

DON'T KNOW NOTHING

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Second Sunday of Lent, March 1, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Is No. 3 in a Sermon Series on Modern Mystics and Spiritual Leaders

By modern, I refer to religious masters of the 20th and 21st Centuries, who are perhaps still living or who may have achieved their eminence at least within the last several hundred years.

Marcus J. Borg died just a month ago at the age of 72. He was an important, indeed a monumental, figure in theology, as well as a major influence in scholarship related to the historical Jesus. He was a New Testament theologian by trade, spending most of his career at Oregon State University in the Religion Department, where he became Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture.

From Astrophysics to Dr. of Philosophy

Having decided early in his education to major in math and physics, Borg had originally planned to be an astrophysicist but then switched his major to political science and philosophy. He later earned a master's degree in theology and a doctorate in philosophy at Oxford University in England.

To give you a feeling for the esteem in which he was held, Borg was the national chairman for the historical Jesus section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Perhaps most famously, he was one of the more

publicly outspoken members of the Jesus Seminar, which examined the historicity of the sayings of Jesus.

Author or Coauthor of 21 Books

Borg wrote or coauthored 21 books, many with his longtime personal friend, John Dominic Crossan, a Roman Catholic priest. In addition, quite a few of them have been translated into eleven foreign languages. Notable among these books, many of which are best-sellers, are:

Jesus: A New Vision (1987); *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994); *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (1997); *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (1999); *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (2001); *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (2003); *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (2006); *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* (2006); *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth* (2007); *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored* (2011); and *Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most* (2014).

Digging up a Tribute to Borg

When Marcus Borg passed away on January 21, 2015, I knew then and there that I wanted to do a sermon based upon his contributions to our faith. In my research I was looking on the Internet in the hope that his eulogy would be posted. That often happens for famous people, and they can be wonderful to read. In a eulogy people sometimes come out and say forthrightly what they want to say, rather than filtering it through political correctness or academic jargon.

But no eulogy was available, perhaps because he hadn't yet been buried. (The interment will happen later in March.) But I did find a tribute written about him by Philip Clayton, one of my favorite teachers from San Francisco, where I carried out my doctoral program. Clayton hit the mark right on the head.

I will address that tribute a little later in this sermon, but first I would like to provide you with some perspicacious excerpts from Borg's own writings:

From “*The God We Never Knew*,” op cit.

“The Christian life is not about pleasing God the finger-shaker and judge. It is not about believing now or being good now for the sake of heaven later. It is about entering a relationship in the present that begins to change everything now. Spirituality is about this process: The opening of the heart to the God who is already here.”

From “*The God We Never Knew*,” op cit.

“Our central problem is not sin and guilt, as it is within the monarchical model. For the Spirit model, our central problem is ‘estrangement,’ whose specific meaning of ‘separated from that to which one belongs’ is most appropriate. . . . For the monarchical model, sin is primarily disloyalty to the king, seen especially as disobedience to his laws. The metaphors used to express the Spirit model suggest something else. For the metaphor of God as lover, sin is unfaithfulness – that is, sin is going after other lovers.”

From “*Reading the Bible Again For the First Time*,” op cit.

“The way of Jesus is thus not a set of beliefs about Jesus. That people ever thought it was is strange, when we think about it – as if one entered new life by believing certain things to be true, or as if the only people who can be saved are those who know the word ‘Jesus.’ Thinking that way virtually amounts to salvation by syllables.

“Rather, the way of Jesus is the way of death and resurrection – the path of transition and transformation from an old way of being to a new way of being. To use the language of incarnation that is so central to John, Jesus incarnates the way. Incarnation means embodiment. Jesus is what the way embodied in a human life looks like.”

From “*Speaking Christian*,” op cit.

“So, is there an afterlife, and if so, what will it be like? I don’t have a clue. But I am confident that the one who buoyed us up in life will also buoy us up through death. We die into God. What more that means, I do not know. But that is all I need to know.”

In Philip Clayton’s Tribute to Marcus Borg at His Death, He Made Four Points:

Borg was hopelessly Jesus-centric.

“Nothing in the history of Christianity or its present-day institutions could turn him away from this Jesus – not the great ideas and theologies of intellectuals, not the debates over the historicity of the New Testament, not the frustrating trivialities of bureaucratic functionaries. If the entire institutional side of the Christian church should go down in flames, Borg’s faith would be untouched.”

Borg described a God worth believing in.

“He was a panentheist: God is immanent in the world, as the world is immanent in God. The rest of the metaphysical debates about the divine went into the ‘optional’ category for him.”

Borg’s unencumbered Christianity didn’t negate other religions and spiritual paths.

