

On Not Becoming a Bishop

written by Guest Contributor | October 25, 2019



I was watching *Vanderpump Rules* when the search committee chair called to say I'd been nominated for Bishop of Southern Virginia. I twice declined the call, from a number I didn't recognize, because *Vanderpump Rules* is my favorite program. During a commercial I listened to the voicemail and didn't decline the nomination immediately because I didn't want the chair to know I'd ignored her call twice while watching reality television.

I hoped she would think I'd been in bed when she called, because surely *actual* bishop candidates were old enough to go to bed at nine? Actually, bishops would probably still be working at nine. Bishops certainly wouldn't decline calls because they were watching *Vanderpump Rules*. I doubted that any bishops in the Episcopal Church even watched *Vanderpump Rules*.

I had tried to hide my *Vanderpump Rules* habit from my parishioners but one year before had confessed my addiction from the pulpit, because I gave it up for Lent. No one seemed shocked—unlike many congregations, mine doesn't put its clergy on a pedestal. But once I had tried to watch it with my eighty-something mother while visiting her in Arizona. She kept saying “You watch this? And you're a *minister*?” It was the episode in which the Toms got their girlfriends' names tattooed on their butts in Vegas. My mom was even less impressed than Tom's girlfriend Ariana was. “They are showing their *fannies* on TV,” she said. We lasted about seven minutes, until I finally said, “That's OK. I'll stream it when I'm back in Virginia.” She shook her head sadly at my degeneracy.

My mother is gone now, so I can't ask her what she would think of me becoming a bishop. I know exactly what my dad would think. He had once asked me if I had bishop aspirations. He asked it while he was reading the newspaper, casually.

“I don't think I'm called to that,” I told him. “I love parish ministry: really getting to know people. Seeing them in the hospital. Learning about their lives.”

“Good,” he said. “I don't think you're supposed to be a bishop, either.” He turned the page.

"They have to deal with lots of conflict," I agreed. I had inherited my father's conflict avoidance.

"Why would anyone want to do that?"

"Well. My bishop makes a hundred grand more than I do."

My father lowered the paper and looked me in the eye. "You're kidding," he said.

"Nope."

He raised the paper back up. "I changed my mind. I want you to be a bishop. You could be rich!"

The money was tempting, as was getting another qualifier in front of my "The Rev": bishops get to be "The Right Rev." But money and adverbs aren't holy reasons to pursue a so-called higher calling. Being religious, we are supposed to actually believe ourselves to be called by God. Surely a phone call attempting to interrupt *Vanderpump Rules* couldn't count as such a call. I waited until the next morning to send a "no thanks" email to the search chair so she would think I had been asleep instead of watching *Vanderpump Rules* when she called.

Until one year before that phone call during *Vanderpump Rules*, I had served on the diocesan Standing Committee, which is tasked with approving bishop elections in the Episcopal Church. I had consistently pointed out to the other members that bishops were too white and too male. Did that make me a hypocrite for not being willing to put myself out there? How could I criticize the system for not being female enough if I wasn't willing to be a female candidate? One of my former bishops had told me the problem was that "women didn't want to do the work," but when I responded with outrage, he backed down. Now I remembered that conversation. Did not wanting to miss *Vanderpump Rules* mean that I didn't want to become a bishop because I didn't want to work at nine instead of watching trashy television?

My husband Gary was not impressed that I had declined the nomination before discussing it with him or anyone else. "You're like Jonah when he wouldn't go to Nineveh," he said. Gary has learned that when he makes biblical comparisons I feel like I have to pay more attention to what he says. "I hope I'm not standing next to you when a whale comes to swallow you."

I didn't correct him about the word whale. The Bible only says a big fish. My nerdiness annoys him sometimes, like the time when I told him that I abhor any so-called sacred music containing gerunds with dropped gs referring to the Lord on the cross. "Don't let anyone else hear you say that," he had said, shaking his head. So instead of telling him that Jonah wasn't necessarily swallowed by a whale, I said, "It's not like Jonah at all. It's like when Satan tempts Jesus in the desert, saying that he can rule the world. I resisted that temptation!"

"So now you think you're Jesus?"

