

Is religion worth all the trouble?

That question frequently bounces around in my head, probably in everybody's sooner or later. Certainly anyone who's tried to commit their life to God has found the reality of that commitment disappointing at some point.

The worship becomes uninspiring,

the demands too high, or too low;

the details obscure the larger purpose;

Or we're just mean to each other.

A couple of examples:

Last week a man stopped me and told me how the church had abandoned its purpose and was some kind of evil empire, and how it was responsible for much of the mess his life had become.

Also last week I sat down and tried to work through an email a friend forwarded me. In it an American Christian writer opined that the American Christian church was nothing more than a prostitute, selling itself for every dollar it can get. Which if true makes me ... well, I guess it would explain why I'm wearing such a colorful outfit.

The church always needs critics. The church always needs reformers.

But the critics I saw this week settled for the grand statement,
the sweeping accusation, the half-truth.

They throw out these half-truths, so easy to offer, with *just enough* truth to get your attention ... but never enough to be useful.

Things like "if you build it they will come,"

Or "government is the problem."

So... is religion worth the trouble?

It's too big a question to answer definitively, of course. But I'd like us to look at a couple of people from today's lessons – Joshua and Peter.

First, today's beautiful passage from the last chapter of Joshua – “Choose ye this day whom ye shall serve....as for me and my house, we shall serve the Lord.”

I've always always loved that passage, and I've been looking forward to preaching on it for some time. It's got that perfect blend of freedom of choice, personal responsibility, and patriarchy that appeals to someone like me.

“You can do whatever you want,” Joshua says, “but I ... and my house ... will serve the Lord.”

The thing is, that line comes at the end of the book of Joshua. And if you read the first 23 and 1/2 chapters before it, things get a little tricky.

When the book begins, Moses has just died and the Lord has called on Moses' assistant, Joshua, to deliver his people into the promised land. The first half of the book is about Joshua leading the tribes to conquer the land of Canaan.

And remember, this was not a group of explorers discovering a new land. This was an army invading sovereign states. This was an army who believed it their divine charge to utterly displace or destroy other cultures. And to varying degrees, they were successful.

You might know that great old spiritual, “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho.” The more you actually read the book of Joshua, though, the less you might

want to sing that old spiritual. Instead, you might find you prefer a bluegrass song called "Little Jericho Boy." It's a song about a young boy who lives in Jericho when Joshua's army comes in and what he has to do to survive.

This is a point where it might be easy to dismiss religion. This is the kind of place where it might be comforting to look at the death and destruction caused by Joshua's armies, by God's armies, and write off all the people who try to act in God's name.

But can we look a little deeper? Can we see a level of complexity in these stories that deserves our attention? For instance, we know that the version of history we're reading in Joshua was written down 400 years after the events have taken place? I wonder if the real Joshua might be more complex than the one in the story? I wonder if we could acknowledge that the beliefs about warfare and conquest in the name of the deity were not unique to the tribes of Israel, but were held throughout the region? I wonder if we could imagine for a moment what happens to a people when they escape from slavery only to wander in the wilderness for decades, a people without a home, searching for a promised land?

No, Joshua's values are probably not our values. But Joshua's circumstances are not our circumstances, either.

Our particular strain of Christianity is willing to face hard questions, willing to struggle with complexity, and occasionally, willing to live with ambiguity. We don't always do it well, but I think at our best, Anglican Christianity is neither threatened by complexity nor reduced to relativism. We can acknowledge the failings within ourselves without saying that those

failings mean every claim, every culture, every belief system, is equally valid.

Anglican Christianity acknowledges we don't have the whole truth, but neither is it willing to settle for the half-truth.

And so I wonder about Joshua. When he gives this glorious speech to the leaders of the twelve tribes, Joshua is an old man about to die. Joshua the military leader has led the people in their conquest of the land God promised them. Joshua has seen a lot of death. He has killed people, and he has sent his soldiers to their deaths. He has suffered losses and won victories, but throughout he has held his people together while fighting for a homeland, and all in the name of the one, true, living God.

I wonder if it changed him.

I wonder if the Joshua at the beginning of the book,

before all the battles, before all the death,

before all the impossible decisions,

would have said what Joshua says here.

Would he have offered them the option of returning to old gods? Would he have offered them the religious freedom he does now? Was there a difference in the kind of discipline he demanded when they were a ragged group of people struggling for survival than the kind he offers here when they have finally returned home?

