



First United Church of Oak Park

Beyond Belief to Relationship

Matthew 16:13-20

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I feel the need to preface this sermon by telling you that the title of this sermon is borrowed; and the content is greatly inspired by the book and author that I have borrowed the title from. Some time ago, Beth Dickerson recommended a book to me, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* by Marcus J. Borg.

This week, in search of inspiration, I picked it up, read probably four of its six chapters, and was enthralled by what I read and learned; but the main thing that I took away from this book and felt compelled to share with you today was this idea of moving “Beyond Belief to Relationship,” which Marcus Borg shares is what he would name his spiritual autobiography, if he ever writes it. I do hope he doesn’t mind my borrowing it for today.

After wrestling with this Scripture text, I couldn’t think of a better title or theme; “Beyond Belief to Relationship,” because I have come to understand that this text, and really all of Jesus’s teachings, were an invitation to his listeners to do just that, move beyond belief and into relationship with God.

In one of the chapters, Borg talks about moving from a secondhand religion to a firsthand religion. This reminded me of a reading and discussion we have every year in our Quest confirmation class about shifting from a secondhand faith to a firsthand faith. The shift from secondhand to firsthand faith is exactly what we encourage our Quest youth to explore: it is a discernment process of considering and deciding what one believes. Which goes a little something like this: “I know what I have been told and taught to believe and now I get to decide for myself, so what are the things that I believe?”

This is an important shift for all of us to make in our lives of faith, to claim for ourselves the beliefs we have been raised to have or to let them go. And to construct our own beliefs.

In a similar way, *a secondhand religion is a way of being religious based on believing what one has heard from others, whereas a firsthand religion consists of claiming a relationship to that which the Bible and church teachings can only point, a relationship with God or the Spirit of God.*¹

Job 42:5 puts it like this, “my ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.”

This is an important distinction to make. Because in many ways, the Christian life has become more about doing or believing what the Bible says, or what the church or a denomination has decided we should do or believe. But *‘to believe’ did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings, in both Greek and Latin, its roots mean “to give one’s heart to.” Believing involves a much deeper level of self.*² It’s not enough to hear something, it’s about knowing, through seeing and experiencing, and then making a decision with your heart.

¹ Borg, Marcus J. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.

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This giving of one's heart to Jesus is the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand religion, from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of your ear to being in relationship with God. This is Jesus's invitation to us, and specifically, to these disciples in our Scripture.

When faced with the question of who people say the Son of Man is, they initially respond with what they have heard from others; it is a secondhand faith, a secondhand religion response: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or some other prophet. But his next question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" That is invitation to shift, to make that move to a firsthand faith, a firsthand religion, to go beyond belief and rely on one's own experience and relationship with Jesus. And Simon Peter is so moved, he answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

I wonder, if you were one of the disciples there, a part of that conversation, and Jesus posed that question to you... "Who do you say that I am?" How would you respond?

The Scripture makes it seem like Simon Peter answered immediately, but I imagine there was at least a long pause of silence where all of the disciples looked around at each other trying to figure out what to say, or what Jesus wanted to hear. This is also a difficult question for us to answer because the images we have of Jesus are numerous:

- Savior, Messiah, Prince of Peace
- Rabbi, teacher of wisdom, a "*subversive sage*"³
- Radical, social prophet
- Charismatic founder of a movement
- Healer
- Disrupter, Heretic
- The Way, the Truth, the Life
- Son of God, Son of Man, second person of the Trinity
- Incarnation of the Word
- Sophia, wisdom of God personified.
- Human...Divine.

Would you be able to sort through these, recognizing which images are secondhand and which you have claimed firsthand?

I will say, you don't have to choose just one. Simon Peter didn't, he responded with two: Messiah and the Son of God. Which serves as an important reminder that to try and limit Jesus to being just one image, to only allow him one identity is presumptuous, and has the potential to distort the Christian life he calls and invites us to.

This passage from Matthew is relatively well known. When my husband asked me this week what I was preaching on I said, "the one where Jesus renames Simon, Peter 'the rock,' the rock on which he will build his church." My husband is a self-proclaimed, lapsed, recovering Catholic and even he said, "Oh yeah, I know that one."

