

## CONFIRMATION – MONTHLY MEETING

Sunday, October 18, 2009

Session 2 – Notes

### God

How one approaches or thinks about God may be the most important part of one's faith journey. It is certainly the most important starting point. In the American culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century there is this incessant, terribly dysfunctional, desire to have almost everything:

- Understandable
- Entertaining
- Immediate

Part of this is because we are under such tremendous stress for all kinds of reasons. As adults, we simply do not have the time or energy for mystery, for slow movement, for waiting. This in turn gets transferred to our youth and our children. It is important to say that some things in life are not mysterious, sometimes fast movement is exactly what's needed and waiting is not always desirable, safe or wise.

When our cultural illness to have almost everything understandable, entertaining and immediate brushes up against our journey with or openness to God some significant problems emerge. So often God is seen as a relationship to be managed. God is expected to "fit in" rather than to be our source. We get to the point where we assume we have God figured out. We think we know what God wants us to do, be, say, feel, own. We derive formulas for knowing God's will for us. We assume this happens if we are the "right" religion, read the "right" books, listen to the "right" preacher, belong to the "right" political party, and on and on.

Likewise there are more and more people who assume God wants us to be happy and therefore entertained. Worship ought never to be lifeless, but some churches work as hard as a night club or a TV show to warrant the patronage of its members. One almost imagines God trying to be a comedian, a guitarist in a band or a movie actor, whatever it takes to keep people from losing interest and moving on to something else.

Because so much in our world demands results immediately, our relationship with God is often subjected to the same stresses. I once proposed offering a series of 8 sessions for adults who wanted to be members of Walnut Hills so that we could get

acquainted with them and help them learn all the aspects of being part of this special church. The reaction from most people was “immediate” – 8 sessions would take way too much time. A session or two ought to do it. We now have one 3-hour session. The same is true with our journey with God. Most people want some immediate verification that God is present, is listening, is helping them, is guiding them, etc. There is a line in Psalm 27, “wait for the Lord.” Most of us feel we don’t have time for that.

Our journey with God, when we let it get real, is unlike almost anything else in our lives, at least the way most of us live our lives in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. God does not journey with us so that we can understand God or figure God out or fit God into our lives. God does not fit into us, we fit into God. In God we rediscover the depths of mystery and awe. We recognize our insignificance next to God. This is not to put ourselves down; rather this is to remind us where ultimate importance is found.

God does not journey with us in order that we might be entertained or to keep us from being bored. If that is how we are living life, with all the privileges, opportunities, natural beauty and gifts around us then something else is going on. Our boredom is not God’s problem – it’s our problem. A society is dangerous when it is privileged and bored at the same time and the best gift God can give to such a society is certainly not entertainment.

Finally, if you were to be told that your most significant prayers would not be answered until your dying day, would it still be important for you to pray them? Would it still be important for you to stay close to God even if many of the answers you were seeking did not come right away? This is a problem for the western mind much more so than for the eastern mind. In our culture we look for answers and results. Sometimes the greatest spiritual maturity comes from asking the questions and from experiencing growth as those questions are lived, even with the struggles that come along.

These thoughts about God are very important in our consideration of everything else we will study and discuss this year. You may have a hard time starting this way but God, your church and I will help you.

### Jesus

Marcus Borg is considered one of the world’s primary experts in the study of Jesus. In his book *The Heart of Christianity* he says the following, “We know about the God of Israel and the figure of Jesus primarily through the Bible. And we know about God – about God’s character and passion – most decisively through Jesus.

Christianity finds the primary revelation of God in a person. This does not make Christianity superior, but it does make it different." Christians must pay special attention to their relationship with Jesus and about how we view him for ourselves. There is a great deal of disagreement about how to view him but there is great agreement among Christians that he is central to our faith.

There are all kinds of thoughts about Jesus in Christianity:

- You must accept Jesus as your savior or you won't go to heaven.
- Jesus died for your sins.
- Jesus is the only way to connect with God.
- It is our job to get non-Christians to believe in Jesus.

