

Getting To Know Your Inner Borg

3rd of Lent, March 15, 2020

Are you familiar with that scary species from outer space called *The Borg*? If you're not.... they're a species that the crew on Star Trek discovered on one of their missions "to seek out new life" in the galaxy, and set up diplomatic relations with them. But, as it turned out, *The Borg* don't do "diplomacy." They're a species that is not made of individuals, but "**drones**," which are part machine. And, together, they make up a kind of "**hive**" that has only one, massive, machine-like mind. The "drones" do whatever the one "**hive mind**" tells them to.

They fly around the galaxy, searching for new intelligent species. And when *The Borg* find a new species which has potential to strengthen the "hive" – they capture as many of them as they can, and turn them into "drones" – so that the "hive" will keep getting larger & more powerful. And every time *The Borg* pull up to a new spaceship (whose crew they aim to capture) they always broadcast the same monotone warning message to them: "**We are the Borg. Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated.**"

"**Assimilating**" is what The Borg are all about. When they capture newcomers and bring them aboard, they don't allow the pre-existing pattern of *life in the "hive"* to be altered or adjusted to "**accommodate**" their new & different captives. Instead, they force all newcomers to "fit" into the *Borg* pattern — which means that the newcomers have to undergo extensive surgery until they "fit" (and become Borg "drones" themselves). And, no, this surgery is not "elective".... For the newcomers always resist being "*made to fit.*" (*Who wouldn't?*)

Now I realize that "The Borg" are only "make-believe" science fiction characters. But they're also a wonderful metaphor for something that happens all the time in each of our minds. Like The Borg in Star Trek, the Borg in **us** is a "one trick pony" – it only assimilates, never accommodates. But unlike The Borg in Star Trek, *The Borg in us* is often highly beneficial, not always harmful.

Very quickly & quite automatically, our minds "**assimilate**" new information into our established patterns of understanding... by discarding the parts that don't fit as "irrelevant." It's a way the mind can quickly digest, cope, and make decisions about many new experiences. It's how what we call our "*common sense*" often works. And the mind can do all this automatically, *all-by-itself*. It doesn't require us to stop and actively think about it at all — which in many situations – is not only helpful, but necessary.

For example: Imagine you're driving along and approaching a Stop Sign. But this *particular* Stop Sign is different than all the others you've seen. The sign itself is the same shape, the same color, but.... it's upside down. So the letters "S", "T", "O", and "P" are upside down & backwards.

What happens next? You might have a momentary strange or confused feeling. But without your having to actively think about it at all, your mind — *very rapidly & automatically* — "**assimilates**" the upside-down sign into your already-established understanding of "*what-Stop-Signs-mean.*" You don't even have to say to yourself "*A Stop Sign is a Stop Sign, upside-down or not.*" You just automatically slow down and come to a stop (...*ideally, a 'full' stop.*)

What you **don't** do is pull over to the side of the road to consider that this "**upside-down Stop Sign**" *might mean* something altogether different than rightside-up ones — to consider that you might have to change your prior understanding of *what-Stop-Signs-mean* — in order to know how best to respond to this different one. Sure, the talk around the neighborhood might be "*Did you see the upside-down stop sign?*" — but you & your neighbors don't all end up parked before it, wondering "*What should I do now?*" Thank God for the **Beneficial Borg** in us !

It's a simple example, but it makes an important point. In many situations, we can't just go around "**accommodating**" our prior understandings of things every time a new experience comes along. If we did, we'd stop moving forward in life. Sometimes just "**assimilating**" the new experience — just disregarding what's "new & different" about it — and making it "fit" into what we already know — is the best response.

But sometimes not.....

In his ministry, Jesus frequently encounters this kind of "Borg" phenomenon in the minds of the people he's teaching. And it's often quite innocent on the part of his audience (just a standard mode of operating) — *but in **this** context* — not a beneficial one. Jesus finds that — *whether rich or poor; whether Gentile or Jew; whether formally educated or not* — people's minds often just quickly "**assimilate**" the new spiritual understandings he is teaching them. Just quickly "*make them fit*" onto the old, well-worn & familiar understandings that are already laid down — like "*tracks*" — in their minds.

The problem with **just automatically "assimilating"** (*in a context like this one*) was that — to "*make Jesus' teachings "fit"* onto these old, familiar tracks — their minds were busily doing some quick "*surgery*" on them (*without their even realizing it.*) Busily "*cutting out*" all the strange "*new parts*" in the teachings that just didn't fit onto the old tracks — and "*pasting in*" some trusty "*old parts*" that made them fit just fine.