Mostly, I wonder what kind of faith it takes for a man to hold fast to the God that has led him through the kind of suffering and death that he has

experienced. What kind of faith risks giving up leadership, risks giving up control of others, risks giving up war, and still has the strength to say, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord"?

There's a kind of faith in complex lives that is not easily dismissed with easy answers and half-truths.

It's the faith of those who have been tested.

It's the faith of those who have endured.

It's the faith of Lincoln at the 2nd Inaugural:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in..."

In John's gospel this morning, the disciples are just beginning their ministries and are faced with questions that have a different kind of complexity.

Jesus is in the midst of his long teaching on bread and wine, on body and blood, on spirit and flesh. And it's a hard teaching.

In the story this morning Jesus is talking to faithful Jews, to people who know there is something special about this rabbi, this prophet named Jesus.

The thing is, they love YHWH - the Lord their God - and they keep his commandments, and now this new thing is happening. This Jesus, whom they respond to, whom they believe to be a mighty prophet, who the day before had turned a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish into enough food for 5,000 people, is telling them that he is more than just a mighty prophet.

He tells them that the bread they got yesterday *is* like the manna their ancestors got, *and* ... that it isn't enough. They will still die one day.

He tells them that manna and loaves and fishes do not lead to eternal life.

He tells them that he, Jesus, is their spiritual food and their spiritual drink.

He tells them that if they would live forever,
they must eat his flesh and drink his blood.

And all those faithful Jews who hear these words
have to wonder what's going on.

They come to him seeking wisdom.

They come to him seeking renewal.

They come to him seeking a way to refresh their faith in the God of Abraham &
Moses & Joshua.

They come to him seeking bread ... and he tells them their old ways aren't
enough.

He tells them they can't go back to the Temple anymore.

He tells them that the manna that God sent through Moses wasn't enough

He tells them there is a Living Bread that comes from the Father through him.

They came to Jesus seeking clarity and they get a mystery.

They came to Jesus for certainty and they got a Sacrament.

It's no wonder many of them left and went home. Maybe I would have, too.

I like to think Jesus understands their decision. I like to think Jesus
understands when his teachings are too hard for us in that moment, that
Jesus is patient with us when we haven't yet come to the new truth we
need to grasp. Sometimes we don't know what else to do with our faith
but to hold onto what feels familiar, even if it means turning our back on
Jesus for a time.

But maybe this morning there's another way.

Maybe this morning we can call on the faith of Joshua,
complex though it may be.

If you've been through the wars,
whether they're military or personal wars,
if you're feeling weary and beaten up,
if you feel like you've been fighting most of your life
and now you're just tired of fighting,
if there's something inside yourself you've been holding onto so tightly
through all the battles, something you use to make yourself feel holy
no matter what the world is doing around you...

let me ask you...

Can you find the faith, the strength, to loosen your grip just a little bit on
whatever it was you've held onto so tightly?

Can you make a little more room in your faith for complexity? for ambiguity?

Is there room for a little messiness in your faith?

Can you allow room for other people's faith?

Can you offer with kindness to those around you the same offer that Joshua
makes this morning:

Choose for yourself whom you will serve.

As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.

Maybe Joshua's situation doesn't speak to you this morning.

But what about Peter's? Maybe you could call on the faith of Peter this morning.

Peter, who saw the fishes and the loaves and thought he knew what Jesus was about...

Peter, who then heard the teaching on true bread and true wine, and didn't know anymore what to believe...

Peter, who saw his fellow Jews turn their backs on Jesus and walk away and wondered if he should go with them...

Peter, who you just know Jesus was staring right in the face when Jesus asked the disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?"

At that moment, maybe Peter is asking the same question I asked at the beginning of this sermon: Is religion worth all this trouble?

For every miracle we see, why do we have to see three tragedies?

For every moment of love and joy, why do we have to deal with three moments of hatred and hurt?

For every moment of real union, why are there three moments when we turn our backs and walk away?

At that moment, I don't think Peter could answer those questions any more than I can answer my question this morning – is religion worth all the trouble?

Ultimately, all I can say is the same thing Peter says to Jesus:

"Lord, to whom else can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

We don't do religion because we're good at it.

We don't do religion because it fixes everything.

We don't do religion because it answers all our questions.

Ultimately, we do religion for only one reason, whether it's worth it or not.

Somehow, somehow, we have come to believe and know that Jesus is the
Holy One of God.

What else can we do but worship him?

Where else can we go but to the Lord?