

The Heart in a Time of Change

The Heart of Christianity 1

Psalms 16

Chapter 1, The Heart of Christianity

Today we begin a sermon series for the season of Easter. I am using the book “The Heart of Christianity” by Marcus Borg as our contemporary reading each week. Marcus Borg is probably most famous for his work with the Jesus Seminar which was a group of biblical scholars who intently looked at trying to recover the historical Jesus from the layers of Christian tradition. His work has led to some amazing and profound insights that have challenged and inspired Christians across the theological spectrum.

Along with our scriptural text each week, we will use Borg’s insight into the challenges of 21st century American Christianity as a place to ponder the core issues of faith – the heart of our faith. What does it mean to be a Christian? For some of us, even the word, “Christian,” has been tainted as a word associated with narrow-mindedness, meanness or hurt. For others of us being a Christian is finding a sense of peace and centeredness. Our reading from Psalm 16 reflects this understanding of being in relationship with God. For other people, being a Christian means having the right beliefs – believing the right doctrines or creeds. Still others speak of their faith in terms of personal righteousness or right behaviors. Although all of these viewpoints touch on some aspect of Christianity today, Borg suggests that the heart of Christianity is loving God and all that God loves. How we live that faith out is what Borg calls our paradigm – the context in which our lives make sense.

It has been my observation for the last fifty or so years that we take our paradigms very seriously. We may not even know what a paradigm is or how to define our own **but we take them very seriously**. Denominations are created around a paradigm – including our own. Congregations split over paradigms. Growing up in Alabama we used to joke that Baptists were the only denomination that could multiply by dividing. I’ve since learned that the Baptists have no corner on that market. Friends cease to be friends because of paradigms. These are powerful constructs. If we

don't acknowledge they exist, they continue to interrupt our relationships and effectiveness. When we do acknowledge them, then they raise questions about how to be in community together with people who are shaped by a different paradigm.

Many of us grew up in the tradition of our families. We went to churches that taught us about God. It felt like what we learned must be the "right" way because it worked for us – until it didn't. When some of us discovered that the way life is supposed to be didn't include a version that looked like "me" it often caused a paradigm shift – a crisis of faith – where we had to struggle with the traditions or assumptions we were given. Those of us who have come out on the other end of that crisis now see how even in the struggle God provided a gift. We learned not to hold ideas and concepts too tightly because our journey with God continues to unfold. As Borg says, faith is "an unending conversation." [Being a Christian is not just about the destination, it is also about the journey.](#)

So how do we figure out what is central to who we are and how we live as people of faith? There are lots of answers to that question and sometimes I know it is confusing. Here's one way to put it in perspective. [\[Video: What's In Your Heart?\]](#)

Like the video says, some of us are afraid to look that deeply into our lives. We're not sure what we'll find or we're not sure we'll know what to do with what we find. Anyone who has struggled with doubt or fear or unresolved feelings knows the quandary of searching one's heart. **But here is the thing you can trust without hesitation – in your heart – at the core of who you are, at the center of your being – is God.** That core may be caked with layers of muck or residue or bitterness or fear or abuse. But underneath all of that is the presence of God. [You were created in the image of God out of the essence of pure love.](#) No matter the human interventions that have occurred since your creation, at your core, you are God's. That's what grace means. When we forget this, life becomes confusing.

We all bring our traditions, our histories, our assumptions, our biases, our fears. We sometimes look at each other and we miss each other's heart because of the distractions of all this other stuff swirling around in our lives or our world. So, this Easter season, we are going to spend some time getting to know our own hearts and working to know the hearts of each other.

Why is this important? Firstly, because in our heart is what is ultimately true about us. The video said it is our eternity. I would say it is what is "more than truth" about you. The presence of God within you goes much further than the simple facts of your life – the data of your existence. The presence of God within you creates a unique experience and expression of God's creative glory and strength. There is none other like you. We sing that about Jesus, so we should also look for how that presence is reflected in who we are as well.

So each Sunday during this season of Easter we will explore the various aspects of the heart of our faith – how we understand God, how we read the Bible, how we might clear away the muck that hides our hearts from ourselves and each other. After worship each week I will facilitate a discussion time in the chapel. You'll have a chance to ask questions about the book or about the sermon. You'll have an opportunity to share your own experiences with how the topic resonates with you. But mostly what I want us to be able to do during these discussion times is to discover ways to engage each other's hearts. We will do our bests to dismiss the distractions. You don't have to agree with the book. I hope you will use it as a tool to think about your own faith journey. You don't have to believe like someone else believes, just be aware of why your beliefs are important to you and why others hold important beliefs. But mainly I want us to learn what it means to be community together – believing as we do, coming just as we are, holding our pasts, presents and futures in tandem and looking to see what is God doing with all of this as we grow, learn, change and serve.

If we can do this, I believe we will not only discover some amazing things about the faith journey of the people around us but also that we will learn new things about God that we will want to incorporate in our

individual journey. The end result is that all of us deepen our connection to the presence of God that makes the journey worth taking.

Sources:

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