

“Why Bother?”

*“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?...
Does this offend you?”*

~John 6: 60-61

Let me begin with a word of reassurance this morning. I have decided to keep my day job and have not declared myself a candidate for governor of California.

I noticed a cartoon in this week’s Stanford Daily. Arnold Schwarzenegger is pictured congratulating the animated fish, Nemo, who has been declared the new governor. As only Arnold could say in his Terminator voice: “He wanted it more.”

I do not wish to make light of the serious economic and political condition our glorious state faces, but I think more than likely I am not the only person here this morning who finds the whole debacle of the recall unbelievable, if not demoralizing. And on some level, it even feels offensive.

But speaking of other controversial and offensive topics, the recent decision of the Episcopal Church, the one in which I am ordained, to appoint its’ first openly gay bishop, has been headline news for the past two weeks. While many have applauded the decision, some are extremely offended by it. More on that in a few moments.

First, let’s consider today’s gospel, which happens to be the last of a series of passages in John on Jesus as the bread of heaven, and how it may be able to shed some light on issues that can polarize and offend, rather than resolve. Particularly, this 6th chapter is full of statements that were offensive to those who heard them. For example, Jesus suggested he was God’s own manna to give life to the whole world. While we might grow accustomed to hearing that sort of thing now, imagine how it must have been hearing it for the first time.

We can also find descriptions right out of a gory movie – flesh as true food, blood as pure drink for instance, were some of the nasty images that seem more appropriate for a Hollywood horror film. Add to the fact that Hebrew Scripture forbids drinking blood and you can begin to understand why Jesus followers began to pull away.

“This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?...” the disciples ask Jesus in today’s gospel. Why bother?

Nevertheless, instead of making it easier for them, Jesus seemed to make it even harder. Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see me ascending to where I was before? He simply would not let up on them.

The point is that apparently if the disciples were going to follow this Jesus, they were going to have to give up their need to understand, agree with or approve of everything he said or did. They were going to have to consider believing him, even when what he said

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offended them. They were going to have to trust him, even when what he said went against the very grain of what they had been taught.

Can you almost hear their minds slam shut? Why bother? Its too much work. They had hoped Jesus was going to explain things to them so that they could make reasonable decisions, informed choices, about how to live their lives. But on some level, it is almost as if he is saying, if you don't get it, don't blame me. Further, he even gives them the option to leave; they were free to go. But the stalwart disciple Peter answers for all of them. "To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Yes, it is Peter, of all the disciples who asks the question. The one who stood up for traditional faith and practice. The one who kept dietary laws. The one who never ate forbidden things. But as confusing as Jesus seems to him, he cannot turn away. Peter has glimpsed God, the holy, and the one who brings life and light. If trusting that means struggling with seemingly distasteful things, Peter will consent.

Suffice it to say this gospel passage in my mind has particular meaning today. Earlier, I mentioned the headline news the Episcopal Church has received the last two weeks. The decision to confirm its first openly gay bishop was not made without significant debate, confusion, struggle and pain. It was also not without 11th hour political tactics of the church's own rendition of mud slinging, as allegations of a sexual nature were brought forth. Within 24 hours, an investigation of the allegations garnered absolutely no merit.

However, despite a lack of evidence, conservatives in the 2.3 million member U.S. Episcopal Church have threatened a schism once The Rev. Gene Robinson is installed as the new Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire. "Around the world, other traditional leaders in the 77 million member Anglican Communion predict varying degrees of chaos, writes Don Lattin, San Francisco Chronicle Religion writer. "In reality, the Episcopal Church, along with other denominations such as the Presbyterians and Methodists – is already split into opposing camps." (We know this much is true: just yesterday, the front page headline in the Family/Religion section of the San Jose Mercury News said: A House Divided; sharp debate among Episcopalians in the Bay Area)

"There are those fighting for spiritual tolerance and those crusading for Christian tradition.....The battle lines are drawn around theology (how one reads the Scriptures) and geography (whether one lives in the city or the country)" continues Lattin.

