

Reckoning Life and Death

Book Review by Owene Courtney

Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power and Justice in an American Church by Eliza Griswold

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Bishop Frank Griswold opposed schism at any cost and considered its possibility a personal failure. However, at the end of his term, he was succeeded by a woman Katharine Jefferts Schori and in 2009 the Episcopal Church officially removed gender and sexual orientation barriers to the qualifications for electing a bishop. Bishop Griswold's consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson proved to be a dramatic and lasting turning point in the life of the church at large.

Like the four gospels, Griswold tells the story of Circle of Hope through the eyes of the second generation of four pastors who at first focused outward on healing the world like Jesus called his disciples to do, ultimately turning in on themselves struggling with privilege and power, sounding more and more like the disciples, arguing “who is the greatest among us?”

As a cautious reporter, Griswold witnessed all that the pastors struggled with and lost, and yet they kept their commitments “to lay bare their mess” for her, as they had promised to do. She never forgot that despite all the conflict, they always closed their services with “Go in Peace” reminding her of her father’s theology of the extremely thin line between the three Abrahamic Faiths and his underlying principle of humility: who are any of us to presume that we know who it is that God does and doesn’t choose?

Closing with a Benediction, Griswold tells of her father's health issues which coincided with Circle of Hope falling apart, challenging the reader to live up to the humanness of showing up in the fullness of who we are... how we live and how we die. In a recent interview, Griswold said, "This book is a hint of how we can start to understand the embodied nature of life, death, rebirth and renewal." It is fitting that she ends with the story of her beloved father's death, his struggle with the world's understanding of God as Mercy and Love, and the great truth that there is nothing we can do to separate ourselves from that Mercy and Love. They are part of our DNA.

The four pastors, and their story so expertly told by Eliza Griswold, accomplish just what she says exegesis of scripture does: "examines a story or an experience for what it reveals not only about the world or God, but also about ourselves and what in our embodied consciousness must grow, or die."

If you are human, this story will give you hope about the cycle of life, of churches and of peace.

Owene Courtney

**NB Eliza Griswold will lead a discussion of *Circle of Hope* at Christ Church
Ponte Vedra Beach November 13, 2025, at 7 p.m. For more information:
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