

## “Faith: The Way of the Heart”

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Today is a day to talk about faith. For those of you who do not know, we, in this congregation, are in the process of reading a book called “The Heart of the Christian Faith” by Marcus Borg. The reading this week dealt with the issues of faith and how we think about and live our faith. So, I want to begin by saying that what is sort of obvious is that all of us, ALL OF US, are here on a journey of faith and all of us have arrived here this morning at this very moment. We have all come from a different place; that is, spiritually speaking, we are not where we were, say, 5 or 10 years ago or even sometime less. We are somewhere different in our faith journey.

For some of us, that faith journey has been, relatively speaking, a smooth journey. God’s presence has sort of felt like it has been with us for the entirety of our journey. For others of us, the journey has been bumpy; that is, some of us like to wander off into the wilderness and we find our way back from the wilderness, and we wander again into the wilderness. Our journey can be a bumpy journey, but all of us on one level or another have been on a journey of faith, so today we grapple with what does faith look like—what does it mean to be on a faith journey?

Basically, how I understand faith as a simple definition is to say that faith is walking with God in some sort of relationship. Faith is walking with the divine in some sort of relationship. My experience is that the relationship piece is open for different interpretations. Some of us are in a relationship with God and a faith journey that is conversational; that is, we’ve talked with God, we continue to talk with God. We talk with God through prayer. We talk with God through Scripture, through worship, through reading, through learning. We are in a constant conversation with God.

I remember back to that great 1977 movie “O, God!” with George Burns and John Denver. If you haven’t seen it, I recommend you go see it. John Denver was this unassuming manager of a grocery store, and George Burns played the role of God, coming to announce to John Denver that he would be the new Moses and that he would be leading contemporary people back to God which made for a hilarious comedy. But I especially remember one of George Burns’ quotes from that movie. As God, he says, “Anybody who could turn Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt, incinerate Sodom and Gomorrah and make it rain for 40 days and 40 nights has got to be a fun guy!” That was a movie about conversation with God.

So, some of us are conversing with God. Some of us are in a relationship with God that is antagonistic. We are in a perpetual argument, or at least, a heated discussion. Where are you, God? What do you look like? Why aren’t you making yourself known to me? Speak to me louder, God. Somehow show up!

A wonderful movie for this sort of conversation, this antagonistic conversation, is a movie by the name of “The Apostle” with Robert Duvall as a charismatic southern country preacher, getting together a church in southern Louisiana. One scene in this movie is of a second floor window in a house, a big, southern-style home, where you can see someone walking back and forth, and you can hear the argument. The argument, of course, is Robert Duvall as the pastor arguing with God, “Show me a sign, God! Tell me what I’m to be doing. Tell me if I’m doing things right! I’m trying to be faithful!” And it is this glorious argument that he’s having with God. I’ve seen that movie a number of times, and every time I come to that scene I say to myself, “I wish I had the chutzpah to argue with God like that.” So some of us are in an antagonistic relationship with God. We are here but we’re arguing.

Some of us are in a relationship with God that is based on denial. We are sort of denying that God is really present in our lives. We are just going to keep God out any way we can, because if God gets in our lives, we might have to not do our own agenda; so we're going to deny that God is actually present in our lives and pursue our own way of living, so we deny saying "God is not really a part of my life".

The final relationship is the relationship that is based in mutual silence--I'm not listening to God. God's not particularly talking to me.

Millard Fuller, the creator of Habitat for Humanity, was in a silent relationship with God for a while. If you don't know the story of Millard Fuller, at age 29, he became a millionaire. He was making money hand over fist as a lawyer and businessman, and he ended up wealthy but with his life going nowhere. His marriage was falling apart. He didn't know what he believed. There was chaos in his family. God was not really talking, he thought. He and his wife, Linda, ended up riding around in a taxicab in New York wondering what they were going to do. Were they going to salvage the marriage? Where they going to change their lives? They decided to give it all away and start building houses for the poor. God was not talking to them, allegedly, and then God started to intervene in their conscience to start one of the great Christian ministries of our time.

When we think we are in a relationship where God is not talking to us, just wait. God will be talking. So, some of us are conversing, some of us are arguing, some of us are denying, and some of us are just not hearing God at all, but one way or another, we are all in this journey of faith. We are all in some sort of conversation with the Divine. Even Atheists, I would argue, are in some sort of conversation with the Divine because if you talk to an Atheist who thinks he's got it all figured out, the first question you've got to ask him is "Tell me about this God you don't believe in" and they will tell you all about it! So we are all in conversation with God.

In Borg's book, he is talking about the meaning of faith. Faith comes out of conversation. He says there are four primary meanings of faith. The first is (He's using Latin terms to talk about faith): faith as "assensus" which is faith as belief, giving one's mental assent to a proposition, believing the correct things about faith, believing that a claim or statement is true. Part of faith is believing in certain things and, of course, what Borg gets at is that, if just believing in a list of things, maybe that doesn't take us too far, but he comes around to say this: There are three foundational beliefs in the Christian faith, three components that we must believe to be within the Christian tradition.

The first is that, being a Christian means affirming the reality of God, affirming that there is a higher power in this world, that there is a force in the universe that is working in our lives, believing that, yes, there is this bigness to the world that is beyond us.

The second component of Christian faith, according to Borg, is that, bringing down this bigness, tapering it in to realize that Christian faith means believing in the utter centrality of Jesus which is to say that Jesus is the lens through which we come to understand the bigger reality of God. Jesus is a particular lens of the Christian faith through which we have come to understand the bigger question of God, the higher power.

