

August 26, 2018  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16, Year B, RCL  
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43  
Psalm 84  
Ephesians 6:10-20  
John 6:56-69

I have a question for you. Being a Christian: is it EASY, or is it HARD?

True confession: I want being a Christian to be easy. I can even imagine what that would look like. I would have a special room, something like a cross between a monk's cell and a suite at the Marriott—you know, because I could focus better if I had a private shower and room service. I would spend all my time there reading, writing, praying—and eating, amazingly tasty and perfectly healthy chef-prepared farm-to-table meals. There would be a hilly park next door into which I would wander for walks and reflection. Every day of the year, the weather would be *my* definition of seasonally perfect. Because of my focus and devotion, God and I would be *just like this* [*crossing-fingers gesture*]. Therefore, God would speak to me, directly and personally and clearly, in language I can understand. At all times, God's presence with me would be palpable, and my body would shimmer with joy. I would radiate holiness.

These days, there *are places* a lot like that. Enough money will get you the room, the food, and more: massages, an infinity pool, a personal guru, the yoga practice of your choice—perhaps with goats. But such places certainly aren't monasteries, because a monk's life has *never* been like that. And such places really don't have much to do with *being* a Christian.

Does this mean I'm saying that *being* a Christian is *hard*? Well, I'd rather not answer that question. It's too risky.

Every spring every Episcopal church is required to file a report with the national church. Last week the national Episcopal Church released last spring's compiled data.<sup>1</sup> The good news is that giving is up since the year before; the bad news is that membership and attendance are down, again.

News like this makes church leaders freshly vulnerable to temptation of a particular sort. However you personify Evil, that One whispers into our ears, saying, "This is your fault, and the only solution is to make it easy for everyone else." The instructions are clear: keep on running the treadmill while repeating: Just keep coming to church! No one will demand a thing! It's easy being a Christian!

It's a temptation to which I have been subject. I'm afraid it's a temptation to which I have succumbed. To name just a few of the many reasons why it's problematic: it's a smokescreen; it's unsustainable; and it's just not true.

If we were to ask Jesus, I doubt he would say that being a Christian is supposed to be easy. Against the idyllic image with which I began this sermon, compare today's readings from Ephesians and John.

Let's start with John. This was our fifth Sunday in a row hearing from John, chapter 6, and our fifth Sunday in a row hearing about bread. Chapter 6 begins with the physical feeding of the five thousand—a nice, straightforward miracle story that anyone can get behind. But it then becomes *metaphysical*. I am the bread of life? Believe in me and you will have eternal life? Eat me and you shall live forever?

Today John tells us that, “many of [Jesus'] disciples turned back and no longer went with him.” Well, duh! The immediately precipitating factor is that weird stuff about eating flesh and drinking blood. But you have to figure that there were a lot of folks who came and went. You have to figure that some folks tried but just couldn't take what Jesus has to offer.

John doesn't give us the details. But I can imagine how it went. Imagine those folks before they heard about Jesus. They are just regular people, grumpy with the way things are, looking for a change—and justifiably so. Into their dissatisfaction drops Jesus. He is so very shiny and new! He will fix everything! They are so excited that they follow him anywhere. It's fabulous—for a while. The problem is, Jesus keeps complicating things. For one thing, Jesus is not interested in a one-way relationship; he's looking for partners. Suddenly, things *get real*. Those folks will spin the blame to their own advantage, but they simply have to bail. For them, Jesus is perfect in every way—until he isn't.

At the *very* end, it got *very* real with Jesus. Of course it did. Jesus wasn't just offering a new spin of an old record. He was changing the instruments and making a whole new kind of music. Not every individual can *accept* that. Not every institution can *allow* that. As a result, disciples left, and Jesus died.

Jesus died, but he didn't stop. The resurrection is deeply meaningful in our lives today, because it tells us that Jesus *still* gets up *every* morning, playing new music and singing new songs—and inviting us to join in. I might argue that *being* a Christian *requires* us to join in. Not every individual can accept that. Not every institution can allow that.

Which brings us to Ephesians. Today's reading is a good reference for talking about easy and hard. “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” However you personify evil, it is alive and well. Ephesians sounds a call to a different kind of arms: “Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.” Battle imagery is not my favorite, but it does convey the seriousness and difficulty of our undertaking.

Many argue that Christianity requires one thing: the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Maybe that's right; John 6 basically says that. Others might raise the gate slightly, arguing from John 6 that Christianity requires only the taking of communion. I *want* it to be as easy as that sounds. But those disciples who called it quits ... they knew better. *Being* Christian requires so much more.

Jesus talks about flesh and blood, but he's after something else. Eating and drinking are the most fundamental actions necessary to sustain life. If we fail to eat and drink, we fail to live. It's not a one-off. We have to eat and drink basically all the time. Jesus would have us choose well what we would consume and to chew it with intention. Because of course it's not just about food. It's about our entire existence, today, tomorrow, and forever. It's about mindfully making multitudes of choices, every day, about food and about so much more. It's easy—and it is nearly impossibly hard.

Remember that old saying, “You are what you eat”? That phrase is said to have originated in French, as contained in an 1825 book by someone Wikipedia describes as “a French lawyer and politician, [who] gained fame as an epicure and gastronome.”<sup>2</sup> But one article suggests looking earlier, to the Eucharistic prayer in the very first Book of Common Prayer, from the year 1549.<sup>3</sup> It includes this:

We offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.

You are what you eat. Partake of the body and blood of Christ, so that Christ may dwell in you and you in Christ—so that you and God can be *just like this* [*crossing-fingers gesture*]. It's pretty simple, but it's far from easy.

I'm pretty sure that Jesus didn't promise easy. He did promise a means of abiding, more luxurious than the Marriott, more sustaining than goat yoga. The choice is yours.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Data from 2017 Parochial Reports now available,” Episcopal News Service, available online at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/data-from-2017-parochial-reports-now-available/> (accessed August 25, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> “Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin,” Wikipedia, available online at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean\\_Anthelme\\_Brillat-Savarin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Anthelme_Brillat-Savarin) (accessed August 25, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> “You are what you eat,” The Phrase Finder, available online at <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/you-are-what-you-eat.html> (accessed August 25, 2018).