



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

New Definitions

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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I regularly receive calls from you mothers wanting to come to Trinity to “get their baby baptized”. So, I have to explain Trinity’s thinking and position on baptism. For some, what I tell them is a radical departure from thinking of baptism as something that you have to get done to make sure that a child is safe from something or acceptable to God. I assure them that baptism is not spiritual vaccination and that even without it, God loves all children.

I tell them that baptism is not a certificate or ticket into heaven; it is the way that one joins the church. And if there’s no interest in being a part of a community of faith then what is the point of it? Why would you go to the trouble to join something that you are going to ignore? I think sometimes they are surprised, I know sometimes they are disappointed and I get no joy out of that. What really saddens me is that for so many, Christianity has not given the impression that being here is about love and joy and happiness and working together to make the world a better place, following Jesus’ vision and example. That’s our fault.

Marcus Borg is my favorite Episcopal theologian. His books have done more to reclaim the spirit of what Jesus taught and showed us than just about anything out there. He has a new one out which is called *Speaking Christian; Why Christian words have lost their meaning and power – and how they can be restored*. What Professor Borg has done is to reveal how some really important terms have been misconstrued and are now misunderstood.

This is particularly important on a day of baptism, because if we aren’t clear what we are talking about then how do they know what they are getting into. So, let’s get clear about what we are talking about today.

We probably better start with the big one; God. When Borg was teaching theology at Oregon State University, he would regularly encounter students who told him that they did not believe in God. He would ask them to describe this God they didn’t believe in. It usually went something like this; some powerful super-father figure, out there somewhere, who doles out rewards and punishment but who doesn’t intervene to stop us from hurting each other. Professor Borg always says, “I don’t believe in that God either.” He explains God beautifully as the sacred presence all around us, a reality that is more than the space-time world of matter and energy, but also present within it. Borg gives us God as an ever-present sacred mystery. Christian faith is meant to be comfortable and intrigued with mystery. It keeps us from being smug and convinced that we have all of the answers.

Let’s move on to another big one. What do we mean by *savior* and with it *saved* and *salvation*? Borg talks about having tested the word “salvation” before large diverse groups of people and discovered that 80 percent of them had a negative response. All they knew about it was that it meant whether or not you were going to heaven and within it, the implied threat of not making it there. You have to be saved from your sins and that’s Jesus’ role. Those who believe in Jesus are saved and others are not. The exclusivity of the definition was a challenge to some. Many volunteered that the word salvation itself evoked anxiety and fear depending on their experience growing up in various Christian denominations.

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So here's the deal, the word in all of its variations appears over 500 times in the Bible and with the exception of a couple of New Testament references, it is *not* about the afterlife. Salvation is liberation from bondage, some sort of slavery, or exile. The Israelites were saved from slavery in the Book of Exodus and that is the foundational story of Judaism. They were saved numerous times; from cruel masters, from the final horrific plague, the death of the firstborn, from capture by the Red Sea; from starvation in the desert. In all of the cases, God is Israel's savior. Time and again, throughout their history the people are saved from bondage; economic, political and religious. They are saved from peril so that they might live. They are saved so that they may live as God intends them to, together in peace. The law was given to save them from injustice and oppression. The law is meant to be salvation from humanity's worst impulses. There is much in today's world from which we need to be liberated and saved. So promises made today about following Jesus as a Savior require us to ground ourselves in real world issues and to consider what we are to do about them.

How about *repent*? I love this one. We hear it as contrition and remorse for bad things we have done or the fear that we ourselves are bad, but what it meant originally was to turn, turn around and return home, presumably, to God. It finds its greatest expression in the return from captivity in Babylon. When you have been away, either pulled away or wandered off on your own, repentance is to come back to where you are meant to be. And there is another extraordinary nuance to the word *repent* that comes from the Greek. It means "to go beyond the mind that we have." What an amazing idea! To repent means to break free from the human way of seeing things, from the cultural fear and limitation and come home to a way of seeing abundance, joy, peace and other good stuff. How startling to have such words pop up into the middle of our secular, dangerous world. Is it possible that they have something to say to us today, something that we've not heard before?

Take the Christian idea of *belief, believing*. Most people think that when Christians say "we believe" that we are saying that we accept certain facts or ideas as true, as in "it happened that way." Professor Borg has liberated "believing" for me. He points out that in the original languages of the Bible belief was a matter of the heart, not the head, not a cognitive process of accepting a story as factual. It means "to give your heart to something." Believing, in Christian terms, means to "believe in" not to "believe that." There's a big difference between believing that the laws of physics exist and telling my husband that I believe in him. We accept as fact that Jesus lived. We believe in him, in what he lived and died for, what he taught and revealed.

There are plenty more words in Professor Borg's book, I plan to get lots of sermons out of it. But for now, let's put these newly liberated words together to describe what we are about here. First of all, Jesus' life and death and resurrection are the best way for us to understand the holy, the sacred, God the mystery. He is what the divine life looks like in human form. It is something for us to believe in, to give our hearts to. When we do that, when we invest ourselves in living Jesus' message and way, we can be saved, liberated from the meanness of the world, from the destructive human habits of hatred, apathy, prejudice and violence. When we only see what the world shows us, we can repent, we can go beyond the mind that we have and quote the letter to the Philippians to "let the same mind be in us as was in Christ Jesus." We can learn to see things from a bigger, holier point of view. As members of this community of believers, we can be the best chance that the world has to be saved from itself. Together we are on a sacred adventure, on the way to becoming more than we ever imagined. Let us share this adventure with those who would join us, beginning now.

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