

Stanford Memorial Church
June 25, 2006

WHEN FAITH MATTERS
C. George Fitzgerald, S.T.D.

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 6.1-13
Gospel: Mark 4.35-41

When faith matters . . . you know it. When faith really matters, the results are seldom benign or innocuous. When faith matters the outcome may be authentically inspiring . . . health care and literacy raise a community to a new standard of living . . . abuse and exploitation are condemned . . . the starving are fed, and often taught better ways to care for themselves . . . and, we enjoy the creation of incredible works of art. Yet, paradoxically, there appear to be an almost equal number of times when faith matters and the outcome is demonically destructive . . . as kings and popes bless the crusaders who rampage and pillage in the name of faith . . . as the Inquisition brutally seeks to purify the faith . . . as slavery is condoned as a way of life . . . as innocent women are burned as witches . . . and so on. Small wonder that so many individuals are turned off when faith matters so much and in such a negative way. To compound the irony--in each instance of what was later determined to be an abuse--the individuals involved at the time passionately felt they were instruments of God . . . that they were practicing a faith that mattered.

So how do we determine—when our faith matters—if we are on the side of the angels, or if history will ultimately determine our convictions and actions have in fact undermined the faith we so earnestly attempted to embody and practice? Not an easy question to answer.

Our scripture lessons for today provide two models when faith mattered. For centuries Peter and Paul have been portrayed as two of the pillars of the emerging church. But we might also keep in mind that before 300 A.D. there would have been a third pillar. According to recent scholarship—and I am not referring the novel, *The Di Vinci Code*—Mary Magdalene, of all the disciples, may have been the closest to Jesus, the one who most readily comprehended his message and ministry. But during the third and fourth centuries it appears the Church *Fathers*, in their implementation of a *patriarchal* faith that mattered, essentially demoted Mary. Rather than being a model of faith, insight, and compassion, she was recast as a repentant prostitute. Talk about being damned with faint praise! She undoubtedly holds the world's record in this category. For centuries she has suffered from this misrepresentation—most often depicted in artistic representations. One of the more recent examples would be the musical Jesus Christ Superstar, regularly performed in churches and theaters, which features Mary, the repentant prostitute, wistfully singing about the many men she has loved and being unable to know how to love Jesus. There is a sense, therefore, in which *The Di Vinci Code* has provided something of a corrective. To be sure, its portrayal of the Mary Magdalene cult is quite a stretch—and the author, Dan Brown, has repeatedly emphasized that this is a novel and is

not to be taken as history—but it has at least challenged the popular misrepresentation of this disciple and encouraged a good many to take a look at the scholarship that exists concerning her true identity and role in the early church. Perhaps one day her critical position as an early disciple will be more readily acknowledged. In the meantime, we have the continuing examples of Peter and Paul.

The story of Peter and the disciples in a boat with Jesus is one of the better known narratives in the Christian tradition. Just prior to the frightening incident Jesus has been preaching to a multitude on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and he proceeded to take a boat with his disciples in order to obtain some rest and renewal. Instead they found themselves on the verge of being swamped as a result of an unexpected storm. We can view a good many paintings of this terrifying scene in museum galleries around the world. Their fear and agitation had to be quite well-founded, after all Peter made his living as a fisherman prior to responding to Jesus' call to discipleship. Thus he expressed his informed apprehension and fear by awakening Jesus, who was sleeping at the time, and exclaiming, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing"(Mark 4.38)? For Peter, his faith in Jesus mattered immensely; it was a matter of life and death.

The story of Peter and the disciples in the boat with Jesus may be seen as something of a metaphor for me of how illness and hospitalization are often experienced. We know that something is obviously wrong. It frequently happens unexpectedly and we have difficulty making any sense of it. And then, like Peter, it feels like God is absent or somehow deserted us. For if God were with us, how could this happen? We ask "why," and desperately try to discover some sense of meaning. But then, when the picture looks quite bleak, we experience that sense that we are not alone, God is with us, and many of the waves of anxiety and apprehension give way to a calming sense of assurance and caring. We experience the certainty that faith matters.