“Love is not a zero-sum game. Following Jesus is not first about pro-

positions, stacking up true ones on your side and attacking the false propositions of your enemies. Humility is the natural result of a Christian faith built around Jesus’ radical way of compassion first, with everything else a distant second.”

Borg knew that we have to pare Christianity back down to the basics – or else.

“The age of Christian empire has passed – thank God.

“Rather, and actually with an almost opposite emphasis, he taught humility. His understanding of God was such that to say one has a grip on it is just absurd. It’s like saying that ten or a hundred or even a thousand has a feel for infinity.

“He was known to say, in a literal sense, about God, that ‘We don’t know nothing.’ Generally we use that phrase figuratively, and insultingly, as in ‘That kid so dumb he don’t know nuthin.’ But here he means it literally. We certainly don’t know everything about God. We don’t even know a lot, but ‘We don’t know nothing.’ We do happen to know a couple of things.”

Let’s Get Personal for a Moment

But that’s a lot of theory, a lot of theology. [Ed.: And a little bit of grammar if you’ve got the double negative, which actually backs up Borg’s humor, surprisingly enough.] Let’s get personal for a moment. Brian McClaren told a story that I found wonderful.

Effusive Comments Bring Brian Back

He had been part of a panel discussion attended by hundreds of people. The three on the panel were Brian (pastor and theologian), Diana Butler Bass (modern church historian), and Marcus Borg (theologian). After the panel discussion, the three speakers went to a book-signing area. Brian writes:

“Immediately after that panel, lines formed with people asking Diana, Marcus, and me to sign their books. My line, being the least popular, left me standing there somewhat awkwardly for long periods, but it also gave me the chance to eavesdrop on what people were saying to Marcus. Person after person said almost the same words, ‘If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be a Christian today.’ ‘I dropped out of church but came back after I read one of your books.’ ‘I’m still a Christian because of you.’ ‘I became a Christian because of your books.’

“Their effusive comments brought me back to the Evangelical revival meetings of my childhood, where people ‘testify’ to how they were ‘saved,’ how they once were blind but now see, how they saw the light and were born again. I remember thinking to myself, ‘Well, it turns out that Marcus Borg is an evangelist too, just in another way and to another community of people.’”

Or take, for example, what another United Church of Christ pastor, Becca Girrell, wrote:

That’s not a God I Can Believe in

“My theological problem had always been very simple. I don’t like what most churches say about God.

“So much of what traditional churches teach is about how we need Jesus, and Jesus is so good and loving because God-as-creator is so abusive and mean. God-as-creator made people and gave them free will and constructed a system of God’s own justice, wherein those beautiful ones, created in the divine image, cannot receive forgiveness without blood, suffering, and death.

“That’s not a god I could or can believe in, let alone preach.

“Borg completely reexplained Jesus as the sacrificial lamb in a way that removes substitutionary atonement from the equation, makes for a much more powerful statement of belief, challenges the systems of sin and forgiveness that require sacrifices in the first place, and is historically valid as a bonus.”

God in Heaven and Everywhere Is Panentheism & Orthodox Christianity

For me, Art Suggs, however, the issue is this:

- Look at that line in our church’s Statement of Oneness: “*The scrip-*

tures declare that the entire kingdom of heaven is within us. Also, we live our lives immersed in divinity. We gather to celebrate that sacred and wondrous truth,” For me, those lines are of critical importance.

- Now compare that with this statement from Borg: “We learned, in the opening words of ‘The Lord’s Prayer,’ that God is ‘in heaven.’ But we also learned that God is everywhere – that is, omnipresent. When one combines the two, the result is panentheism. It is orthodox Christian theology.” (Borg, *Convictions*, op cit.)
- Panentheism! You might not even have heard of this word. Pantheism (without the “en”) is where you might imagine an equal sign between God and the universe or the cosmos or the whole shebang. God = cosmos. Panentheism (with the “en”) is a variation on that theme where the universe, cosmos, etc. is IN God. The world, particularly the material world, which so dominates our

attention, is a subset of that entity we call divinity. I consider myself to be a panentheist.

- As a pastor, but mostly just as a person, I want a God I can believe in, let alone preach about. I can’t tell you how weary I am of the finger-pointing, sexist, racist, homophobic, angry God promoted in so many churches. Borg and theologians like him, who are now many, are articulating for you and me a sense of divinity that is not an affront to science, not an affront to those of other faiths, to the secular humanist, to the agnostic and atheist.
- Being a panentheist makes preaching fun again! Judgemental theology is not just mean, pessimistic, and judgemental! It’s also boring. This new vision of faith, scriptures, and divinity has potential. Finally something worthy! Something capable of ushering humanity into a new era.

Amen.