

“A Recommitment to Seekers, God, and Mother Earth” by John Morris

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2019



The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

This is the final week before Recommitment Sunday. I never have any trouble deciding whether to recommit to Seekers. Seekers is my spiritual home, my extended family, and I think you'd have to look far and wide to find a church that does as much good, with as little nonsense, as Seekers does. Moreover, I still feel the way I did when I first showed up here: The percentage of people I *like* at Seekers is amazingly high. I can only hope they like me too.

Amen.

Well, if that's all I had to say to you, it wouldn't be much of a sermon, though it would be short, which is always welcome.

Sorry, though, I do have a few more things to say.

First, I want to offer an interpretation of our Gospel today as a story of recommitment. Next, I'll look a little more deeply into what recommitment to Seekers means, and tie this to a particular vision I have for how Seekers might express God's love even more forcefully.

Let's assume that the ten lepers had at some point made a commitment to the God of their understanding. Let's imagine ten pious people – who become sick with leprosy. How many are able to keep their faith, remain committed? It's tempting to say, Well, all ten, since we first meet them as they call Jesus "master," and Jesus tells them to show themselves to "the priests," so presumably they're not apostates from the Samaritan worship. Moreover, the final lines of the Gospel are "Your faith has made you well." But surely at least a few of the ten had lost the faith of their youth, buffeted by the hideous affliction of leprosy, and were begging Jesus to heal them in the spirit of "I'll try anything once."

Whatever, we know what happens next. Nine of the ten who get healed go merrily on their way, perhaps heading downtown to the local singles bar now that they look good, but one returns to praise God and thank Jesus. I like to believe that this one person had lost all faith in God. She was once committed, but became deeply uncommitted. And through the miracle of her healing, she came to recommit herself to God.

None of this is really very deep. The single point that I want to pull out of it is that, in the life of a believer, there is a difference between *commitment* and *recommitment*. Not for nothing are we Seekers asked to *recommit* once a year. I take this invitation to mean not only a recommitment to Seekers Church, but a reaffirmation of my lifetime Christian commitment.

Probably my model for this is the first spiritual way of life I ever had, the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The 3rd step says, "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives

over to the care of God *as we understood him.*" (By the way, the phrase "as we understood him" was italicized by the founders of AA to emphasize that each individual member should choose their own idea of God. Thus, my God, among other characteristics, is not gendered, but I've left the AA language as it is.) Almost everyone I know with long sobriety in AA agrees that this 3rd step is really the template for a lifelong habit or process of spiritual recommitment. In other words, you may have a first tremendously powerful moment when you acknowledge the presence of God in your life – I certainly did – but the Step is not over and done with. There is a more or less constant need for recommitment, for turning my will and life over, again and again, to the care of God. Why is this? Because I am human, and I forget, and I am still prompted by habits learned long before I became a Christian. Particularly in the matter of self-will, I find that I take back my own will from God on virtually a daily basis. As one of my early sponsors used to say, "I'm fine with letting God take care of all the day-to-day stuff, but when something really difficult or important comes along, it's time to call in the expert: *me!*"

Now I believe that faith is alive, that my spiritual life is dynamic and changing, and that these vital qualities must be reflected in my faith community. Another way of saying this is simply that a church rigidified into dogma and old ways of seeing God and the world is a pretty sad place. We are not such a church. Halleluia! But part of how we stay alive, and fresh, and growing, is our willingness to change our views and practices as we hear the call of God in our communal life. This has happened over and over at Seekers, as I read the wonderful history that Marjory Bankson has written for us. Seekers has been consistently open and sensitive to the needs of its members, and to the changing voice of God in our poor troubled nation and world. So it's very much in the spirit of Seekers for me to stand here this morning and say: I love you, and now let's do even better.

What might Seekers Church look like in 2029, 10 years from now? I hope it won't look all that different from our church today, but here is the difference I do long for, and foresee in 2029. Our current commitment statement contains the pledge: "I will care for the whole of creation, including the natural environment." I think we can say, and do, something much more meaningful than that. Consider how the children's commitment statement is worded: "I promise to take care of the air, water, and earth, and to love the plants, trees, animals, birds, and fish." As I write, I notice a big and important difference. The children are committing to something familiar and specific, whereas "creation" is a vague noun, almost never used in ordinary conversation, and "natural environment" is, sorry, tired jargon. Neither creation nor the natural environment are things you can point to or in fact do anything with or about. But "animals," just to pick one noun from the children's list . . . that's very different. We are surrounded by actual animals, and confronted with daily choices about how to treat them in order to show the love that the children are being asked to pledge. I want the adult Seekers of 2029 to be more like the Seekers children of 2019. Their commitment to the Earth already sounds so much like the vibrant words Nancy shared with them from Native American tradition. I want us to commit, in clear language, to showing Christ's love to our fellow animals, along with all the other promises the children make in this magnificent sentence.

Our communal history shows how we have deepened and strengthened our understanding of what racism is, to include immigration and mass incarceration issues, and our understanding of what sexism is, to include oppression of gay and transgender people – and this is not an exhaustive list. Now we need to show the same understanding of what *speciesism* means. Like racism, like sexism, speciesism posits a superior position for one group of living beings, on no other grounds than that the one claiming superiority is a member of that group.* Unlike racism and sexism, however, the victims of

speciesism have no voice and cannot cry out for justice and mercy in the name of Jesus. We humans, we Christians, need to do that for them.