But, in the process, the *meaning* of what Jesus was teaching them got *changed significantly*. In reality, for them to take in and accommodate this new level of truth Jesus was teaching... required the building of some "new tracks" within their minds. And this is precisely what Jesus was challenging them — and seeking to work **with** them — to do.

He carefully describes this whole process in one of his other metaphors, where he says that his gospel is like "new wine." You just can't pour it into your "old wineskins," because they can't "bear" the newness of it. The old skins will burst, and the new wine will be lost. It takes a "new wineskin" to accommodate the "new wine" of his teachings. So there we have it.....

.... *But never underestimate The Borg* in us. It's always trying to help (in the only way it knows how). And so it finds a quick way to get the "new wine" into the "old wineskin" without it bursting. All it has to do is inwardly "tinker" with the new wine a bit, and it becomes so much like the same old wine we've always drunk, we can't tell the difference. And our "old wineskins" can contain it just fine. No fuss, no muss. It's actually no longer the "new wine"... but it's spared us all the collaborative time & effort (with God & God's People) of forming a "new wineskin" in our minds. And even if it doesn't work this well, it usually works well enough to give us grounds to just spit the "new wine" out.

We saw such Borg-like processes happening with Nicodemus last Sunday. When Jesus teaches him something new, Nicodemus "takes it in", but it's quickly, automatically *modified* (in his mind) to make it "fit" into the grooves of his prior understandings. And so, although Jesus is actually teaching him about *being born "from above," Nicodemus hears & understands him to be saying that he needs to be born — "again" — from his mother's womb, which is clearly absurd. And on & on it went.*

In a nutshell, Jesus keeps teaching him that there are two worlds — an outer one that is physical, visible, and tangible — and an inner one that is spiritual, invisible, and intangible. But, within his mind, Nicodemus keeps changing this new "inner, spiritual world" into the old "outer, material world" that he already understands very well. And so, some good seeds get planted, but the conversation doesn't get very far at all.

We see it happening again in this morning's gospel as Jesus converses with the Samaritan woman at the well. Like his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus is teaching the Samaritan woman that there are two worlds — an outer (physical, tangible, visible) one — and an inner (spiritual, **IN**-tangible, **IN**-visible) one. There is physical water — like the water in this well — and it will satisfy your physical

thirst (for a while.) But you also have a "thirst" that is spiritual, a "thirst" that no physical water will ever satisfy. It can only be quenched by the invisible, spiritual, "living" water, which flows from God. And Jesus tells her that, if she asks him, he will happily give her this "living water."

She takes in his message, and (*like Nicodemus*) the message gets changed within her mind to make it "fit" what she already understands. And so, she replies, "*But you don't have a bucket! And it's a deep well! So how do you plan on getting this living water 'out'? Even our father Jacob needed a bucket to get water out of this well. Are you saying you're better than Jacob, son of Isaac & Abraham?*"

It could have all gone rapidly downhill from there – much like the religious conflict that erupted over 'thirst' between Moses and the Israelites in the desert, a conflict which physical water could not resolve, for beneath it God sees a deeper, unrecognized thirst which they do not (for *'they err in their hearts, and have not understood my ways.'*) But here, in this less physically desperate situation, Jesus keeps on gently clarifying to the Samaritan woman what he means: he doesn't need a bucket, because he's not talking about this well, or about physical water, or physical thirst... On the contrary, the "living water" he is offering is *eternal* – not of this mortal world. It flows from the Kingdom, the Unseen World of God. And so becomes like a never-ending spring within those who quench their spiritual thirst on it – always gushing up in them, all the way to eternal life.

She takes in these additional details, but again, within her mind, automatically changes them to mean that Jesus has some kind of magical technology that will give the bearer a "lifetime supply" of physical water. So **then** she asks him to give it to her — so she can stop having to trudge back & forth to this well for good.

But that is not what Jesus is offering her. So he sets aside the whole "living water" analogy altogether, and takes the conversation to a much deeper, personal & social level (a level where she probably understands very well the difference between the outer, physical world and the inner, spiritual one). He takes her to the world of her own inner thirst & suffering, which have been leading her from husband to husband, only to find herself still inwardly unsatisfied (*and depending on how these husbands had treated her, perhaps even worse off than she'd been without without them. The text only tells us that she kept trying, again & again.*) But the key is that by bringing up this pattern within her personal life, Jesus is still sending her the same message. Physical, tangible, visible things from the "outer world" (even in large quantities) can't satisfy the deeper needs of your "inner world." That requires "goods" of a different kind. The kind that last – like the faith, hope, and love that flow from the Unseen World of God – which Jesus is embodying and offering to her.

