

**“Living in the Gap”**

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The Bible is both individual and political and I always (in an election year) try to stay away from the political. But it is true. Over and over again, God, in Scripture, calls us to a very deep and abiding relationship with God. Liberals sometimes miss that. They want to go right to the political, without focusing on that individual faith, that prayerful guided relationship between each of God’s created beings - you and me - and that prayer life binds us so deeply to God. In worship it is both. We worship as a community, but we also receive something powerfully meaningful, that you receive between you and God in the act of worship or listening to that beautiful music. But it is also social and political as well, and I think too often that the fundamentalists or the evangelical wing of our Christian body feels it is all about *my* relationship with God, without any focus on social [change] or any real relationship politically, because you can hand out charity, but until you change political systems, nothing really changes in the lives of people.

Over and over again, just like Gary read from Psalm 146, you have speaking out against the princes and the leaders of that time; and you go to the New Testament - you see Jesus fighting with the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Roman officials. [It’s] very political and you can’t avoid that. You don’t want to. It has to be a “both/and.”

When I was growing up you couldn’t turn on the [TV] channel - I can’t remember if it was Friday or Saturday night - about once every month or quarter you heard Billy Graham on that huge hour-long program. And when Billy Graham was on the television, he had stadiums. He was the Led Zeppelin of God. Huge stadiums would listen to one man you had to respect, because he touched a nerve in people needing to hear something profound and meaningful that they were not getting anyplace else, even in their churches. They flocked in droves, sometimes 50,000 people, listening to one person talk. It wasn’t that he was amazingly charismatic. People were not getting out of their wheel chairs for Billy Graham, but he touched and explained faith in a very personal way that people were drawn to.

My argument is Billy Graham just didn’t go far enough. He only went half way, and he was so good at talking about the personal relationship with Jesus Christ, that he never quite got to the social and political. Now you move decades later to his son, Franklin Graham, and now you have someone who realized it, but he did it in such a conservative, difficult way, and in a way that was charity without really being justice. He fell short as well.

So I’m trying to figure out what is “born again,” because it has been co-opted by the evangelicals and fundamentalists, and we, who are mainline, kind of have let it go away. We need to bring that term back. We cannot let it be taken from us because “born again” is a biblical imperative and a very meaningful one to think about.

So, when I run into doubt, I always turn to people who are smarter than me (which isn’t particularly hard). All you have to do is go downstairs to the church Library. (There is a lot of good stuff down there. You should go down and check it out some day.) In one of the racks on theology is a wonderful book by a man named Marcus Borg, who was a professor

for years out in Oregon. He wrote a book called “The Heart of Christianity.” In it he talks about what it *should* mean for Christians in the mainline to be “born again.” He talks beautifully about this idea of having a personal relationship, (again, which has been co-opted by the conservatives and it shouldn’t be). If you call yourself “liberal,” or whatever label you want to call yourself, you shouldn’t shy away from having a relationship with God. That is the joy of prayer, the joy of sitting in the quiet before and after a service or experiencing it and feeling God’s presence. Affirm it, learn it. Before it goes on, to talk about social and political because we have a calling to care about people beyond ourselves.

“Born again” is not a selfish, exclusive phrase. It is deeply personal. It is deeply inclusive and it is fundamentally concerned with powers beyond ourselves. That is, what we are “born again” to. It’s not to send us to damnation, but bring us into this wonderful joyous relationship with God through Jesus Christ that is lived out in a prayerful relationship and a loving, social, demanding justice relationship.

Borg went on to tell it in a very impressive way, through a story of parents and a little girl who was 3 years old. They [the parents] were bringing home her new little brother. They explained it to her, and she was looking forward to having him come home. The day came when mom gave birth, and a couple of days later they come home. The little girl said, “This is wonderful. I want to spend time alone with my little brother.” Mom and dad hadn’t thought about that. So they talked and decided they could put him in the crib far enough away so she couldn’t reach him. They could go in the other room and listen on the baby monitor. She [the 3-year-old] couldn’t do any damage. They put the little guy in the crib so she couldn’t quite reach him. Then they ran out of the room and went to the monitor, waiting to see what she wanted to say.

All of a sudden, she [the 3-year-old] looked at him and asked, “What is God like? I’m forgetting.” Borg said, “That in a nutshell is the deepest faith.” The reason he thinks that little girl said that to her brother is because, when you are an infant your world is totally self-contained. The whole world is all around you – with one universal understanding. It’s all there for you. You cry, you get picked up. You are hungry, you get fed. You need your diaper changed, it gets done. Every one of your needs is met, and you, and God, and everything else around you is one.