Our second scripture lesson, from the life of the apostle Paul, has an entirely different slant on the issue of when faith matters. As with all his letters, the apostle is addressing a problem in one of the early Christian churches. In this case, the recipient of the letter is the church in Corinth, which was one of the more affluent and well educated communities of its time. Paul is challenging them to be more generous in providing financial support for the much poorer church in Macedonia. In contemporary terms, the church in Corinth appeared to be akin to our Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists and Presbyterians looking down on the more blue-collared Holy Rollers and Pentecostals in Macedonia. Although they had already given a donation, Paul urges them to dig deeper and give more, emphasizing the mutual responsibility we have when our faith matters as members of the community of faith. Apparently there had been some in Corinth who had been critical of Paul, of his motives and his actions, suggesting that he was promoting his self interests too much. At this point the apostle recites a litany of the sufferings and deprivations he and colleagues have experienced, underscoring their commitment when faith matters: ". . . as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights (and) hunger" (2. Cor. 6.4&5) But in spite of these adversities, he and his co-workers have striven to embody, "purity, knowledge, patience,

kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God” (2 Cor. 6.6&7).

In effect, Paul is saying to the men and women of faith in Corinth that this is the essence of what happens when faith matters. There will be tough times. There will be challenges. Yet we persevere. We extend love and compassion. “We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way” (2 Cor. 5.3). When faith matters, things happen . . . life is transformed. In this case, the sharing of the resources of the church in Corinth will enhance the life and effectiveness of the church in Macedonia.

When faith matters—convictions are expressed, actions are taken—life is transformed . . . hopefully, for the better. But how can we be sure? How do we know that, with the passage of time, it will be determined that our well-intentioned efforts have, in fact, been more demonic than redemptive? I submit this is a very immediate and fundamental question, given the resurgence of extreme, reactionary movements—in all of the world’s religions. The adherents of every one of these groups will insist, without hesitation, that their actions stem from a faith that matters. It is a faith that stems from the conviction that they are God’s anointed; they are the sole possessors of the truth; they are the saved, while everyone else is damned; and the most vitriolic comments of condemnation are invariably addressed to the liberal wing of their own faith group. In our rapidly changing, increasingly complex, globalized community this sense of certainty proves to be tremendously appealing.

In her marvelous best-seller, *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong makes a very insightful observation about the nature of reactionary, extremist religion when she states, “Instead of making God a symbol to challenge our prejudice and force us to contemplate our own shortcomings, it can be used to endorse our egotistic hatred and make it absolute. It makes God behave exactly like us, as though (God) were simply another human being” (p. 55).

Karen Armstrong’s statement came to mind this past week in—of all places!—a front page story in the *Wall Street Journal*—not a publication frequently cited for when faith matters. The story begins a Mr. Souleiman Ghali a Palestinian refugee from war-torn Lebanon. As a Sunni Muslim, he was imbued from childhood with a hatred for Shiites, Christians—and especially Jews. In 1993, Mr. Ghali, who owned a Deli, decided he would like to open the first Arab Mosque in San Francisco. After extensive searching, he found the ideal building. But the owner was Jewish; moreover he wanted \$10,000 a month rent, which was far more than the group could afford. Mr. Ghali assumed the owner did not like Muslims and hesitated to tell him that he intended to use the building for a mosque. But the owner replied, “A mosque, fantastic. We have so many fanatics. We need to work together for peace.” The owner then slashed the rent and gave the congregation a long-term lease. Mr. Ghali was transformed by this experience of what can happen when faith matters. He became a leader in the Islamic Society of San Francisco and is at the forefront of a movement to shape an “American Muslim identity” of tolerance and respect for other faiths. This is a story that I believe Jesus, Mary

Magdalene, Peter and Paul would have appreciated and endorsed—but there is more to come.

In 1992 the Islamic Society decided to fire Imam Safwat Morsy, claiming he was too much of an extremist in his preaching. The imam then filed a suite for wrongful termination, which has split the Muslim community. After that Imam Morssy opened a new mosque in a basement just around the corner from the Islamic Society. To swelling crowds the imam has railed against “the traitor criminal Souleiman Ghali,” and has called for a jihad, or holy war, against Israel and U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2003 he preached, “Our killed ones are in paradise and their killed ones are in hell.”

When faith matters things happen--for better or for worse. And there are so many areas in which faith needs to matter: global warming, hunger and inadequate education, the invasion of Iraq, and extensive health needs. But if faith does not matter, and is not pursued in tolerance and caring and openness, then the field is left open for those who proclaim a faith that matters that excludes, and destroys—and may eventually pull us all down. So may we be emboldened to live a faith that matters. Amen