

THE FAITH OF JESUS
Randall Tremba
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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus went to Capernaum; and on the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue and taught. [A synagogue is not a church or temple; it is more like a meeting house, a place for learning, a kind of community center.] Suddenly a man with an unclean spirit cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

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This morning let's focus on the question: *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?* For whether you have a clean or unclean spirit, or just an inquisitive mind, it's a good question, one that has occupied the minds and hearts of many for 2000 years. *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?* I mean, really, *What does Jesus have to do with us?!* As a matter of fact, it's not easy to know *exactly* who or what Jesus of Nazareth was or is.

I once shook the hand of a man who devoted his entire adult life to that question, to a quest of discovering the historic Jesus of Nazareth behind the written gospels. Although I saw this man in person only once, his books and spirit inspired, informed and transformed me more than any other teacher over the past 25 years. And I know he did the same for many of you.

I'm speaking of Marcus Borg who died January 21 at the age of 72. He was one of my heroes.

Borg spent a lifetime rescuing Jesus from fundamentalists, rescuing Jesus from lofty pedestals and holy shrines in order to reintroduce the real Jesus, a first century Jewish rabbi and prophetic sage, to skeptics like many of us here. Against persistent criticism and hostility, Borg kept the faith, the faith of Jesus, alive and vibrant.

Borg was humble and unassuming; but he was also a bit of a celebrity among progressive Christians. I am not one to quickly shake hands with celebrities—theological or otherwise—but 10 years ago at a two-day conference at Stetson University in Florida, I did go out of my way to shake Marcus Borg's hand and thank him for giving me hope and courage in my work as a pastor and teaching elder.

Today I mourn Marcus Borg's death and celebrate his life, especially his wisdom and courage.

When I learned of his death last week, I immediately purchased and read his last and final book, *Convictions: How I Have Learned What Matters Most*.

It tells of his journey from a dead faith to a living faith; from an old paradigm to a new paradigm, which, as it turns out, is older than the old one. It's a journey many of us have taken, a journey from skepticism and disillusionment to quiet

epiphanies. A journey of learning to see Scripture as poetry rather than mere prose, as metaphor rather than literal, of seeing Christianity not so much as faith *in* Jesus but rather as a movement expressing the faith *of* Jesus, which is to say, radical trust in the God of love and justice.

Over time, through many years, in a persistent, scholarly quest, Borg came to see Jesus as a *revelation* of God, not as God *per se*. Borg, like many of us, came to understand God as a verb not a noun; as process not a finished product; calling us from tomorrow; evolving with us even as we evolve with God. Jesus manifested that One, the Holy One who only asks that we love kindness, do justice and walk humbly with each other.

We are not urged to stand and watch Jesus die for us. Rather we are invited to take up our cross and walk with him to build the land, the world that God has planned where love shines through. Jesus isn't our substitute. Jesus is our companion.

Borg had been a long time professor of religion and culture at Oregon State University. As a lifetime student and scholar of religion, he discovered wisdom in all the world's great religions. No one religion has absolute truth. All reflect and refract a common wisdom. All, he would say, at their best, teach and cultivate compassion and justice.

But Borg ultimately, finally and fully embraced the Christian tradition of his childhood because, as he put it: *better to dig one well 600 feet deep than 10 wells 60 feet deep*. If you dig deep enough in your own religious tradition you are bound to tap the one aquifer that feeds them all. And that got him in trouble with many prominent, literal minded Christian leaders. He was dismissed and denounced by some as a heretic. By the way, if you don't have at least one heretic as your hero, you're missing out on a lot of fun!

If life is a journey, if the way is long and winding and sometimes disappears under our feet, it helps to have a trail guide. Marcus Borg was a trail guide for me and for many of us here. His books, including *Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time* and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* and most especially *The Heart of Christianity*, helped many of us see the way more clearly and walk it more faithfully.

One of his greatest contributions was to reconnect us to a more ancient definition of faith—*faith as an act of trust* rather than *faith as giving mental assent* to propositions, creeds or dogma.

What good is it to say, *I believe in God the Father Almighty Maker of heaven and earth* if we don't trust that love is at the heart of reality?

What good is it to say *Jesus is Lord* if we don't trust that love and love alone is more powerful than any Empire, more powerful than wealth or sword, that love is the rule and ruler of all things and all peoples?

What good is it to say *Jesus is our Savior* if we don't trust that love and love alone will save us from fear, greed, violence and bigotry?

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?

It's still a good question. And part of the answer is this: Jesus was all about healing, healing here and now, in and with the power of God, which is to say, the power of Love within our own hearts.

Borg helped us see that believing at it's root means loving. *Faith is about loving God and all that God loves. The Christian life is about loving God and all that God loves. Faith is our love for God. Faith is the way of the heart.*

Borg, more than anyone else, helped me reclaim *the faith of Jesus*, a faith that is trust in God's amazing grace and love. It's a faith that gives us courage to boldly practice compassion, kindness and justice. Marcus Borg helped many of us claim the faith of Jesus, the faith of Jesus that welcomes all to the Table and into the community of the Beloved.

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HYMN
All Are Welcome