

“Authority at the Point of Call” by Ken Burton

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost



September 3, 2023

This sermon has three parts. First, I have a few words about the Hebrew Scriptures reading, the story of Moses and the burning bush. Then I want to share a recent dream of mine which focused this sermon for me. Finally, out of all of that, come words about authority, that is, “authority at the point of call,” within Seekers Church.

Moses both hears God’s new call on his life and, with God’s “I will be with you”, is empowered to carry it out. He is given authority at his point of call.

Now it should go without saying that I have never encountered a burning bush that was not consumed. But I recently had an intense experience that provided a sense of direction, at least for this sermon, that has some resonance with what Moses heard in that bush.

As some of you know, I tend to dream in great detail. Many of my dreams would take hours to document if I noted all their nuances of scene and setting, not to mention the details of personalities and their complex interactions. My dream notes would end up sounding more like scenes from a poorly written novel than the nocturnal products of an active unconscious.

This dream came early last Tuesday morning. In my waking life the previous day, I had just begun to think about this sermon. At that time I lacked a clear sense about what I wanted to share with you. The dream was set in the church in Arlington where I grew up and where my father was the pastor for 20 plus years, but the dream story was about a Seekers worship service. My good friend and fellow Celebration Circle member Elizabeth Gelfeld was the liturgist. Parenthetically, this is the first time that any Seeker has shown up in a dream of mine, and I am delighted that Elizabeth was somehow chosen for that role, although, as you will see, I regret the particular circumstances of her appearance in this dream.

But Elizabeth had a major problem. The guest preacher had not shown up when it was time for the sermon. He was from a non-Christian faith tradition, perhaps Muslim, but no matter, he was not available to preach at the appointed time. To make matters worse, this was the second Sunday in a row when this had happened. The previous Sunday, when I was liturgist, the preacher had also been a no-show, and I had had a difficult time keeping the service together at that point. This Sunday, even Elizabeth, with her liturgical gifts, could not continue the service. Several people got up and left, making comments as they did about Celebration Circle being

incompetent and irresponsible. Those that stayed insisted on chatting among themselves rather than supporting Elizabeth as she tried to hold the service together. Finally, she gave up and cut to the benediction, even as the background conversation continued.

As the dream continued, I felt particularly responsible for the collapse of this service because I had been the moderator of the previous Celebration Circle meeting when we failed to discuss the preacher for the coming Sunday and to designate someone to be in touch with him. Most of that meeting had been taken up by conversation about a growing sense in the community that Seekers was falling apart and that mission groups were largely to blame. That had also been the context for the negative comments about Celebration Circle when the preacher failed to show. So, with my leadership, or lack of it, unintentionally I had contributed to the very problem we were discussing. And I felt awful that Elizabeth, as liturgist that Sunday, had had to bear the brunt of my mistake. Please believe me when I tell you that I actually dreamed all of this. It is not a story that I consciously made up.

While I don't want to press the comparison to Moses and the burning bush too far, I hope you can see how this very intense dream, coming while I was working on a sermon, got my attention in a special way, just as the burning bush had done for Moses. And just as, in the context of Moses's experience, the flames of the bush led to a new understanding of God's call on his life, so the dream focused my attention on how authority is exercised at Seekers, particularly with regard to the role of mission groups. Please understand that I do not believe that Seekers is facing a crisis nearly as severe as the one pictured in my dream. In the dream the community's situation was grossly exaggerated in order to grab my attention, roughly analogous to the bush burning without being consumed. It is also clear that the dream focuses attention

very specifically on how authority functions at Seekers. And just as Moses was given the call and authority to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt, so I am now claiming, at least for the next few minutes, the authority to talk about authority here at Seekers.

Let me say immediately that those of you who have been part of Seekers for a number of years will not hear much that is new in what I have to say. I am not proposing any major changes in how authority is exercised among us but rather intending to illuminate this subject primarily, although not exclusively, for the benefit of those who are newer to the community. I am going to mention only in passing the long history of authority at Seekers and before at the Church of the Saviour. The territory has been well-covered by Marjory Bankson in her book *Stalking the Sprit: In a Do-It-Yourself Church* which I highly recommend, and I do not want to get side-tracked into that conversation.

Whether or not you are relatively new to Seekers, it is unlikely that you have had any prior experience in a church where authority functions as it does in Seekers. Authority in most Christian denominations is either congregational, meaning local church majority rule, or hierarchal where designated authority persons make all the decisions. There are denominations with various combinations of these extremes, but these two models, the congregational and the hierarchical, dominate the Christian church authority scene.

Seekers, however, is different. While we have a governing body, the Stewards, that is charged with care of the whole church and makes some decisions in that context, Stewards are neither democratically elected nor appointed by some authority person but rather self-select, and sometimes de-select, based on each candidate's sense of call. I'm sure you will hear more about how this process works during our Recommitment Season, which begins next Sunday, so for now I simply want to note the primacy of call in the selection of

Stewards, who are one of the authority groups within Seekers.

But notice I said "one of the authority groups". The fact is that most decisions within Seekers are not made by Stewards but by one of the mission groups. Each group comes into existence and is sustained by a carefully written call. The call includes the purpose of the group and detail about those aspects of our life together that the group intends to support. Once the call is approved by Stewards and shared with the community, the mission group becomes responsible for the areas of our life together that the call specifies. This last point is crucial. The mission group does not simply "do" the work that it claims but becomes the final authority for that work within the community. Its actions do not get reviewed by any other group. The mission group is exercising its *authority at the point of call*.

For example, if there is a leak in the roof, it is up to the Time and Space Mission Group to get it repaired because that group has authority at the point of call for building maintenance. If this doesn't happen, the roof opening remains and the water flows in until Time and Space gets its act together. Others in the community may speak to members of Time and Space or communicate with the group in writing, or mutter among themselves about the incompetent mission group. Such muttering is not helpful because it does not get the roof repaired and can undermine the sense of community that helps to hold Seekers together. This is what happened in my dream, when Celebration Circle and its mismanagement of the preaching schedule were the primary target.

In order to have authority at the point of call and to make major decisions about the life of the community, a group must be recognized as a *mission* group, not simply an ad hoc collection of Seekers with common interests. This is why groups that have energy around some aspect of our life together are encouraged to become mission groups. More information about this process and its spiritual undergirding

can be found in our publication *Guide to Mission Groups*, which is available both digitally on the Seekers web site and in hard copy.

Seekers Church and its members have found through thirty-five years of experience that authority at the point of call works reasonably well for us as a way of making decisions and sustaining the life of the community. Like all such human creations, whether or not biblically based, it is flawed and imperfect. We have, however, also found authority at the point of call to be sustaining and nourishing, and a useful tool for our life together.