Perhaps this is why the story in today's gospel from John and the experience and words of Peter and the disciples may have some added meaning today. They were wary of allying themselves with imperfect communities of faith. After all, Peter was the one who stood for traditional, coherent, agreeable faith. The circumstances the Episcopal Church faces are not especially new. For example, people are still saying, as they always have – (and did with the issue of the ordination of women): If my denomination votes the wrong way on this issue, I'm leaving. Why bother going to church or having anything to do with religion anymore? I'm tired of the 1. Hypocrisy 2. Conservatives 3. Liberals 4. Sexism 5. Irrelevant preaching 6. Fill in the blank

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Honestly, there is no perfect community of faith or religious tradition, anymore than there is a perfect God, if perfect means that we understand, agree or approve of everything that is said. And as an Episcopalian myself, I know that it is a national church heavy with all the usual forms of bureaucracy. There are bishops who still will not ordain women and people who continue to argue over what prayer book to use. And, there are openly gay clergy who have been turned down for jobs in the church (even though they are the “perfect candidate for the role and have just the gifts we’re looking for”) because of who they love and call their partner. Just ask me – I am one of those Episcopal clergy.

“But there are also liturgies so wonderful they take your breath away, and a commitment to common prayer that puts all of our divisions to shame,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and theologian.

I will say that on this day, I am very proud and grateful for what I believe is an especially courageous act by the denomination that recognized and affirmed my vocation as a priest and that which ordained me, regardless of who I love and call my life partner.

All that to say, there may be yet a deeper message here. That is, why bother means getting on to what is worth bothering about. We all know that wherever people are people there will always be things that offend, things that polarize our religious communities. However, perhaps the more pertinent consideration this issue has raised is: what is the role of religion in our lives and society?

To offer a suggestion, I quote the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, Jewish scholar:

“Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message becomes meaningless.”

Whether you agree or not – which is what we hopefully have determined is not the point – the Episcopal Church by virtue of this decision has stared down the longtime complicit oppression of homosexuals and other marginalized people and bothered to do something rather brave and astonishing. (Although some would admit there are those who scratch their heads and wonder – what is the big deal anyway?)

This brave decision, to quote Kansas City Star columnist Bill Tammeaus: – “meant also a choice to lead rather than follow.” “Religion,” continues Tammeaus, “while honoring its valid traditions, should help people live fuller lives of love and service. This decision reflects what is best and healthy about religion, whether or not most of the religious world recognizes it.”

Could this, also in part, be the role of religion in our lives and society? And could this serve as an example of faith that has not become an heirloom but a living fountain, to which all are granted access and a place at the table?

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Tammeus further illuminates that sexuality is not the only matter roiling religion these days, though it gets much of the attention.

For example, in Islam now, the fights are over whether woman are as free as the religion the Prophet Muhammad founded sought to make them and whether the concept of jihad, or struggle, should ever countenance violence. In the center of gravity of Judaism, Israel, one struggle is about who is really Jewish. The ultra-orthodox segment of the tradition there refuses to imagine, for instance, that American immigrants from Judaism's reform branch are Jews at all.

And I would add to this mix that the recent decision in the Episcopal Church has led some to say that it is a denomination that is "non-practicing Christians that call themselves good Christians."

Tammeus suggests that these and similar disagreements devalue religious ideas that set people free, make them whole and place them in a healthy relationship with each other and with their God. However, he contends these ideas become secondary to dogma that has grown encrusted with foolishness and impoverished theology.

With that in mind, could the role of religion in our lives and society also be to render wisdom? Wisdom, as Mary read for us, is to lay aside immaturity and live, and walk in the way of insight. Wisdom, that which begins as an attitude of awe, reverence of the Holy is also that which should not keep us unaware of our own limitations or the ambiguities and mysteries of life.

Why bother? We do and ought to bother because the Holy One of God offers spirit and life despite us. And because threatening schism or otherwise refutes the fact that we do need each other to save us from self-righteousness. We also need one another, those with whom we agree and disagree, to help keep us in shape for what religion can continue to contribute to our lives and society. That is, as we will sing together in a moment, "an opportunity to claim the growing light, advancing thought and widening view. The larger freedom, clearer sight, which from the old unfold the new."

Why bother? Because for the religious mind and soul, the issue is the importance of God, the difference God makes in the way we live. The issue is what kind of people we become when we attach ourselves to God.

Grant us wisdom; grant us courage, for the living of these days. Fill us with a living vision; heal our wounds that we may be bound as one beyond division in the struggle to be free. Amen. (stanza from closing hymn)