Do I really need to justify this vision for Seekers in 2029? Isn't it obvious by now that our brutal, unconscionable treatment of animals and, yes, the "natural environment" is literally reaping the whirlwind? Is there anyone in this room this morning who still thinks that the human presence on Mother Earth is sustainable in its current form?

All the statistics and projections are there for you, and for your children and grandchildren, if you do have doubts. I will specifically address only one of these doubts, briefly, the one I hear most often in the context of our reliance on factory-farmed animal products: It's some version of "OK, we'll return to good old family-farm and 'natural,' 'humane' agricultural practices." Here is the problem: Demand for animal-based food is going up worldwide, not down. More and more animals are being processed by the atrocities of factory farming. So-called humane farming could not possibly keep up with the worldwide demand for animals as food.

As for the U.S., here is a report using only USDA statistics, which is not known for being a friend of animal rights: In 2019, it's estimated that 99% of US farmed animals are living in factory farms. And yet a 2017 poll showed that 75 percent of Americans "believe they usually buy 'humane products.'" Things are much, much worse for animals than we believe, and at this point, I don't think it's possible to ignore the fact that what's bad for animals is bad for the planet, and bad for us humans. So even if you aren't moved to mercy by our cruel treatment of factory-farmed creatures, you can rest assured that our very survival depends on immediate and radical change. There are so many facts I could cite to scare you with, but you probably know most of them, so I'll settle for just this one: Producing 1 calorie from animal protein requires 11 times as much fossil fuel input—releasing 11 times

as much carbon dioxide—as does producing 1 calorie from plant protein. It doesn't take a very stable genius to figure out what's wrong with that picture.

I would need a second sermon to talk about what sorts of change I have in mind. Here, I'll just quote the title of the latest book by Jonathan Safran Foer, whose previous book "Eating Animals" has recently been made into a powerful documentary. Foer's new book is called "We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast." I haven't read it yet, but according to a laudatory review in the New York Times, Foer makes the case that "we need new laws and stronger enforcement of existing ones that will make it difficult or impossible for industrial animal production to remain profitable." He also argues – which to me and many others has been evident for years – that saving the planet from climate change cannot be separated from the simplest daily choices each of us makes. We can, and must, take an inventory of the animal products we eat and wear, and find ways, today, to end our reliance upon them.

So let's become leaders of progressive Christianity. Let's put the concerns of all living creatures first and foremost in our church mission. Just as environmental groups set goals to reduce fossil-fuel dependence or carbon-based emissions in five years or ten years, let's declare: By 2029, Seekers Church will *begin* its commitment statement with these words: "I am a Seeker. I come today to affirm my relationship with this Christian community, linked with the people of God through the ages and with the animals, rocks, rivers, trees, and sky." And may those words be reflected in our individual and communal life. Oh, and by the way: Let's not be lazy grasshoppers and put off the hard work until 2028. Let's start *now*. In fact, we are. We have! The new Earth and Spirit Mission Group is exploring these and similar concerns. I know a number of Seekers who are, or who are becoming, vegetarians or vegans. Our School for Christian Growth has

proudly offered vegetarian – and now vegan, thanks to Okima – meals for several years. The Children’s Team is planning a Sunday School unit on Christian animal ethics. There’s a lot to praise here.

Which leads to a final thought about the Gospel reading. If the one healed Samaritan has indeed recommitted herself to God, what form does that recommitment take? She returns and seeks out Jesus because she wants to praise God, and thank her Savior. I think that’s a wonderful picture of recommitment, one that definitely would work for me if I could remember to do it. For all that I have stressed planet-wide concerns and social justice in this sermon, I also believe that personal salvation is the great hope of Christianity. So praise and thanks are, or ought to be, the cornerstones of my Christian faith. And when it comes to Seekers Church, and Recommitment Sunday, I am indeed full of praise for this community, and gratitude for what you all have given me.

* A philosophical footnote: Racism and sexism no longer have reasonable proponents in the philosophical literature. Speciesism, in contrast, is still the focus of a highly charged debate, and reasonable people do disagree about whether there are legitimate defenses of it. A 20-minute sermon is no place to explore this in detail, but I don’t want to mislead listeners or readers into thinking that the case for speciesism – like that for racism and sexism – is closed. My background in philosophy has allowed me to follow the conversation closely, and I’m unpersuaded that there are any strong arguments in favor of naive speciesism – that is, the version of it I used in the body of the sermon. Probably the key point concerns whether there can be *other* grounds for claiming superiority or preferential consideration for humans, *besides* mere membership in the species *and* besides some species-wide “virtue” or “potential” or “quality.” I don’t know of such an argument, and it would have to overcome the

same type of objections that are fatal to racist or sexist positions. To offer one example: You can argue that the human species exhibits more "X" (fill this in with whatever positive virtue or potentiality or quality you like) than any other species; so, to give preferential treatment to a human before a non-human is justified because of that X. But for an argument of this form to go through, you would need to show 1) that there is an independent, non-speciesist set of reasons for valuing X, and 2) that all humans in fact have X. This latter condition is more important than it might first appear: Unless the preferential treatment being advocated for is universally applicable, certain humans who lack X can logically be treated as if they were non-humans, i.e., treated unequally in the human community. Worse (for the proponent of the argument), the reverse is true as well: Animals who *have* X, even if there are very few of them, must be given equal consideration. Fill in X with "potential to love" or "reason" or "goodness" and you'll see the problems for the argument.