

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**February 1, 2015; the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany**

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28.

### **Marcus Borg, Jesus, and Christianity**

He taught as one with authority...then there was...a man with an unclean spirit, and he 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!"

And the spirit does comes out, and the people are impressed, asking "What is this? A new teaching---with authority!"

What is this, indeed?

I wonder what Marcus Borg would say about the Jesus we meet here?

On January 21, 2015, Marcus Borg died, but he will live on through his many books, his many students, and his various modes of teaching, which touched so many over the years...our 8:45am adult

education class recently finished a DVD of Borg and his colleague in the *Jesus Seminar*, Dominic Crossan, in which they taught about Jesus, his time and how his message was received in that context long ago.

I remember my excitement, when I was in my first year of seminary in 1997, when I learned that Marcus Borg would be coming to campus to give a talk or it might have even been to participate in a debate of sorts with one of our seminary professors.

I was excited to see him in person because his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, was an important contribution to my Christian education before seminary, and enabled me, as it for many others, to be able to relate to Jesus in a new and fresh way.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Borg, Marcus J. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & The Heart of Contemporary Faith*. HarperCollins EPub, 2009, original publication date, 1994, HarperCollins.

Growing up, I, like many others, had heard about Jesus primarily from the fundamentalist preachers on TV and the street corners, and such an understanding as they gave, kept me out of church for a long time.

Marcus Borg was part of the *Jesus Seminar*, which formed in 1985, a group of scholars who met to learn as much as they could about the 'historical Jesus' the Jesus of history, and to share their findings with others.

They did things that really upset some, such as voting on what Jesus actually said versus what the Bible presents.

That sort of thing gets some people really upset.

But for many of us here, and so many others, Borg opened up the Gospels for us.

What I especially loved about Marcus Borg were qualities that I did not see as much in others associated in the *Jesus Seminar*, such as humility in the face of the mystery of God, love for God, and a deep spirituality that exuded faith and peace.

He was a fabulous writer and a brilliant man.

This weekend I reread parts of his book, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power---And How They Can Be Restored*.

For everyone who wants our church to grow, and to know what we are dealing with, the lack of understanding among so many about words we use without much thought -- the clarity of Borg's writing can be a huge help.

Consider our reading from Mark's Gospel.

We hear about the authority of Jesus in the reading.

And we see Jesus dealing with what is evil.

Authority is a word that when paired with Jesus might bring to mind the sort of framework of understanding that Borg refers to in the book, *Speaking Christian*, as a "heaven-and-hell" framework.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Borg, Marcus J. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power---And How They Can Be Restored*. HarperCollins EPub., 2011, p. 9 of 238.

Borg defines a framework as, “large interpretive contexts that shape the meaning of words.”<sup>3</sup>

This is a way of thinking that was taught to many growing up, and is still taught and emphasized in some churches...that the primary reason to be a Christian is to avoid hell by believing in Jesus, and that God has the authority to send us to hell if we somehow do not get that right.

Borg states that when he was twelve, if asked “What is Christianity about? Why should people be Christian?”

He would have said, he tells us, “Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven, if we believe in him.”<sup>4</sup>

Borg states that the heaven-and-hell framework has four central elements: the afterlife, sin and forgiveness, Jesus’s dying for our sins, and believing.”<sup>5</sup>

I wish that I could give you all the ways that Borg challenges this framework be reexamining the words most associated with the framework...but to give one, “redeemer, redeem, and redemption.”

I choose this one because someone asked me what I meant in saying that “God is the redeemer of history” as I did in last Sunday’s blessing. In the blessing I was using that word, in part, as a way to identify the 2nd

Person of the Trinity, as in Father, Son, Holy Spirit, the second being the Son, but also to state something about the nature of God’s love for us.

Borg states that these words, redeemer, redeem, “now [for many] refer to Jesus as the redeemer who redeems us from our sins and brings about our redemption.

But in the Bible, these words are not about being saved from sin, but about being set free from slavery.”<sup>6</sup>

And in using that word as part of the blessing last Sunday, I intended to give that sense of God who sets us free from the negative aspects of our past; we can be enslaved by our past or the past, but God, and, I would say, Jesus, is all about setting us free

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

and moving us in to a grace-filled future through our  
deepening relationship with God, which  
enables us to be about justice and  
freedom and healing in our world  
today.

Some of this is subtle.

You really need to read the whole book.

But to share one more morsel from Borg on this matter: "...the point is that  
the common heaven-and-hell framework is like a black hole that  
sucks the meaning of Christian language into it, changing and  
distorting it."<sup>7</sup>

So to go back to the authority of Jesus as presented to us.

How do we see that authority expressed here, and what does that mean  
for us...what does the authority of Jesus have to offer us...can we  
even know Jesus outside of the heaven-and-hell framework?

I believe that we can.

Mark is presenting Jesus and the one who has the power to transform and  
to heal.

And this new authority that they see in Jesus, is not the sort of authority that  
demands our devotion, but rather engenders devotion; this is the  
authority of the One who sets us free...and as we come to learn  
more about Jesus, we learn that it is through his  
vulnerability that Jesus has authority...in his giving of  
himself, not as demanded by an angry Father-  
God because of our sins, but because  
God loves us so much.

This new teaching that Jesus brings is that, "...all things demonic are on  
their way out...no oppressive boundary will stand...readers of Mark  
are invited to follow Jesus into a whole new world...."<sup>8</sup> so notes  
Gary Charles in his commentary in *Feasting on the Word*.

Marcus Borg has and would encourage us to consider this account beyond

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 1, Advent Through Transfiguration*. Westminster John Knox Press, Epub., 2008. Gary W. Charles, "Exegetical Perspective," Loc 11203 - 11224 of 16650.

literalism and to take an approach that Borg terms, *historical-metaphorical*...historical means setting biblical and Christian language in their ancient historical context. What did these words mean in and for the ancient communities that used them?

“The question is no longer simply, “What does the Bible say?” as if that would settle everything. Rather the question becomes, “Given what their words meant for their then, what might they mean for our now?”<sup>9</sup>

And what does Borg mean by metaphorical, “According to a metaphorical interpretation, the exodus [for example] is about the human condition as marked by bondage to the lords who rule this world, and about God’s passion that we be liberated from bondage and embark on a journey that leads...to the promised land.”<sup>10</sup>

The same could be said for our account in Mark’s Gospel today, this story shows us what following Jesus can mean for our lives.

I’ve often thought and preached that when we are celebrating the Eucharist, during the words concerning the wine, “Drink this, all of you: This is my blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>11</sup>

That those words contain even more than what the word “sins” bring to mind...we might also add or think, shed for you and for many for the healing of the world.

We remember and give thanks for Marcus Borg today. In the words of our Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori about Marcus: “His teaching and writing led countless numbers of people into deeper and more authentic relationship with the Holy One. His gifts of insight, profound faith, and the ability to show others the path will be greatly missed.”<sup>12</sup>

In his last book, *Convictions*, Borg, wrote, “Imagine that Christianity is about loving God.

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<sup>9</sup> Borg. *Speaking Christian*, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, p. 363.

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<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2015/01/22/rip-marcus-borg-theologian-and-historical-jesus-expert-dies-at-72/>

Imagine that it is not about the self and its concerns....<sup>13</sup>

Our relationship with the Bible and our faith should expand our minds and our hearts, and lift our spirits so as to be about God's work in the world. ---knowing and loving God, who is with us...the God, Jesus showed us, who has the power to overcome all that possess or oppresses us, so that rather than being limited, we can have the life for which God created us, and have it abundantly. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*