It is very interesting that Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman goes much further and deeper than his dialogue with Nicodemus. He is firm in both dialogues, but less frustrated, more flexible & gentle, with the Samaritan woman than he was with Nicodemus (*even though they both seem to have been handling & altering his message in a similar way*). With Nicodemus he is brief & to-the-point. He cuts the dialogue short and sends him off to ponder a pressing personal & spiritual question about these issues. And there is a sense that *by now*, as a Rabbi, Nicodemus should already have had such crucial questions on his horizon — and already have been prayerfully asking & answering them for some time. In contrast, Jesus' shift to a deeper, personal level of dialogue with the Samaritan woman suggests that, in her own way, she had already been pondering these matters for some time. The social contrast between the two is also very significant. Nicodemus had been given the **privileges** of learning how to read & write; receiving a higher education on the sacred scriptures & commentaries; having full access to rabbinical study groups to deepen his understanding; having an official position that gave him economic security, a high ('praiseworthy') social status, time to pray & study. And with the privileges came the moral responsibility to teach & care for others *less fortunate* than himself. In contrast, an unmarried Samaritan woman was far from socially privileged. She would not only be among the least fortunate in the larger society, but an outcast — judged unclean and shameworthy –

on multiple counts. And yet, she is more open and able to dialogue with Jesus than Nicodemus was. I suspect she already understood that she was an 'amateur' at life, and thus more open to learning, whereas Nicodemus still considered himself to be a 'professional.' Perhaps being a self-accepting amateur enabled her to go further and deeper in this sort of challenging, enlightening dialogue.

It's not a coincidence that these readings come to us in the season of Lent. A season of "repentance" – a sometimes 'scary' word that can evoke harshness & shame – but a word which actually means a fundamental "change of mind." A coming to a fundamentally new outlook or point of view that changes how we live. An opening up of the mind to accommodate the **radical newness & differentness** of Christ & Christ's message as they personally address us. Opening up to the kinds of mind-expanding dialogue that Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman were invited into. *How would you respond today if **you** (instead of Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman) were Jesus' partner in these dialogues we've explored ?* I'm quite sure that these are conversations that Christ is desiring to engage each one of us in.

We can engage in them privately in prayer, in reflecting on the scriptures. With careful discernment, we can engage in them face-to-face with one another, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. But in all cases, such dialogues go beyond casual conversation; they're more honest and more "work" – because through them, "new tracks" get gently, carefully built up within our minds by the Holy Spirit. Tracks that don't just lead us to the same old conclusions that we already know all about, but can bear the teachings of Christ to us in the present moment, as they are. And, with our humble co-operation, the Spirit never stops building new tracks in our hearts & minds that enable us to move further & further forward in our practical understanding and living. But as far forward as we move, it seems we always remain amateurs in this process.

When we read the writings of the saints about their experience of Lent, they often describe it as a kind of "spiritual breakdown." Not a breakdown in the unhealthy, modern sense. But one born of high quality spiritual dialogue. It leads to the grace-filled, healthy breakdown of "old wineskins" in our minds, which **cannot hold** the "new wine" of Christ & Christ's teachings. It's more of a "break-through" actually...., because it simultaneously builds up wiser, more resilient and compassionate structures in our hearts & minds, "new wineskins" – which not only give **our own** lives greater depth & simplicity – but create a broader, safer, more accommodating space in our hearts & minds **for others** – enabling us to accept and "take them in" as they are, without prejudice.

The temptation to not engage in these challenging, enlightening dialogues like Jesus has with others – The temptation to just assimilate all things new & different into what we already know – The temptation to become impervious to truths that question our prior knowledge – is great.

But the grace to resist it.... is greater.

To each of us & all of us – *and not just in Lent* – God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit... is always whispering:

*"Today, when you hear my voice,
harden not your hearts...
Come.... let us reason together...."*

(Deut.1, Ps.95, Heb.3, Is.1)

Thanks be to God.

Fr. Shaun Eaton, Rector
St. John in the Wilderness
Brights Grove, Ontario