

February 22, 2015 Psalm 25: 1-10, Mark 12: 28-34 Rev. Joy R. Haertig "Believing and Faith"

Watching the news...reading the paper...all the conversation about terrorism and the religion of Islam has had me thinking a great deal about my own experience as a Christian.

I suspect I that I am not alone when I admit that there have been times in my life when being a Christian has created a sense of embarrassment; guilt, even shame.

Our history as a religion holds much pain and suffering, prejudice and violence. (That is the BIG stuff)

And now the accompanying stereotypes and assumptions projected on the label beginning sometime in the 1970's (Anita Bryant was an eye opener for me as a girl – a whole other side of Christianity than I had known)...Rachael Maddow's piece on CNN last week...a Christian woman going on and on about an energy drink being evil...and her interrupting a peaceful gathering of Muslims...what the world sees Christians are like makes me crazy!!

I have had people ask me: **how can you be a feminist and stay in the church?**

How can you be gay and have anything to do with that religion?

How can you be a thinking, intelligent person and a Christian?

I have had people assume that I don't honor other religions or believe in evolution or...

The Psalmist's words speak to me when he writes: "Do let me *be put to shame...do not let those who wait for you be put to shame.*"

And I also know I am not alone when I say that this faith tradition which I was born into; which was fostered by the love of so many, has given me wings that have brought me up from pits of despair; has pushed and prodded me into speaking up for and working beside, the oppressed and forgotten. Has enabled me to see all creation as beloved, valued, and a gift.

It has opened my heart to discovering a relationship with God that is indeed trustworthy, even though our human-made religion is imperfect and fallible in its expression --- God, the Ground of all Being, is trustworthy.

Christianity offers a path in our search for meaning; a compass in this ever-changing world around us which for me is summed up in the words of Jesus when asked what the two greatest commandments are: "To love God with your heart, soul and mind, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Through the generations our religion has been evolving, a multitude of expressions and understandings have been manifested. However, theologically speaking, particularly in

America, many people understand our religion to be confined into a narrow box of fundamentalist doctrines and stereotypes.

I am so grateful for scholars like Marcus Borg whose writing liberated many of us from that narrow box and helped us find language to speak of our religious tradition and experiences in ways that claim the true diversity of Christian understanding and theology. I know our congregation benefited from his work even before I arrived here. He helped many of us continue to call Christianity, home.

Marcus Borg died this January, a sad and surprising loss as he had not made his health issues very public. In gratitude for his life, I have chosen to use one of his books: Speaking Christian, during the season of Lent. In this book he takes the traditional language of our faith and seeks to restore power and meaning to words that many of us have come to dismiss because they don't fit --- they don't ring true for us as the horizon of our spiritual expression stretches to include science, reason and personal experience.

For Borg, the language of our Christian faith was not to be lost or disregarded, for it is part of our identity and gives us roots and wings in living the Way of Jesus.

In this book he claims there are two major causes for shaping Christian language in a particular way that many of us have come to find too confining:

1. The literalization of language in the modern period, which affects Christians and non-Christians alike.
2. The interpretation of Christian language within a common framework which he calls "heaven and hell" Christianity. (Intro, pg. 1)

He claims that half, maybe more of American Christians believe that biblical language is to be understood literally, within a heaven-and-hell framework that emphasizes the afterlife, sin and forgiveness, Jesus dying for our sins, and believing.

The other half (maybe less) puzzle over and have problems with this. The differences, he writes, "are so sharp, they virtually produce two different religions, both using the same Bible and the same language". (Pg. 2)

Borg's goal is to help us find meaning in our traditional Christian language, and just maybe, find some places of common ground with those whose framework is different than our own.

This week let us look at the words Believing and Faith:

What comes to mind for you when you think of the word BELIEVE or BELIEF?

The word **Believe** was not originally understood as an intellectual act, believing that something is true – a set of statements for instance such as a literal interpretation of the virgin birth or creation literally happening in seven days.

To believe was about having confidence or trust in someone.

In addition, the Old English word for believe was “be loef”, which means to hold dear.

It is more like the English word belowe.

Even the origin of the word creed from the Latin word “credo” meant “I give my heart to”.

At its core, believing is about choosing to love **God with your whole heart, mind, and strength...loving your neighbor as you love yourself.**

It could change the whole conversation between our different Christian worlds if instead of starting with the question of whether you interpret the Bible literally or not we might ask one another: **As a Christian person, what or “who” do you “belove”....“what do you hold most dear”?** (This could be an intriguing question to ask a Muslim, Jew; an atheist!)

Borg asks in his book: “What is more transforming to our actual living as Christian people, believing in a particular set of statements or giving your heart to God?”

One of my favorite stories about Marcus Borg is when someone told him that he did not believe in God. Borg asked him to tell him about the God he did not believe in...it was the God of heaven and hell, the God we find in the literal reading of the Bible...Marcus responded --- “I don’t believe in that God either, let me tell you about the God I do Love, I do believe in”.

How about the word “Faith” --- what does that word mean to you?

(Faith “in” something...Faith as a religion...Faith in the literal interpretation of the Bible...you don’t have faith if you don’t literally believe in everything...faith in particular things will get you specific results!)

The ancient meanings are expressed by the Latin words: fi-del-i-tas and fiducia.

Fidelity and faithfulness.

It was understood to be a word associated with a relationship.

It was about commitment, loyalty, allegiance, and attentiveness.

Fiducia means “trust”, a deep trust in the relationship.

It might help us to think of the word trust when we hear the word faith.

In the Bible, the opposite of faith is NOT doubt, it is mistrust.

As a Christian then, faith as trust is about centering more and more in your relationship to God. How does one trust in a God that threatens us with hell if we misbehave or we don't understand the Bible literally?

18th century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard says *that faith is learning to trust in the buoyancy of God*. A God that is always there, not a God that makes a list and checks it twice.

(This is why we are offering a workshop on the practice of Centering Prayer, as it is one of the ways we can nurture a relationship of trust and reduce anxiety)

Essentially then, believing and faith are about our relationship with God – with Jesus. They are not the acceptance of doctrine or the path to some just reward.

I find this freeing and challenging. It means we get to take responsibility for fostering a mutual relationship of trust and fidelity with God. It is a covenant rather than a contract.

After my mother died and my father was going through her things, he found a box of keepsakes he had not ever seen in their 40 plus years of marriage. In it he found a sheet of paper in which my mom wrote to her God: “Before anything or anyone else in my life, I commit my whole self to you, body and soul” and then she would sign it and date it. She did it every year as her New Year commitment.

I was very moved by that discovery and it awakened in me a new understanding of believing and faith as a living relationship that involved mutual love and trust; the head as well as the heart. Amen.