

REDISCOVERING FAITH



Scripture:

Psalm 111

¹Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. ²Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. ³Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. ⁴He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. ⁵He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. ⁶He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. ⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. ⁸They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. ⁹He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. ¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

¹Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ²Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³but anyone who loves God is known by him.

⁴Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as in fact there are many gods and many lords — ⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

⁸“Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. ¹²But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



REDISCOVERING FAITH

The Apostle Paul is wrestling with some challenges in this passage from First Corinthians. He seems to be thinking out loud as this is written.

First, he humbles those who might boast of having much knowledge. That is so interesting since Paul was admired for being highly educated from a University in Tarsus and studied under a revered Rabbi of that era at a school in Jerusalem. But the knowledge that is important, Paul says, is the knowledge of God.

Although he seems somewhat concerned about the influence the pagans have on the newly formed Christian community, he seems quite tolerant of them and just emphasizes that although they worship many gods we worship the One God.

Then he decides to address the concern that the food offered up to idols should not be consumed by those who don't believe in idol worship.

Paul basically says that you won't be better or worse off if you do or don't eat this type of food. Paul has been working hard to help new Christ followers understand they don't need to follow their traditional Jewish laws about eating and living in general. However, if they confuse the faithful who watch them eat food left over from idol worship, then they are instructed to not risk leading the new Christians astray. Basically he is telling them to be conscious of what kind of role models they are for the community.

WE ARE ROLE MODELS

That's a lesson for all of us, isn't it? What behavior do you show to others that might not reflect so well on being a Christ follower? Do you present to the world in your actions what a Christian looks like wherever you go? I try to remind myself of this daily.

Have you seen those t-shirts that say, "This is what sixty looks like"? (Or Evelyn Radinuch's t-shirt that says, "It took me ninety-five years to look this good!") Have you ever seen a t-shirt that says, "This is what a Christian looks like"? You would have to be pretty sure of yourself to wear one of those. But maybe, just maybe we should all get one when we join the church. That is what we are basically signing up for, isn't it:

- to follow Christ's way of being in the world
- to do our best to show the world the gospel of Jesus in action

- to show what the love of God, ourselves and love of our neighbors looks like.

**Yes, that is your calling:
To show the world in all our actions in all
places what the love of God looks like,
feels like, and acts like.
It's a big responsibility isn't it?**

WHY CHURCHES GROW OR DIE

I enjoy reading about what helps a church grow and flourish and what can go wrong that seems to allow churches to gradually die. Overall, the top reasons for churches failing involve the actions of the people inside.

On a church management website called Best Ministry Practices, they listed the survey results of the top ten reasons why people switch churches or stop going at all. These are the top answers:

1. The church was not helping me to develop spiritually. (28%)
2. I did not feel engaged in meaningful church work (20%)
3. Church members were judgmental of others (18%)
4. Pastor was not a good preacher (16%)
5. Too many changes happening in the church (16%)
6. Members seemed hypocritical (15%)
7. Church didn't seem to be a place where God was at work (14%)
8. Church run by a clique that discouraged others getting involved (14%)
9. Pastor was judgmental of others (14%)
10. Pastor seemed hypocritical (13%)

Do you see a pattern in these? Six out of the ten involved church members or pastors being hypocritical, judgmental, or discouraging involvement of new people.

Those survey results are authentic. People often come to church to be nurtured and made whole again after a rough week of work. But they don't return the next Sunday after they have heard gossip, felt tension, or observed other negative non-Christ-like behaviors in the church.

CHRIST-LIKE BEHAVIOR

In the Presbyterian Church, you don't have to worry about your diet, what prayers you say each day, or how many times you received communion this year. But, you *are* called to try to be Christ-like here and in your personal lives on a daily basis.

One of the ways to show your Christ-like behavior is to venture, like Paul did, into territory that takes you out of your comfort zone and into a new place where you can show Christ's love in a new way. For example, you could go on the Haiti trip coming up in May, or enable someone else to go on the Haiti trip if you physically are unable to go.

Another way to show Christ-like behavior is to reach out and intentionally make a friend of someone who is somehow different from you. Think about this. How many of your friends have a different skin color or a different socio-economic status?

Paul showed the new Christians in Corinth how to engage with members of their community, not isolate away from them.

