

Re-Formed

By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

1Kings 12: 1-11



12 Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had gone there to make him king. 2 When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard this (he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), he returned from[a] Egypt. 3 So they sent for Jeroboam, and he and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: 4

“Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you.” 5 Rehoboam answered, “Go away for three days and then come back to me.” So the people went away. 6 Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. “How would you advise me to answer these people?” he asked. 7 They replied, “If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants.” 8 But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. 9 He asked them, “What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, ‘Lighten the yoke your father put on us’?” 10 The young men who had grown up with him replied, “These people have said to you, ‘Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter.’ Now tell them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s waist.

11 My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.”

Late yesterday afternoon a news alert popped up on my phone. The alert came from a reporter whose name is Jason Horowitz.

VATICAN CITY — A summit of Roman Catholic bishops meeting at the Vatican recommended on Saturday that Pope Francis allow the ordination of married men as priests in the Amazon region, which would lift a roughly 1,000-year-old restriction and potentially revolutionize the priesthood. It is the first time a grouping of bishops convened by a pope has endorsed such a historic change to the tradition of a celibate priesthood. The proposal is limited to remote areas of South America where there is a scarcity of priests but could set a precedent for easing the restriction on married priests throughout the world.

Wow! I thought, what a remarkable opportunity for the Roman Catholic church! What a shift in culture it will represent in a faith community that doesn't shift easily. I wonder what Pope Francis will decide to do. I mean, whenever a group of people comes to a leader with new ideas, there are decisions to be considered and choices to be made. Shall we stay the same, or do we re-form into something new? Either way, the moment comes with its ramifications.

It is an exciting time when community of faith is approached with new ideas and today as we welcome into our membership 8 new members, we will surely add to our long established conversation here at BCC. Those who have held power, who have served on committees forever, will no doubt be

asked at some point to change. Our new members may have new ideas about the way we do pledging or make our offerings. They may wonder about why we support particular benevolences and ask us to consider a different way of interacting with the organizations we support. They might even request that we make it easier for them to meet our established members. And there lies the opportunity...

In our reading this morning, we learn that wise King Solomon had been a task master and when he died, those who had struggled under his rule asked his son for change. They said,

4 "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you." 5 Rehoboam (Solomon's son) answered, "Go away for three days and then come back to me." So the people went away. 6 Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked.

And some of his advisors suggested lightening the load and serving his people. And some of his advisors suggested flexing his muscles and making things more oppressive.

King Rehoboam had a choice.

Likewise in 1517 the scholar, Martin Luther, approached his community of faith with some new ideas. He went to the religious leaders at the time (the pope in particular) and offered up 95 theses that argued against some of what Luther believed were oppressive teachings of the church. In

particular, Luther believed that the sale of indulgences to gain freedom from Purgatory was a hardship on the poor and a stumbling block to faith for the rich. Luther believed that these “get out of jail free” cards were an obstacle to relying on the grace of Jesus Christ. In particular he objected to a saying promoted by one of his contemporaries: *Johann Tetzel who said that "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory ['into heaven'] springs."*^[4] Martin Luther asked the pope to consider revoking this dubious teaching and privilege.

The pope (as head of the church) had a choice. He could use his power to ease the burden on his followers, or he could crack down and make an example out of Luther. He could teach his congregants that questioning the pope had nasty consequences.

Whenever those who've been in power are challenged, we have the option of King Rehoboam and the Pope in 1517: to serve or supplant. To adapt and build up by folding the new ideas into the batter of our reality, or to sift anything challenging out of the mix and label it foul.

King Rehoboam and Martin Luther's pope had that choice.

Pope Francis has that choice before him.

We will have that choice before us.

Fortunately we have the lessons from history to show us what happens when we choose to be served rather than serve in a community of faith.

In last week's scripture reading we witnessed the coming together of the South and North in the ancient middle east. Judah and Israel were united

by King David in the city of Jerusalem. A great celebration rose up as David became a more or less servant king to his people.

Today we read about King Rehoboam choosing to crack down on his people. He decides that not only should they serve him but he will be *cruel as scorpions* to keep them in line. In the verses that follow today's reading, Jeroboam, the leader from the north proclaims that King Rehoboam's oppressing reign is unacceptable. Jeroboam returns to Israel and is made king of the North. King David's victory is left in spoils and fighting continues for years upon years as the divided country battles for control.

In the case of Martin Luther, the pope decided to excommunicate Luther. He cast him out of the "one true faith" as if that would destroy Luther's relationship with Jesus Christ, and the great theologian pressed on with his protests against the Roman Catholic Church. With the help of the Guttenburg press he sought to serve the people he had originally been advocating for and they gathered around his teachings and became Protest-ants. They Re-formed themselves into something new. The churches have never been rejoined at one table despite each faith tradition's insistence on unity and a desire to fulfill Jesus' calling that "*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— 23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will*

know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”--John 17: 20-23

Jesus calls us to servant leadership. He calls us to put aside our needs for power and control so that we can better point folks toward God’s love...like he did.

So I pray for Pope Francis as he considers this request for married priests in the Amazon. His advisors are already with their opinions: *Liberal supporters said the change would address the unmet needs of a far-flung community and they hoped it would lead to similar changes closer to Rome. Conservative opponents called it a threat to the tradition of the priesthood, another troubling sign Francis was willing to dilute the faith to pursue a more inclusive, but less pure, church*

And I pray for the leaders of our church here in Briarcliff as we welcome these new voices and perspectives into our midst. Like our spiritual forebears we will have a choice to make, to serve or supplant. For Jesus’ sake, I hope we find ways to choose the former. To those of you who joined the Briarcliff Congregational Church today I say, “Welcome to the Re-formation of our church. I look forward to hearing the thoughts and ideas you will surely add to our experience. I’m glad you are here in Jesus’ spirit. May we all be one in his love and to his glory. Amen.”