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(image courtesy of Steve Austin <http://thebookofopen.com/2016/09/20/grace-messy-changes-everything/>)

“Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of (another)... There are just some kind of men who’re so busy worrying about the next world that they’ve never learned to live in this one ...”
Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Our reading from the Revelation to John certainly has something to say about the next world. Or, better yet, the new world where what we know is transformed by God’s grace into a community where we live with love for neighbor and for ourselves consistent with the values articulated by Jesus. Love one another as I have loved you – a commandment, not a nice to do if you feel like it.

Steve Austin¹ writes a blog entitled “Messy Grace.” He said:

My faith matters to me. I read the Bible. I attend church. I pray when something is weighing heavily on me. But while I used to find my identity only in the label of “Christian” or in the name recognition of my local church, I’ve realized **people care much more about whether I am kind than whether I have faith.**

Every person of faith must choose if faith is water or cement in their lives. That choice is sometimes a lifetime in the making. A faith that is cement is meant to be absolute, definable, tangible, and - most importantly - defensible. Black and white. It is the rock on which they stand. And they will defend it, all of it. Their position, their beliefs, their convictions. They cannot be moved.

For the longest time I was in that camp. I forged ahead, clinging fiercely to a black and white faith. But while I thought I was following Jesus, I was really falling in line with the opinions and attitudes of family, friends, and faith leaders who felt it was their duty - and God-given right - to shape my character to look like theirs.

In today’s political climate, we see a lot of absolute, black-and-white, my-way-or-the-highway attitudes. We see, time and again, an approach that denigrates the other when the other doesn’t agree

¹ Steve Austin “Is Your Faith Water or Cement” in *HuffPost Religion* April 19, 2016.

Acts 11: 1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13: 31-35

100% with our way of seeing things. This attitude of cement carries over into faith for many. We can each think of someone with whom we avoid conversations about faith because we know it will devolve into harsh words simply because we do not always see eye-to-eye. Love one another as I have loved you – easy to say, hard to live.

One of the strengths of the Anglican Communion has been a belief that we do not have to believe uniformly in order to remain in relationship. That undergirding to our understanding of communion (small “c”) was tested earlier this year when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, issued invitations to Lambeth Conference 2020. The theme for next year’s Conference is “God’s Church for God’s World: walking, listening and witnessing together.” The invitations, however, excluded the same gender spouses of any Bishop – once again raising differences between The Episcopal Church and other parts of the Anglican Communion who do not support same gender relationships, let alone marriages. And, in fairness to them, in many countries of the world, same gender relationships or same gender marriage is illegal whether we like it or not.

The American Bishops at a meeting earlier this year made a decision to attend Lambeth but not to stay in the official lodging- because the same gender spouse of a Bishop could not stay in the official lodging. A way of ensuring that our voices are heard even when not all welcome that voice. And not everyone agrees with the choice our Bishops have made to attend. But we want to remain in relationship with each other and sometimes that means we need to look at the bigger picture – we need to consider how we understand God’s role in the world and in our lives – and where sometimes we need to step out or speak out when we might rather be quiet. We need to continue to be at the table.

For you and me, here in Crawfordsville, decisions about Lambeth mean little in terms of our everyday life. Basically, it changes nothing to us in terms of our daily life because, for Americans in the Episcopal Church, Lambeth is a nice concept but it has no ability to set doctrine or dogma. However, for others, revisiting the issue of the place of LGBTQ persons within the Church (capital C) is a continuing challenge when the attitude appears to be “believe as I do or get out”. This is belief as concrete – rigid and impermeable- and not water – fluid and life giving.

Steve Austin puts something like we’ve recently experienced this way:

Over time, my faith has become more like water. Picture a river, constantly flowing, deep enough that we cannot see the bottom. Sometimes we step in and sometimes we step out. Most often, I think I sit on the bank and watch. Sometimes, I muster enough courage to bend down and scoop a little up in my hands, but most all of it slips through my fingers. Because in my life, faith has become larger than anything I can control...

After resurrecting from the dead, Jesus could have preached sermons and continued to wow the crowds. Instead, he greeted his best friends on the shoreline and cooked them fish over a campfire. He knew they’d been out fishing all night and would be starved. ... Jesus greeted his followers as friends and served them.

God meets us where we are. We read that “the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.” John echoes the Hebrew Scriptures and especially the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah when they remind us that God is not far

Acts 11: 1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13: 31-35

removed from us but rather walks with and among us. John says the new Jerusalem will come **down** out of heaven. God meets us where we are. God loves us where we are.

The prophet Isaiah, in chapter 65, beginning at verse 17 writes:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight....No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; ...Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox...

The vision and the hope we read about in Revelation is thus part of the fabric of life that has been passed on to us. From the Alpha to the Omega, the vision of God for the people of God is life abundant and in community.

Austin reminds us that

Jesus fully embraced his humanity, and his disciples'. And if I'm going to follow in his footsteps, I must fully embrace my own. I've been doing it all wrong. I've been trying to shove cement down people's throats, when they are dying of thirst. Most people aren't looking for super spiritual revelations and deep theological dissertations. In the ebb and flow of everyday life, we aren't longing for earth-shattering Truth or soul-shaking experiences in a radical worship service. We just need breakfast.

After years of frustration with black and white answers to grey questions, I grew so frustrated that I nearly abandoned faith altogether. Life is not black and white. And those who believe it is, often push away the rest of us.

I think far too often, we confuse faith with religion. And faith with theology. And faith with denominations. And faith with doctrine. The moment we are no longer inviting to those who aren't just like us, we begin to harden. Cement swells or shrinks with the temperature, while water flows into every parched crack of our souls. Maybe cement cannot be moved, but it is water that nourishes us and brings life to us all.

Jesus, the water bearer, the one who turned water into wine at the wedding of Cana, is the one who can give "water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." Jesus, as the Alpha and the Omega, is with us from birth to death. Present in all aspects of our life. The one who makes all things new when we can see our faith as water and not as cement.

We baptize with water and in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We die with Jesus and we are raised to new life in Jesus. Water washes away the sins of the world. Water washes our robes in the blood of the Lamb until they are dazzling white. Without water to drink, we die. Without love, we die.

Although we have talked this morning about our faith being either cement or water, keep in mind that over time, water wears away cement. Yes, it can take a long, long time. But ultimately water works

through and on solid surfaces and we get something beautiful like the Grand Canyon. With God, nothing is impossible.

It's important also to remember that the vision reflected in Revelation is of community. Yes, we are individuals, but we need community, even the most curmudgeonly among us. The ideal life is one where we live and work together to bring about the realm of God on earth. This is not a one-time shot. Rather, God is continually transforming our world as we inch closer to that new heaven and new earth. One where we have been transformed by God's love for us and we automatically extend that love to others. By loving our neighbor as Jesus has loved us, the world will know that we are disciples of Jesus Christ, called to love and to serve until the new heaven and the new earth come to be and we are all transformed in God's grace. Go! Be transformed. May your faith be like water that is life-giving and which wears away the places in our hearts that are hard like concrete. **Amen.**