EPIPHANY

We are still in the church season of Epiphany. Alan Brehm, a Presbyterian pastor in Nebraska, believes the good news of Epiphany is that wherever we are, God is there, drawing us into the joy of God's life and love. Reflecting on our passage in Corinthians, he said, "It seems to me that the God who is always there, wherever we are, does not call us to isolation, but to engagement. The God for whom all space is sacred calls us not to withdraw but to reach out. The God for whom no one is beyond the scope of mercy and love calls us not to retreat behind barriers, but to take our faith out into our world full of diversity. And the same God promises to be with us everywhere that calling takes us."

MARCUS BORG

Last week the world lost a famous theologian, Marcus Borg, who agrees with this encouragement to reach out. He wrote twenty-one books but one of my favorites is "*The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*." The book's subtitle is "*How We Can Be Passionate Believers Today*." Borg discusses the Early Paradigm and the Emerging Paradigm of the Christian faith. A

paradigm is a large interpretive framework that shapes how everything is seen, a comprehensive way of seeing. And he says Christianity has the ability to transform people at the heart level; hence his book title.

In the last chapter of this book, Borg talks about rejecting Christian exclusivism on the basis of grace. He says that if our relationship with God is based on grace, then it is not based on requirements. Deepening the relationship depends upon paying attention to it. Borg grew up Lutheran, but in college he had many doubts about the Christian faith and initially planned to be an astrophysicist. Later he was offered a fellowship to Union Seminary in New York City which put him on the path to becoming a professor of religious studies.

Borg said he identified himself as a Christian because he felt it was important to be a part of a religious community, to pray and meditate and to nourish a relationship with God.

Another reason he was a Christian is because we all need a path. We are lost without one. Community and tradition articulate, embody and nurture a path.

After much thought, Borg decided the vision of life articulated by the Christian faith was what he wanted for his life. He said, "The path of Jesus provides a path of connection and transformation in this life. Religious community keeps us in touch with wisdom and beauty of the past." And he deeply believed that "Christianity is unique among the major religions in the world because we find the revelation of God primarily through Jesus."

Yet, he was criticized by some for not taking the Bible literally. He viewed the Bible metaphorically and sacramentally. Dr. Borg said the definition for a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign that functions as a means of grace." We call our Lord's Supper a sacrament for that reason. But Borg said that the Bible was a human product through which God becomes present to us. He believed we hear the Holy Spirit speaking to us through the ancient words.

And he liked to tell this story: When a Christian seeker asked the Dalai Lama whether she should

become a Buddhist, his response was, “No, become more deeply Christian; live more deeply into your own tradition.”

In an effort to explain what it means to live more deeply in our Christian tradition, Borg said, “Christian faith means loyalty to Jesus as Lord, and not to the seductive would-be lords of our lives such as affluence, achievement, or other desires.”

He said we must recall the first of the Ten Commandments, “You shall have no other gods before me.” And recall the Great Commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

FIDELITY TO GOD

Fidelity to God means loving God, loving your neighbor, and being faithful to these two great relationships.”

This brings us back around to Paul talking to the church in Corinth about idols.

Paul reminds us, Christ followers today, to be faithful to God and realize that our behavior can cause others to either deepen or lose faith.

Marcus Borg’s words remind us to pay attention to your relationship with God by practicing your faith. Borg left a formula for practices that shape a life of faith. He prescribes five practices:

- 1st owning your Christian identity (You are created by God, you are a child of God, you are beloved by God, you are accepted by God),
- 2nd praying the scriptures (lectio divina).
- 3rd contemplative prayer,
- 4th attending worship with your faith community,
- 5th being involved in mission work of compassion and justice. This formula basically sums up Living the Way of Christ.

I like the words Borg chose to close his book. He concluded, “At the heart of Christianity is the way of the heart, a path that transforms us at the deepest level of our being. At the heart of Christianity is the heart of God, a passion for our transformation and for the transformation of the world. At the heart of Christianity is participating in the passion of God.”

May you participate today and everyday in the passion of God. Show people, even while you are watching the Super Bowl, what a Christian looks like. Amen.

Benediction:

Go forth, owning your Christian identity, remembering you are created by God, a child of God, beloved by God, and accepted by God. And then share this Good News with everyone you meet so they, too, can participate in the passion of God.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever more. Amen



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