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Dear Friends,

Easter—our current season—was never intended to be a religious holiday. Holy Week and Easter are not about religion at all. Jesus did not go to the cross to provide a talking point for a religion or a group of denominations. The deep challenge for us, especially in our time and culture, is to recognize that Easter is about everyone, or it is about no one. Like the constant speed of light, viruses, and the complex interaction of subatomic forces—none of which I have seen but which I nevertheless firmly believe to exist—the Resurrection is part of creation, and is the work of the same one to whom light, viruses, and quantum physics are no mystery at all. What I believe about viruses has no bearing on their existence. I am certainly free to ignore them, deny that they exist, or think that they might be significant for others but have no consequences for me, but eventually that set of beliefs, because they do not coincide with the way things are, will land me in trouble.

**Religion is the Problem** In this most religious season, I would like to say that for much of our culture “Religion” is actually the problem—not the content of religion, but the way we have created and defined the category itself.

**Science, Economics, History, and Education** I think we tend to establish categories into which we group the various ways we relate to the world and to other people. To each category we assign a value. Science, in our culture, is held to offer a highly reliable way to understand and interact with the world. We ignore it at our peril, and we generally hold in low esteem those who take other views of science. What can be scientifically “proven” is true, real, and reliable. That the best science of one generation routinely repudiates the best science which came before does not undermine our faith in the basic principle that science leads to truth.

**Economics** is held to be equally serious albeit somewhat less reliable. We may have a strong (or even absolute) faith in The Market, but even the most orthodox in that denomination recognizes that The Market may produce results which, on an individual basis, are unacceptable. We do not stand by and wait passively for the market to correct itself while some starve and others are glutted with wealth. Or at least we do not stand by idle if that happens directly before us. We balk at letting The Market, by itself, allocate who gets health care and at what level. The Market might well redress environmental abuse, but its verdict might be mass death from pollution, toxic waste, or starvation, and while we might acknowledge the intellectual and, on some level, even the moral justice of such

an outcome, we are reluctant to embrace it in practice. Neither have managed economies produced abundance, excellence, and equality at the level for which many have hoped over the years.

**History** is a serious discipline but subject to a wide range of interpretations. We learn early in school that those who do not know their history are condemned to repeat it, but what exactly is to be learned from history, or even what constitutes history (monarchs, wars, and diplomacy? or the diets, life-spans, and the working and living conditions of common people?) continues to be a matter of vigorous debate. Exactly what lessons are to be learned from Munich, from Pearl Harbor, from Vietnam, and from 9/11 can still prompt interesting conversations from divergent perspectives. And interpretations swing back and forth over time. Harry Truman was held in low esteem when he left office, but a few decades later was rediscovered as a heroically gutsy and independent leader. We have seen the reputations of Eisenhower and John Kennedy rise and fall with successive biographies, revelations, or subsequent development of world events. Although there is little agreement about what the past actually means, there is a broad consensus that it matters. We rarely address present issues without supporting our positions with a version of the past which supports what we now contend.

**Education** We could say similar things about education—does anyone believe that education is optional or that one can opt out of it without serious, negative consequences? We have so much faith in education that we require people, by law, to be educated. And increasingly there are debates about how that education should be presented, what it should contain, and how and at what level it should be funded. About topics as basic as reading and mathematics passions run high when significant changes are proposed in the manner of instruction—changes in the liturgies attached to our core beliefs are always controversial.

**Questions and Answers** Science, Economics, History, and Education are a few of the pillars of our world view. It is difficult for us to imagine being a modern person without some facility in each. We turn to those disciplines, and others not unlike them, to provide the answers, abstract or specific, for the questions of how we are to live—how do we allocate resources, what do we do with our days, how do we relate to our communities, what is the purpose of work and how do we choose where we fit in, what choices should we make as a nation, how does the world work, how can we protect ourselves from what we fear or dread, what do we do now with our children so that they might have good lives as they grow up, and so on. We take what we know and, from that, we construct lives for ourselves, our families, our communities, our nation, and our world.

For all of our vaunted diversity and open-mindedness, the one rigid and unquestioned orthodoxy of our culture is that God does not matter enough to be a serious factor in any choices beyond the most private and elective. Anything to do with God is “religion” and how dare you put that on the table when we are trying to do serious, practical business in the real world.