This is just for starters but Christians feel more strongly about Jesus than almost any other part of our spiritual journeys. Some disagreement seems OK for most Christians but when it comes to Jesus sometimes tempers flare and blood pressures rise. For some Christians the statements above are absolutely true and for others they could not be further from the truth.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that you will study this year in Sunday School we hear two voices related to Jesus Christ – the voice of Jesus of Nazareth and the voice of the community of faith that came into being after his death, that community that consisted of changed lives and new hope. Because Walnut Hills is a progressive church and follows the emerging worldview (you will learn what this means later in the year) the views we have of Jesus are not shared by all Christians. There are those in our church who struggle as well.

Easter is the focal point for everything in the Christian journey. Before Easter we hear the voice of Jesus of Nazareth who was a historical figure and was involved in his land in the following ways:

- Jewish mystic
- Healer
- Wisdom teacher
- Social prophet
- Movement initiator

He had an incredible impact on those in his land and he also caught the attention of the Roman occupying force. Because he spoke of allegiance only to God and because he always threw his support for those who were overlooked by those in authority he was not popular with the Roman government.

Why was Jesus killed? Some say he was killed for our sins, so God would accept us. This has become a common theme but careful Bible study does not support this idea. Jesus thought his purpose was not to die, but to connect with God, to heal, to teach, to be a prophet and to start a movement. He was killed by Rome for getting in the way of their power. Therefore his death was the consequence of what he was doing, not his purpose. His purpose was to love as God loved and to demand justice for all people, particularly the outcasts.

Jesus after Easter became the Christ (the messiah or the anointed one) for the early church. Many of the stories about Jesus really came into being decades later as the church was trying to make sense of the new hope and vision they were experiencing, even in the face of danger and oppression. The stories of the virgin birth of Jesus, of angels singing in the heavens over Bethlehem, of walking on the water, of turning water into wine are stories that were written decades later by people who never met Jesus during his years on this earth. The stories were the early church's way of saying that following Jesus had changed their lives. This does not mean that the miraculous stories are untrue but that they contain a truth that is different from factual chronology. It means that although an eyewitness would not have heard angels sing on the night (or day) of Jesus' birth that eyewitness would have experienced in following Jesus a new hope and a new love that would make the heart sing. Put another way, Marcus Borg writes, "The Bible is true – and some of it happened." He also says to his students, "Believe whatever you want about whether it happened this way; now let's talk about what the story means."

### The Holy Spirit

There is this untrue and even dangerous notion that humans can control God, or at least influence God. We will talk about prayer later, but even some prayers are worded in such a way as to hope against hope that just perhaps God might listen and change a bad situation. At its worst, there is this notion from some people in power that God has a preferred country, a preferred religion, a preferred economic system, a preferred political party, a preferred race, a preferred sexual orientation, etc. This is an attempt to gain power by claiming that God endorses certain people and certain positions.

Ancient Israel and the early Christian community referred to God in about the same way. The Hebrew word is "ruach" and the Greek word is "pneumos." These are both terms for God's Spirit. Literally these words mean "wind." Among the reasons ancient Israel and the early Christian community referred to God as Spirit, ruach, pneumos, wind was to remind people that we don't influence God. We don't control

God in any way. We think of God as Spirit in order to get some things straight. The main thing is that God is God and we are not. People throughout the centuries have had a hard time remembering that, even religious people. Hopefully God influences us, not the other way around. The notion of the Holy Spirit is to remind us that God is as vital as air, as uncontrollable as the wind, as refreshing as a cool breeze.

### The Trinity

Sometimes you will hear in prayers the line, "In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit." Sometimes more inclusive language is used, "In the name of God the Creator, God the Risen Christ and God the Comforter." Anyway you look at it this idea of the Trinity is confusing. We worship one God, not three. The idea of the Trinity came about several centuries after Jesus lived on this earth and it was another in a series of attempts to explain what can't be explained. The earliest image was that God was a figure up in the heavens, that God entered the life of Jesus as he walked around on the earth and that God stayed put in the lives of believers after Jesus was no longer on the earth.

It's important to remember that Jesus did not look for his followers to worship him but rather to follow the dramatically different way he taught about God. The Roman authorities were satisfied as long as he taught about a God without any power. The religious authorities were satisfied as long as he taught about a God that supported their authority over people. Jesus was not willing to do either. Perhaps another way to consider the Trinity is this way:

- We worship God in all God's mystery and love.
- We follow Jesus in his selfless attention to including everyone in love.
- We allow the Holy Spirit to be that power that transforms individuals and societies through love.