



A recent article asked why the Pope matters today.¹ It suggests the Pope matters because he embodies the tradition to a 1.2 billion member faith group. “The pope is the head of a cohesive, transnational organization that has been in existence for close to two thousand years. The church has a chain of command from the Vatican all the way to the local parish that is capable of

transmitting information, ideology and material goods throughout the world.”

The article goes on to discuss why the current Pope- Pope Francis- matters especially. He is distinct from those who have gone before him in many, many ways, even as he wields, because of his office, power and influence reaching every corner of the globe.

While we are catholic in the meaning of universal, we are not Roman Catholic. We do not have a pope or similar person at the head of the hierarchy in the Anglican Communion. Both the Archbishop of Canterbury, the titular head of the Anglican Communion, and our Presiding Bishop are elected. But neither has legal power to require us to act a certain way or believe a certain thing. Moral and personal suasion, yes; legal authority and power, by and large, no.

Jesus, too, had no legal authority or power. We see this in the questions asked about “who is this man- the son of Joseph the carpenter; we know his mother, brothers and sisters.” We see this in the attempts to trip him up by asking questions that appeared to have no easy answers and indeed questions that would get Jesus in trouble with the authorities. We see this in the decision to put Jesus to death on trumped up charges. Yet it was that very death that gave rise to the religious faith tradition we follow today.

Today we finish reading Chapter 6 of the Gospel according to John. We have pondered what it means to us that Jesus is the **living** bread, the bread of life, the way to eternal life. Believing Jesus means that while we will experience physical death, that belief enables us to have eternal life with God.

We began our readings today with the passage in First Kings where the temple is dedicated to God. Solomon says there is no God, the God of Israel, like any other god on heaven or in earth. God, despite all the failings of humankind, has kept the covenant with humans. Interestingly, the house that is dedicated by Solomon is a house where a foreigner is also welcome. This house of God is one that welcomes all people, not just a select few.

The images of the house of God and of the relationship between humans and God are continued in Psalm 84. We hear echoes of the hymn *Amazing Grace* in the verse 9 of the Psalm: “For one

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-pope-francis-matters_55d370dee4b07addcb443e0c?ir=Religion§ion=religion&ncid=newsltushpimg00000003&kvcommref=mostpopular (Aug. 21, 2015)

day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room.” God is more than we can imagine. God’s time is not measured as our human time is. The Psalmist foreshadows the words of Jesus in verse 1 when the psalmist writes: My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.” Not a God who is distant, remote, unapproachable, but a God who is living and with us daily in the midst of all the decisions and activities of life. **Living- not dead.** Our faith matters as we encounter each day- not just on Sundays. Our faith, rooted in Jesus- the living Lord- matters when it is taken deep into our psyche and so informs our actions. It matters when Jesus abides in us and we in him.

When we put on the whole armor of God, then we can stand against the temptations and trials of this life. We are surrounded by the love of God and that enables us to make choices from love and not from fear or despair. Paul uses wonderful images in the passage from Ephesians today. The belt of truth around our waist. The breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the sword of the spirit, the helmet of salvation and on our feet whatever will make us ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. There is no part of us that is not covered and surrounded by the love of God. Abiding in Jesus as the living God, there is no part of us that cannot respond to the flaming arrows of the evil one or the cosmic powers of this present darkness. Then we can sing out with confidence: O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.²

The promise that God will be with us brings us to the decision that Jesus poses to the disciples and to us today. Do we believe? What Jesus asks is hard: will we live a life that gives honor to God, most especially when to do so may cause us to make decisions about how we live that is contrary to the advertisements we see on television or read about in the paper. Are we willing to make choices about how we spend our money and other resources that glorify God by upholding the dignity and well-being of all of creation versus choosing to spend money on things that give pleasure today but fall apart and are no further interest in a month or two or three? Thanks be to God that we have resources- financial and otherwise- to be able to make these kinds of choices. Not everyone does. Whatever our personal circumstances, it is good to ask ourselves if our choices promote life and well-being. Do our choices give glory to God by enabling us to live healthy lives both physically, mentally and spiritually?

We know that what Jesus asks of us is hard. The Gospel tell us that many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. They couldn’t wrap their heads around Jesus’ assertion that eating of the flesh and blood of Jesus was the route to eternal life. Eating of the flesh and blood of Jesus was better than the manna provided by God to the people of Israel in the wilderness. God sent manna and God sent Jesus, true. Manna enabled the people to survive in the wanderings while believing Jesus enables us to live with God in eternity. Believing in the Gospel of John means we trust in God. We know where the center of our life is- in God. We use what God has shown us in Jesus as a model of how we are to live.

Yes, what Jesus asked of the disciples was hard and what Jesus asks of us is hard. Will you turn away or will you gather the courage to raise your questions. Let’s talk- it may be that what is hard for you is hard for someone else, too. We pride ourselves, as Episcopalians, at encouraging people not to leave their brains at the door. We ask ourselves, as Episcopalians, to engage in

² Hymnal 1982, 680.

those questions that are hard. Doing so offers the chance to deepen our faith. To live more fully into what Jesus asks of us. We may not all come to the same conclusions but we will each be better and more faithful people for engaging in conversation and listening- really listening- to what each other has to say.

As Episcopalians, we do not require belief in transubstantiation. That is, you do not have to believe that the bread and wine we will drink is the physical flesh and blood of Jesus. We do believe that Jesus is “really present” in the Eucharist. However you define “real presence” is up to you and it may change from time-to-time. The spectrum runs from transubstantiation- that the bread and wine is actually the flesh and blood of Jesus- to the bread and wine are a memorial or remembrance but never changed from what we see them as: bread and wine. However you regard what happens during the Eucharist, Jesus is really present in what we do at the altar, today and always. The bread that we eat and the wine that we drink are important to our understanding of our relationship with God as living and loving and challenging us to live in ways that give glory to God. Listen closely to the words used as you decide what eating the bread and drinking the wine mean to you.

What Jesus asks of us has consequences for how we live. It is not always an easy road to follow. With the whole armor of God surrounding us, though, we can have the strength to follow Jesus if we so choose. And it is a choice. Nothing Jesus asks of us is a foregone conclusion. We have free will. We have the option to choose to follow Jesus or to turn aside. The consequences of our choice are not usually clear when we make it. They are only really clear after our death when those who knew us will remark upon our resume virtues or our eulogy virtues, as David Brooks uses those terms in The Road to Character.³

What drives you? You have a choice to make. Will you put on the whole armor of God with all the challenges that entails? The reward is eternal life with a loving and compassionate God. The food for the journey is the bread and the wine that we eat each week. It is nourishment indeed if only you will believe that Jesus is the living God, the one that makes all possible. Come and eat. All will be well, all will be well and all will be well. **Amen.**

³ David Brooks. The Road to Character (New York: Random House, 2015) .