic principles, psychological health or something else).

A fact comes into existence as a fact only through a story about what matters. Almost everything we think we know involves large amounts of trust – in other people, in the processes for deciding how we know, in our ability to understand.

Cultural fashions, scientific thought and what we call knowledge will always be changing. Freudian psychology seemed like sound science to earlier generations. But the Good News is this. God's love for us, the gift of our existence and the imperative to love each other – all of this come before anything that we think we really know. If God is God we should expect God’s ways to be mysterious. We are grateful to know about God's love through Jesus.

3. The prophet Jeremiah describes God as a kind of potter shaping the house of Israel on a wheel. God forms the clay into one purpose and then reuses it for another. We don't know exactly how God was shaping Bishop Pike but we might guess. Although his shortcomings seem obvious, his extraordinary accomplishments may be harder to see today because we take them for granted. Pike pushed the church to move in a new direction and it did. He embraced approaches to bring various Christian denominations together and controversially ordained a Methodist chaplain from Mills College to serve almost as a kind of dual citizen in both churches.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Bishop Pike encouraged Grace Cathedral to share Holy Communion with all people who believe in Christ. He insisted that women should be priests and he ordained Phyllis Edwards as our Diocese's first ordained woman (a deacon). Pike vigorously opposed racial injustice. He refused an honorary doctorate offered to him by The University of the South when he realized that they excluded black people. The university learned this from a *New York Times* interview with Pike. His action led to the admission of the first African Americans at the theological school there.

Bishop Pike was far ahead of his time in welcoming gay people in the church. He would be astonished and probably happy to see how far we have come in recognizing the sanctity of human love. In part as a result of his ministry, heresy trials are not the way that we as a church work out our differences. I think we are also more likely to be honest about what we believe and more supportive of others' beliefs.

Although some criticized him as an egotist hungry for press attention I believe that he was a person who cared deeply about reaching modern people who felt like the church could never be a place for them. This passion to meet people in the world still is central to our identity as a cathedral.

On this day fifty years ago they laid the body of Jim Pike to rest. It is hard to conceive of a time when an Episcopal minister could be a kind of rock star celebrity. And they could never have anticipated the tidal wave of social change that was coming or how far short we have fallen in our ideals for equality.

There is a picture of Bishop Pike in the mural depicting the final phase of Cathedral construction. I invite you to look at it. Say a prayer for the good bishop because like him we too have our treasure in earthen vessels. And may God the gracious potter who shapes our lives draw you deeper into the transcendent mystery.

1. Pike chose this quote for the title page of his book. James A. Pike, *A Time for Christian Candor* (NY: Harper & Row, 1964). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Michael D. Lampen, *Grace Cathedral Sourcebook: For Internal Use* (San Francisco: Grace Cathedral, March 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I have particularly in mind Owen Thomas, Dick Millard, David Forbes, Darby Betts and others. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. David M. Robertson, *A Passionate Pilgrim: A Biography of Bishop James A. Pike* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004) 77-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Television interview with Canon Darby Betts, "In Search of: Bishop James A. Pike," *In Search Of*, 1981. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. At home Pike seemed to feel a growing distance between himself and his children. He later questioned whether he had been a good father to them. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Pike ordained George Hadley. Robertson, 101. See also, https://keithwatkinshistorian.wordpress.com/2010/12/13/bishop-pike-and-a-new-kind-of-church-in-america/ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)