Third, the Christian faith means affirming the centrality of the Bible. We believe in God. We believe that Jesus is central to our faith, and we believe in the centrality of the Bible—that it is a foundational document, it is an identity-producing document, it is the narrative through which we ground our lives. He will go on to the Bible in later chapters to talk about that, and to say that we believe in the Bible is to open up a huge can of worms, so we believe we have beliefs.

Borg says one of the meanings of faith is through “fiducia”, the Latin word for trust. Fiducia is a foundational trust in God. Faith as trust, he says, is like floating on the water, floating in the ocean, and if you are in a pool, ocean, or wherever you happen to be, and you are calm and relaxed, you float. If you thrash around and panic, you drown. Faith as trust is about being calm in the waters of life, that there is a buoyancy to God in our world that keeps us floating above, keeps us sort of comfortable but if we panic (and the opposite of trust is anxiety), our faith can be threatened. We can sink. We can drown. Faith as trust is critical to our journey, staying above of the water.

A third meaning of faith which Borg lifts up is “fidelitas”, which is faith as fidelity. It means loyalty, allegiance, commitment of the self at its deepest level. It is the commitment of the heart, so that we have a relationship that is not unlike a marriage, but is based on fidelity. The opposite of fidelity is adultery. Borg, of course, is not talking about the sexual aspect of adultery, but he’s talking about what it means when we cheat on God.

I often think of the Ten Commandments one of which is “Never take the Lord’s name in vain”, and we’ve thought sometimes that it means don’t say “God damn it” or words like that, don’t swear, but what it actually means is, it gets into the issue of fidelity and it means don’t make claims about God, and claims about your life and live otherwise. Don’t say you believe in Jesus and love and mercy and all that stuff, then act differently. So, faith as fidelity means being honest to God, and honest in our relationship with God. Adultery and idolatry are the opposites of faithfulness to God.

Now, I’ve shared this story with some of you about the final dinner at our seminary when our class graduated. In the class of 1996, we had a final dinner and we were privileged to hear how Hale Schroer, the Dean of Students, preached to us that night. The story that he told in that sermon (It’s the only piece of the sermon I can remember), the centerpiece of that sermon, gets at this issue of faith. He said “You have all now passed the courses. You have all now written the papers. You have come through your oral exams. You have done the field education. But when you get in the local church, all of that is going to be marginal to your success.” It will help, but the question that we grapple with when we graduate from seminary, and the question that we all grapple with in our faith journey, and as he put to us that night is “Do you love Jesus? Do you, with your heart, love Jesus?” “Because if you don’t,” he said to us, “you will not make good pastors because people need to know that Jesus can be loved and lived, so if you have straight A’s in seminary (which I did not), it doesn’t matter because, what matters is that you love Jesus, you love God, you live as a person of faith. That’s what is going to get you through and help you to be a faithful pastor and help all of us to be faithful Christians.” It is a question which is heavy and central to our faith, so, faith as fidelity, as allegiance, is critical.

The last piece that Borg lifts up is this idea of faith as “visio”, which is faith as seeing. How we see the whole of life is critical to our faith journey. He puts down there in his book 3 ways of seeing the whole of life and the whole of the world. He says one way is to see the world is as threatening and frightening. Do we live our lives based on the day’s terror alert?

If you remember, in the wake of “9/11”, every day was a red alert day or orange alert day or yellow alert day. It was like we couldn’t live without the terror alert of the day. What a way to live. That is not a way to live. That’s a way to die. So, one way to look at the world is through terror—through frightful living, being scared, being intimidated by all that is going on out there. That’s one way.

A second way, Borg says, is to look at the world as simply indifferent, that the world is indifferent to human action and human passion, that the world just sort of “is” and if the world just sort of “is”, then we must look out for ourselves. Who is going to get us through a world that just “is”? Well, WE'RE going to do that. We're going to take care of our OWN. We're going to be self-centered.

The third perspective that Borg lifts up is seeing the world as life-giving and nourishing. Is the light of God everywhere and prevailing? Is goodness going to finally overcome evil? That is the testimony of Jesus. We are to be people of the Light. We are to see God in everything—God in the sun, God in the flowers, God in the face of our neighbor, God in our children, so how we see the world has tremendous implications for how we live our faith, and as people of faith, we are to find ways to affirm that God is the God of Light, that there is goodness going on everywhere around us. Yes, there is pain and there is struggle, and there is crime, and there is this and there is that, but in the end, what we are really to see is God in the midst of it all.

Etty Hillesum was a young Danish Jew during WWII. She died at Auschwitz. She was 29 years old. She wrote a book about her experience in that time. The book's title is “An Interrupted Life”. If you read that book you read about Etty in Auschwitz communing with God, seeing God in her fellow prisoners, seeing God at work in that most dark moment of history. She even writes about loving her guard, a Nazi guard who, in the end, would control her life and send her off to die. She talked about loving her guard. She was talking about God's Light being present even in the darkest moments. So, how we see the world has tremendous implications for how we live as people of faith.

We are people of beliefs. We are people of trust. We are people of loyalty and allegiance to God, and we are people of vision. What we say in our faith journey is that God is alive. God is moving. God is working. God is Light. God is love. God is in me. God is in you. God is in everything. So, faith is about finding ways to interact with that Light, finding ways to bring God's Light up in our lives, finding ways to let God's Light wash out into the world, upon all people, finding ways to share God's love with one another. So, it is how we see the world. It is what we trust in. It is what we have faith in. It is what we believe. We, as people of faith, go on this journey. We go on it together, and we strengthen one another in our journey. We are all at different points in that journey. We are all where we need to be. God is continuing to push us forward, and that is a glorious, glorious experience. God is alive, working in our lives, working in our church, working in the world, and we give thanks to God for that faith journey. Amen.

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