Before we were married, I thought I was good at arguing. He's a lawyer. He always wins. To score any points at all, I have to cry. I wasn't going to cry over this, though.

"OK, this is what it's like," I tried. "Remember when we were looking for housing in Virginia Beach, and you said we had to buy a house for the people we really were, not who we wished we were?" I had attempted to talk him into a duplex with an unfenced small back yard in a flood zone four blocks from the beach, with a strange living room that would not have fit any of our furniture and had no place for a dining room table. We ended up in a condo with a first-floor bedroom that did not require any yard maintenance. "Face it," he had said then. "We aren't funky beach people."

"Well, I'm not a bishop," I said now. "I'm a parish pastor. That's just who I really am."

"But if it's a call from God," he argued, "does it matter who *you* think you are?"

See what I mean about arguing with him? "Fine," I said. "I'll talk to the vestry." The vestry is the governing body in an Episcopal church.

"Why bother? You already said no."

"She said if I change my mind I can still fill out the paperwork."

Bishops in the Episcopal church are so important that they are in our name: "Episcopal" means bishop. They have a lot of power over the clergy in their diocese. In fact, when becoming ordained, we have to vow to *obey* our bishops. The ordination rite says: "And will you, in accordance with the canons of this Church, obey your bishop and other ministers who may have authority over you and your work?"

Even though our previous bishop had only been about ten years older than I, he intimidated me. Like the time we had to attend a mandatory clergy retreat/"listening session." Here's how listening sessions work in my diocese: under the guise of pretending to want to hear from you, leadership listens to a few words. Then they tell you what to think. That year, our assigned topic was the diocesan camp itself, which was undergoing a capital campaign. We met in small groups, and after each group reported back, the facilitator invited a member of the staff to "respond," which meant telling the group why it was wrong.

After the so-called retreat was finally over, I was standing in the parking lot with three friends when the bishop approached. "This group looks like trouble," he said. "What are you all talking about?"

We definitely weren't going to get into the "listening" sessions with him, and it seemed rude to talk about an upcoming crab boil to which he was not invited. I considered throwing Jeunée under the bus by mentioning her new boyfriend with whom she texted in French, but then Jeunée beat me to it: "We were discussing Elizabeth's upcoming writing program."

Oh great. "You're still doing that," he said to me, which I translated as "Gifted people, like me, would be finished by now."

"Yes," I said. "Next residency starts soon." I glared at Jeunée and wondered if it was too soon to bring up her new boyfriend.

"What are you studying this time?"

"Poetry, actually."

"Who's your favorite poet?"

I panicked, because I didn't have a favorite poet. How could a writer not have a favorite poet? Think of a favorite poet, I ordered myself. I really liked Sharon Olds, but he probably hadn't heard of her and if he looked her up, he might discover that her most recent book included a poem called "Blow Job Ode," which might cause him question my fitness for ministry.

What poets do Episcopalians like? "T.S. Eliot," I lied. In addition to obedience, my ordination vows called on me to be a wholesome example. I just lied to my bishop.

He beamed. Clearly I had picked well. "What's your favorite T.S. Eliot poem?"

Oops. I hadn't actually read any Eliot since college more than twenty-five years before, other than the Ash Wednesday poem many Episcopal clergy quote on their social media pages every single Ash Wednesday. I had to think of something else: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

"Let us go then, you and I, when the evening is spread out against the sky, like a patient etherized upon a table," he quoted.

I wondered if I was supposed to quote the next line back. I glared at Jeunée instead, who was trying not to laugh.

"What's that Eliot poem about . . ." he began, and started asking arcane Eliot questions to which I didn't know the answer. I felt like I was losing on a quiz show. My "friends" were laughing at me, but quietly, because he was the bishop.

"Uh, Hollow Man?" I threw out. Hollow Man, Waste Land, Four Quartets, and I would be at the limits of my scant Eliot knowledge. Oh wait, *Cats*. Eliot wrote something that had something to do with the Broadway musical *Cats*.

"No, not Hollow Man," he scoffed, and then answered his own question. Now I felt like I was watching a quiz show.