If we question the science or the economics of, say, an energy policy, we can expect to get a fair hearing. If we offer an historical critique of an international policy, we can expect to be taken seriously. If we make an impassioned plea that every child have at last thirteen, and maybe seventeen, years of excellent daily education, we might well win election to public office.

**An Uncomfortable Moment** But if we say that we are dying as individuals, self-destructing as a people, and have cut our children off from what could be their best life-long resource for well-being because we do not know God and ignore God’s will for us, then we can expect people to avert their

eyes, clear their throats, shift uncomfortably in their chairs, and desperately want to be somewhere else. If we were to say in the same setting that we need better science, smarter economics, a clearer view of our history, or a recommitment to better education, we could expect a very different response and probably a follow-up invitation from someone for further conversation.

God is not against science or the other disciplines. Indeed, science depends on the orderly nature of creation. Christians regularly affirm that God created everything that is, and to explore creation is to study the work of God. To take God seriously is not to reject the other disciplines. God is not opposed to science, to economics, to the understanding of history, or to the education of children. Indeed, scripture celebrates these pursuits and calls us to them.

I often hear—or read—that one cannot take God seriously because of all of the evil done by those who invoke God. By that argument we should have given up science decades ago—without science neither the Holocaust nor Hiroshima would have been possible, and those are just the top two items on my list for one decade of the past century. We should reject public education because it was used by the Third Reich to produce the Hitler Youth, and in this country was, for decades, a bastion of racism. We should dismiss economics with laughter and scorn because of crashes and gross inequalities between the very rich and the very poor, and we should relegate history to the scrap heap of history because Marx got it wrong. And, while we are in history, of course the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution have to go because many of the drafters and signers not only tolerated slavery, but personally participated in it.

To blame an entire discipline for the behavior of each of its practitioners is thought to be reasonable when applied to religion, but somehow in every other case it is nonsense. We can, and need to be, smarter.

Like science and the other serious disciplines, the meaning of our encounter with God may not be able to be reduced to one or two pithy and compelling sentences, or even to a weekly hour two or three times a month. Whatever our final concentration, we spend years developing some basic competence at science, economics, history, and education, and we acknowledge how what we learn in each of those areas enhances our ability in all of the others.

**Understanding and Belief** If we do need to understand to believe, and if we are prepared to organize our lives around such core elements as the Ten Commandments, the Baptismal Covenant, and the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds without seeking to make sense of them, then we need not put any additional effort into understanding our relationship with God. When we are very young, this style of knowledge and belief works for many—but not all!—of us. To make sense of the world as thoughtful, and (appropriately) skeptical adults requires some serious engagement (using adult intellectual tools) with who God is, what God wants, and what God continues to be up to.

In the Middle Ages theology was described as the Queen of the Sciences because the study of God touched, and united, all other branches of knowledge. Theology, and theologians at every level in our own day, have considerable work to do before such an assertion would get a serious hearing now. But the project might be a good one.

An integrated way of looking at the world, in which personal behavior, a recognizably fair distribution of resources locally and globally, the underpinnings of physics, the love of a couple, the making of peace, the pursuit of the arts, an understanding of the past, and a sense of our purpose

and destiny here and hereafter—a world in which those were all seen as deeply and naturally connected—would be significantly different, and I think markedly better, than the world view we have made for ourselves over the past few centuries.

A view of all things centered on the creator of all things offers, I believe, that potential. We may understand parts of creation by bringing to bear on them our best resources, but to understand creation itself, we need to look to the Creator. And not because we are or want to be “religious,” but because we want to be smart, we want to know and understand how things really work and are interconnected. We undertake this work because we seek that peace and equilibrium which would derive from seeing not only how things work, but what our, not inconsiderable, place is in that creation.

A world view which cannot accommodate Easter is an inadequate guide for the complexity of our lives. And the meaning of Easter, like the meaning of science, economics, history, or education, cannot adequately be presented in a sermon or two on a Sunday morning. The reason to enter into an adult engagement with God and with Easter is not so you can be more religious or a better Christian, but so that you might understand better how the world works and what our place is in it. This project guides our life at St. Elizabeth’s day in and day out, in a wide variety of forms and settings, and from a number of different perspectives. I look forward to continuing this work with you.

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