

Let us pray...

O God, in whom we live and move and have our being, you call us to live deeply, love daringly, pour ourselves out wholeheartedly. Take the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions that result, and make something beautiful, Amen.

I need to say at the outset that the “why” questions are the hardest and least susceptible to definitive answers. So why do we believe, why God, why faith, what’s the point? Well if you are hoping for definitive answers, apologies right off the top. This question has many dimensions.

It is like asking, why do we love? Do we love to get something out of it- in which case, is that really love? Or do we need an object of our love or can we just be loving? Is love or the need to love just part of being human, a dimension of our nature that develops well or not but is part of us? Is faith like that? Is belief like that?

The late F Forrester Church once said that “Religion is the human response to being alive and having to die.” That is to say, we are human, we are alive (which is a wonder unto itself) and we will die (which places us all at the edge of a profound mystery). And religion, belief, faith are our limited, human responses to the profoundly mystery embedded in life whether we want to acknowledge that mystery or not. Faith helps us create a meaningful framework for our life within the unavoidable confines of our mortality. It is not a promise or threat of something after but rather the profound, poetic, lyrical way we construct a life that matters, that has purpose.

Marcus Borg used to say that there is always more to life than we can know. There is always something bigger, deeper, more mysterious in life. There is more to it, always. And that “more” is what most people are referring to when they talk about God- the mysterious More with a capital M at the heart of life. And all major

religions are an attempt to engage with that mysterious More. We do it when we worship, we do it when we sing, we do it when we serve, Muslims do it 5 times a day, Sufis do it by whirling around dancing, Christians do it at the communion table.

So if the question is, why do we believe, one answer is, because there is more, always more. We are limited, we see dimly, but we sense a mystery beyond our limited view. We choose to call that great mystery God. Jesus chose to personalize that great mystery with the name Abba. And all the great religions of the world create frameworks, networks of story, teaching, history, poetry all intended to engage with the great mystery that is God.

Now I know that the existence of God is not universally accepted, but Nancy didn't ask that question. She asked, why do we believe, and for those of us who practice faith, we believe because we are waking up to that mysterious More and we want to live a fully engaged life, engaged with what we can know and engaged with the mystery beyond our reach. Dag Hammarskjold, 20th century thinker, economist, and UN Secretary-General once said, "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, ... of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason." God doesn't need us to believe. But if we want to come fully alive to the wonder of life, there is a spiritual part of us that needs to contemplate more.

Part of Nancy's Stump the preacher question was also around motivation. Do we have religious faith in order to be better people- does it merely help us be good and is that enough? Or do we believe in God in order to be rewarded by some future promise of heaven or avoid some future punishment? What is the motivation beneath belief?

And frankly, I think that kind of depends. There are some churches and mosques and religious organizations that wield their beliefs like weapons, or practice a kind of “carrot and stick” approach to the great mystery. They take the basic uncertainty at the heart of life, concoct a theology that promises certainty and then insist that we adhere to that certainty in order to gain heaven and avoid hell. Believe what I believe and your reward will be in heaven. Refuse my belief and you will be punished forever.

I don’t believe any of the great teachers in human history, Jesus, Buddha, Mohamed, any of them practiced faith like that. That is a fear-based fundamentalist mis-understanding of God.

Now to be fair, uncertainty can be scary. Faith does not take away or even diminish life’s uncertainty.

Albert Einstein said, “True religion is real living; living with all one’s soul, with all one’s goodness and righteousness.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way: “Religion is to do right. It is to love, it is to serve, it is to think, it is to be humble.”

Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

And the followers of Jesus, having admitted that none of them had ever seen God, said that when we love, that is when we know God.

Nancy’s question may seem really philosophical, but I believe it speaks to the profound significance of the life you have been given and the importance of choosing to live it well. We choose the way we live, the path we will follow, the values we will embody, and the meaning we will give our life. Faith speaks to all that. Micah said, “What does God want? To seek justice, to love kindness and to

walk humbly with our God.” There it is! A framework upon which to hang a life filled with meaning and purpose. And that matters.

Why faith? Because faith, with its stories, and teachings, and songs and prayers and community creates a heartbeat that will give energy and purpose to our life. We underestimate the importance of our lives. Faith is a powerful force in human life and we are foolish to proceed without consciously choosing how to live it and who to live it with. The world needs you to gather every resource of love and trust and faith and hope at your disposal, gather it like a hurricane gathers the wind. Point it in the direction of the deepest needs that you can see, the most intractable wrongs you can find, and bring it to bear. That’s why faith. Amen.