"Bishop, did you know Jeunée has a new boyfriend?" I asked. "They text each other in French." Thankfully, finally, we moved on.

Our next vestry meeting was the night after *Vanderpump Rules*, so at the end of the meeting, I asked to speak to vestry members confidentially, and we sent the person who takes the minutes home. I told them about the nomination,

and about Gary's annoyance that I had turned it down that morning without discussing it with anyone; so now, here I was, discussing it with them. What did they think?

"Well, I would rather you left us to become a bishop than to go to another church," one of them said finally.

"Does the job appeal to you?" asked another.

"No, not at all."

"What about your writing?" They support the Master of Fine Arts writing program I am taking as a sabbatical with both time and money.

"That's part of why it doesn't appeal to me," I admitted. "I know my writing would be thrust aside for a while." Maybe forever.

"You seem to really love your writing," someone pointed out.

"Why does Gary want you to do it? Is he unhappy here?"

"No! Gary's happy here. He doesn't actually want me to do it," I explained. "He says I wouldn't get elected but would have an opportunity to change the conversation. I could get the other candidates to talk about mandatory giving, for example. About why we have these high-paying positions like bishops when churches are shrinking. That sort of thing."

"Do you think you would get elected?"

"I don't think I would even make it to the final slate; so no, I don't think I would be elected. But I wouldn't want to put my name in without talking to you all first. If I enter a bishop election and people find out, they will start thinking that I want to leave our church. They would become anxious." I was probably making them anxious. I was anxious.

"We want you to do whatever you want," said one.

"Yes, whatever you decide, we will support you," said another. They weren't acting very anxious. Did they want me to leave?

Then one man said, "Yes, we will support you, but I have to say that it's a bad idea to participate in an election if you aren't prepared to win."

I agreed and did not change my answer to the search chair. Gary remained annoyed.

That was back in February. The election for the eleventh bishop of the Diocese of Southern Virginia took place on September 21. We started with Eucharist, which included a sermon from our interim bishop, a man with whom I am able to have honest conversations about literature (although I still don't mention Sharon Olds). He preached, "Jesus didn't mind being interrupted by people in need. This characteristic will be particularly important when the next bishop is sojourning in the hard places of life; when it would be much

easier to look away from someone who is in need.”

I wondered about watching *Vanderpump Rules* while declining calls from a number I didn't know. Was that turning away from someone in need? I hate being interrupted. Seemed like an affirmation that becoming a bishop was not my vocation. Of course, it was not really about *Vanderpump Rules*. It was my writing. My congregation spoils me by letting me devote Thursdays to writing sermons, and they only interrupt me for true emergencies. They also recognize that Friday, my day off, is spent writing for places other than church, and they rarely seek my presence at Friday events.

It took eight ballots to elect one of the six candidates: a woman not much older than I. My not becoming a bishop has nothing to do with gender or age. It's just not who I am. I detest being interrupted, love trashy television, and want to continue to pursue writing.

In between ballots, a friend who had wanted to nominate me for bishop told me about two dioceses that were accepting nominations for their elections. “I know it's not my call,” I told him. I wondered if I sounded convincing and hoped he would stop asking, and prayed he would not become friends with Gary and join in on the “Jonah” name-calling.

One of the delegates who had been an ardent supporter of our new bishop was practically glowing. “We needed someone with perspective outside of our diocese,” she said after the election. “Someone with some Midwestern grit.”

“She lives in the Midwest now, but she's actually from the South,” I pointed out. “Remember? She said she really wanted to move back to the South.”

The supporter looked a little worried. She was from New York herself. “Yes, but she's been there a while,” she mused. “Surely some Midwestern values rubbed off on her?”

“Some of that Midwestern niceness?” I asked, laughing. She nodded.

I want to be able to embrace my identity as a pastor whose favorite television show is *Vanderpump Rules* and who wants to become a pastor-writer, not a bishop. But my husband keeps whispering, “If you really believe all that stuff you preach, does it really matter what *you* want?” Here's hoping that he's wrong, and that our new bishop will have some of that supposed Midwestern niceness so that needy priests like me can interrupt her from time to time, seeking reassurance when we say “no.”



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