But somewhere along the way you become a toddler and you begin to differentiate yourself from everyone else. You realize that the whole world was not made for you. There may be a sibling, so perhaps when you cry parents go to them first. It is a terribly unfair world. You realize that there are others [out there] and things going on, and all of a sudden you realize that you have to act differently in this new world.

You begin to realize you are different, and [you] figure out what you can do that your brother or sister cannot do to get mom’s or dad’s attention. Pretty soon try to differentiate yourself from the rest of the world so that you can get attention. You are one “self” among many selves.

As we do that, Borg says, we begin to realize that when we differentiate and separate ourselves from everyone else, we also separate ourselves in some manner from God - who becomes further and further away in our own minds. For the infant, God is so close and all around us; the world is made for us. As we get older and more mature, we realize that

everybody is suffering and we have to reach out and grab and claw and scream and do everything we can to get what is “mine”; and, everybody is a little bit further away and the world becomes a scarier place.

The reason the little girl said what she did, was because she wanted to be back and feel God intimately, and you don’t feel that until you are reunited with God. So as we grow up, how we live in that gap defines our faith and our relationship with God, and we differentiate with other human beings around us.

How do I live? What do I do? How do I differentiate myself in the presence of God, and to be “born again,” and to love? The way we love is to figure out where the needs of the world are and respond to them. Where are the lonely? Where there are people who are sick, what do we need to do to be of help? Where there are people in need, you don’t just say, “How will we feed them?” But for mature people of faith [it’s] to differentiate with understanding: “How do I meet their needs so they won’t be hungry again?” How does justice impact my life and their life together so we are joined together in Christ; and how can I respond to make their life better here and now, because a hungry stomach cannot hear God speaking?

A system that is so unjust that a group of people are told they are not appropriate or acceptable keeps them from feeling our love and God’s love - that’s why “Born Again” must be inclusive. There has to be a way to open the door so that all can reach out and receive glorious grace of the Holy Spirit, and to move, hold and be accepted.

If we are one who feels that acceptance and that love, it’s a *huge* responsibility. That is to reach out to others in love, care and justice so that they too can feel the acceptance that God has given us. And, you and I are unique. Over 40 percent of the world lives on less than \$2 a day. They watch their children go hungry. They [the children] cry out and [the parents] bring them a little bit of food. It’s a nice thing to give a donation, but it doesn’t make a difference in the grand scheme. It’s only when our “born again” experience is social and political that real change can take place. We cannot be shy about that. We have to figure out each new day, and pray that God will give us the wisdom and courage to give us new ways to make \$2 become \$4, and \$4 become \$10, and \$10 become \$100, so that their children no longer have to go hungry. So their children have an opportunity - a chance - to get an education.

Right now Syrian children are trying desperately to avoid the war that has plagued them there. They are moving into Turkey and trying to almost sneak into Europe. And, Europe is trying to figure out how to keep them out. So there is this clump of displaced people, families with small children stuck in Turkey.

There are these groups of people who scratch their head and go, “Hum. I have an idea.” So they started building sweat shops. They put children in there, because children don’t organize, they don’t talk back, they do what they are told, and they have energy. They crank out large numbers of shoes, shorts and shirts, and make a lot of money. They don’t get an education. They don’t know how to read. They are almost starving because they take the money back to the family, and they [the family] tries to live on an 8-year-old’s salary.

How fortunate we are, and how responsible we need to feel, so that no one has to live that kind of life. A life without hope, without vision and without education. That is the “born

again” experience. To see ourselves in a larger group, where it isn’t just about “me” anymore. That is the positive side of maturity. That’s the positive side of differentiating. To see beyond ourselves and make a difference in this world.

So when you leave today, think of yourselves as “born again” - but not in that constricted way. You are “born again,” because you are loved by God.

You were chosen by God - but that’s not all - it’s bigger than that. You are “born again” to make a difference. God has given you and me so much, and with that comes responsibility. We, as a Church, can make a difference. You, as an individual, can make a difference and we, as people of faith, together can make a difference.

We together can figure out a way so 8-year-olds can get an education, so that wars can subside and people can be respected. That’s a “born again” message that I want all of us to share.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, Amen.