

“Seeing Clearly”
Deuteronomy 6:4-9
Mark 8:22-34
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Introduction to the reading

In his sermon last Sunday, Marcus Borg reminded us that Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi was the first occasion that a human being had declared who Jesus really was: not John the Baptist, or Elijah, or a prophet, but the Messiah, or, in Greek, the Christ. Although the demons and the “unclean spirits” had recognized Jesus right away, until this moment, people had simply not “gotten it” about the identity of this man Jesus. Peter is the first one to say, “You are the Christ.” This morning’s gospel lesson reveals what happened immediately prior to Peter’s confession on the road ... on the road to seeing Jesus clearly. Listen to the word of God as it comes to us in the 8th chapter of Mark.

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Who is Jesus, and what does it mean to follow him as “the Christ, the Messiah”? Jesus teaches us that following him requires us not just to come up with the right *title*, as Peter did – not, in other words, just to confess that Jesus is my Lord and Savior. Following Jesus requires us to take up his cross: to take up his mission of fidelity to the kingdom of God above everything else -- our own personal desires, or religious tradition, or political rulers. To take up the cross is to hurl ourselves into God’s passion, God’s agenda, even at the cost of our own lives. In many ways, Jesus is interpreting the Shema, the central core of Jewish law, which we heard just a moment ago this morning: “Hear O Israel: the Lord your God is one Lord” – therefore not one of many gods in our lives – “and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your might.”

That, I think, is the essence of Marcus Borg’s message, and I heartily applaud it. Now I know that our congregation is of a mixed mind about Marcus Borg, so allow me a brief excursus to speak of that. There are many who have been electrified by his message; some who disagree vehemently, and – I love you well enough to say this -- perhaps a majority for whom Borg’s presence barely registered on the radar screen. As for me, one of his most helpful comments was this: that both the idea of Biblical inerrancy – that every word of the Bible is true and fully inspired by God – and the

historical-metaphorical approach of reading Scriptural writings within their historical context – that both of these approaches are *modern*. Before the Enlightenment, natural phenomena were all “acts of God”; after the Enlightenment, they were matters of science. In reaction, Christianity developed two competing paths: the path that defended the Bible as factually true, that is, inerrant, and the other path that explored the Bible as metaphorically true, and written by historic people as they best understood God’s revelation to them in their time. I had never really thought about that before – that inerrancy was as much a reaction to the Enlightenment as historical-criticism. It made all the sense in the world: every age of social expansion -- from Roman roads to the Renaissance and the age of explorers – every age of expansion inevitably produces an upheaval in society’s world-view, and competing reactions to it – a conservative reaction of preserving what was essential, and a number of progressive reactions seeking to reframe reality. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation are good examples of this: the explosion of Renaissance ideas, including humanism, produced an explosion of new religious thinking – Reformers and Anabaptists and more ... and it also led to the Counter-Reformation’s preserving defense of the Roman Catholic Church’s tradition.

All of this is to say that I am convinced that our current divide between what Borg calls “the Earlier Christian Paradigm” and the “Emerging Christian Paradigm” is an expected result of the seismic shift brought by scientific discovery, industrialization, the technological revolution and the resultant globalization. *Of course* we’re wrestling with our faith. We cannot live with a 17th century theology in a 21st century world. We’re all trying to figure out what faith means for today – and it is predictable that we have very different answers. To summarize Borg’s description of the differences, one paradigm sees the Bible as inerrantly God’s word, the means of salvation as belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and the result of salvation as a welcome into heaven. In contrast, the other paradigm sees the Bible as historically developed the means of salvation as God’s grace alone, and the result of salvation as a transformed life in this world. Now, that is a radical simplification of Borg’s description, but I offer it as shorthand for the dilemma that we face. This isn’t just an academic problem either. Within our own church, we have deeply devoted members with *very* different views of faith.

As your pastor, for me the question is not “which one is right,” but rather, how do we move forward? How do we continue to be the church

with such radically different approaches to faith? American churches – including ours -- have been muddling through this question for some decades now, with basically three solutions. One solution to our differences has been what I like to call “the least common denominator”: if we focus on what we agree on, then, to use Rodney King’s phrase, “we can all just get along.” This is also known as the “big tent” approach – if we make the tent of the church big enough, everyone can fit comfortably. But this approach keeps us superficial, and we never wrestle with the meat of what we mean.

The second solution is for us to focus outwardly – to acknowledge our differences but merge our resources for the sake of common mission. It is how progressive-liberal and evangelical-conservative Christians end up rubbing elbows at Habitat for Humanity sites, and at the Peru Connection conference we hosted, and even on our work trip to Ocean Springs, Mississippi. We set aside our differences for the larger good of helping God’s people. It also helps us lay down our arms; it’s much harder to dismiss a co-worker in Christ with whom you’ve labored than it is to bash a category of believers who are strangers. But in the end, I don’t think it’s enough.