Well, there are two things that have always bothered me about this Scripture passage:

³ Borg, Marcus J. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.

1. Jesus's decision to call Simon 'Peter,' and to build his "church" on *that* rock. Especially since we know where the story goes, that Peter is the one to deny Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. I could never understand his seemingly blind faith and trust in Peter to be a "rock."
2. The second thing is the last sentence, "then [Jesus] sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone he was the Messiah." Why not?! Doesn't that seem like the kind of Good News they should be sharing far and wide?

Have you ever heard or read something so many times that you can repeat it verbatim, or at least you think you can. When in fact our brains don't always remember things exactly right. Upon further reflection of my summary of this passage to my husband, important words and nuances were omitted.

Having now gained deeper insight on moving from a secondhand religion to a firsthand one, Jesus calling Simon Peter "a rock," can take on new meaning. Jesus does not mean that the future community of his followers will solely depend on Peter's leadership or even presence, but rather the proverbial "rock" of which he speaks is not Peter himself, but rather Peter's statement of faith, of who Jesus is: not even that it is the correct statement, but that it is a confession that represents moving beyond belief and into relationship. No one had told Peter that Jesus was the Messiah or Son of God; the text says, "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven." It was a belief he constructed and claimed for himself. And it represents the transformation that all of Jesus's teachings invite his listeners to. Shifting the focus from believing in Jesus or believing in God to being in relationship with God.

Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, this is also the explanation for Jesus instructing his disciples not to tell anyone he was the Messiah. To do so would be perpetuating a secondhand religion, of followers who only believe because they were told to do so. And Christianity is not meant to be a secondhand religion.

Although Jesus didn't set out to start a new religion, he sought to found a movement based on love, compassion, and justice for all people in the face of an unjust empire and morally questionable religious leaders. Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher, he wanted to teach people, show people a new way, a different way, not teach them what to think and believe. His teaching style, through parables and aphorisms, are evidence of this. Jesus almost never taught a straightforward lesson, because what he was trying to achieve was not something that could be taught, it has to be experienced, it has to be felt; only then can one be changed.

Rabbi, teacher, movement founder...Of all the images of Jesus, one of the ones I like best is what Marcus Borg calls Jesus as a "spirit person," in other words, someone who didn't just believe in God or about God, but had experienced the Spirit of God. This is what he wants for us, for all of his disciples.

Disciple, that's one of those church words that we hear and use a lot. And if asked to define it would probably say something like, "to be a student of a teacher." Which entails listening, learning, gaining knowledge and understanding. Which is not incorrect but, I would say, is incomplete. A more accurate understanding of what it means to be a disciple is to be "a follower after somebody." There is action implied and required in being a disciple.

When Jesus called the first disciples, Scripture uses two **verbs**, action words, to describe their response: "they **left** their nets and **followed** him."

Being a disciple, to be a follower after Jesus, is not about having a particular set of beliefs, it is about a journey. *A journey with Jesus, both the past, Biblical, and the present, living Jesus; listening to his teachings—sometimes understanding, sometimes not quite getting it, but journeying with a community of fellow disciples, walking together, oftentimes on the road less traveled, but one that can move us beyond belief to a Christian life centered in our relationship to the Spirit of God.*⁴

When we consider the teachings of Jesus, the message he preached was not about believing in him, for he consistently pointed away from himself to God, to the Spirit of God that he himself experienced and knew and wanted others to experience and know. As his disciples, that is how we follow after him: seek to know the Spirit of God through our experiences; allow our relationship with God to be the center of our Christian life; this is the transformational journey Jesus invites us to embark on with him and with one another. And this story, of Simon becoming Peter, is an example for us, not of being a perfect disciple or having the right answers, but of undergoing this transformational journey, of shifting from a secondhand to firsthand religion, of claiming what we believe, and in so doing, having a 'rock' on which our faith can continue to be built and nurtured.

So may it be, for you, and for me.

Amen.

⁴ Borg, Marcus J. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.