The third solution, which I find saddest, has been to give up pretending and just have the church split. Honestly, for two decades I’ve wondered whether the moderate-liberal sections of the mainline churches should all get together, and the evangelical-fundamentalist sections get together, and just call it a day. The tension in the Presbyterian Church (USA) has been so thick you could cut it with a knife, and some of us have wondered, to mix metaphors, if we’re spinning our wheels in vain.

But the truth is that I’m not ready to give up, in part because some of the people I love the most see their faith differently than I do. And, miraculously enough, there is emerging what I think is an inspired way forward. It sounds so obvious that I can hardly say it. The way forward is for us to focus on this: on following Jesus. Yes, that’s right. The liberal church has, if you will, re-discovered Jesus, the Jesus whom evangelicals have loved all along. And this is no small thing. Borg put it this way: that Christians believe that “Jesus is the decisive disclosure of God.” If that is true, and I, of course, believe it is, then learning Jesus, seeing Jesus, loving Jesus, following Jesus is not just *a* way forward, but *the* way forward for all of us. This doesn’t make our differences go away. But it does put us on the

same path. And the work of that path begins with this: how do we come to see clearly, so that we can follow Jesus where he rightly leads us?

I think we find the answer in our Scripture lesson this morning: the story of the healing of the blind man. Listen to the story again. “Some people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand ... and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, ‘Can you see anything?’ And the man looked up and said, ‘I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.’ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.”

Now I have read this story a thousand times, but when I studied it again last Wednesday in our weekly pastors’ Bible study, I saw some things I’d never seen before. After Jesus touches the blind man’s eyes, he asks him, “Can you see anything?” As Patrick Day noticed, the blind man could have just said, “No” – after all, he was only seeing shapes moving around; it would have been a totally legitimate answer. But he doesn’t say no; instead, he focuses on what he *does* see. “I can see people, but they look like trees walking.” And as Gordon Butcher pointed out, the blind man could have just said, “Yes” – after all, he did see some things, and it would have been easy to think that this is all there is. How could the blind man know that the sight he had wasn’t all that was possible? But the blind man gets it – and admits -- that his sight is only partial. And Kent Kinney noticed this: that the blind man didn’t give up on Jesus. When Jesus asks the blind man “can you see anything?” the blind man could have responded, “Well, yes, but not enough, so I’ll go somewhere else and try some other healer.” Instead, the blind man stays with Jesus until his full sight is restored.

Why does this matter? Because that is precisely how almost all of us come to see Jesus clearly. We encounter Jesus for the first time, whether as children or adults, because someone brings us to him. Our parents, or, like the blind man, our friends, bring us to church or to prayer or to a conversation where we meet Jesus. And Jesus reaches out to us, and sooner or later we are changed by that encounter. But the change is not complete right away. Whether we’re raised in a Christian home and come to faith gradually, or even if we have a phenomenal conversion experience, the healing, the transformation wrought by Jesus doesn’t happen all at once. We see a little. We see who Jesus is a little; we see God’s compassion a little; we see the world’s need a little; we see our life purpose a little.

And the question is, what do we do next? Some of us may just give up. Because we don't see everything, we assume this Jesus business is only for romantics, or for those who can recite all the creeds. We may even go through the motions of coming to church, but remain functionally agnostic. And some of us may assume that what we see is all there is to see, that we're completely sure who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him, and we're content with what little we have. We don't even know that our lives can be different, that our church can be different, that our world can be different, because the half-sight is all that we know, and we think that's all that there is. And some of us ... some of us may wander off and keep looking for faith elsewhere. The bookstore shelves are full of options, from classic Buddhism to New Age crystals. And if we think that all that Jesus has to offer is seeing halfway, seeing people like trees walking, then who's to blame us for looking elsewhere.

But my hope and my prayer is this. That we – liberal or conservative, progressive or fundamentalist, old or young – that we, *all* of us, can acknowledge that our faith has helped us see a little bit, and boldly share what we know. And we can humbly acknowledge that we don't see everything yet, for there is still more to see. And we can trust in faith that this Jesus who has touched us has more healing still to offer us, and we are willing to wait for more. This is how we all come to see Jesus clearly ... to see him, and to follow.

We are not the first to wrestle with our faith, nor will we be the last. Let me close then, with a prayer from the 19th century, when all the modern questions of faith began to emerge. Please pray with me this prayer from the English Bishop Ridding. Let us pray.

“In times of doubt and questions,
when our belief is perplexed by new teaching, new thought,
when our faith is strained by creeds, by doctrines, by mysteries
beyond our understanding,
give us the faithfulness of learners,
and the courage of believers in thee;
give us boldness to examine
and faith to trust all truth,
stability to hold fast our tradition
with enlightened interpretation,

to grasp new knowledge
and combine it loyally and honestly with old;
alike from stubborn rejection of new revelation
and from hasty assurance that we are wiser than our Fathers,
save us and help us, O Lord.” Amen.