

# Bob Bayer: Crossing Bridges, Building Bridges

Sermon to Seekers

Bob Bayer

February 28, 1999

## Crossing Bridges, Building Bridges

Good morning. I have set a complex task for myself this morning:

- Linking the Old Testament lectionary scriptures of Lent to;
- Reporting to you about the Bridge Builder Fund which has received \$1000 from Seekers over the last two years;
- And encouraging you to join the Sexuality and Spirit Mission Group on retreat at the end of April.

Hope I can pull that all together in 20 minutes! So work with me!

For some reason I was called to read the whole season's OT readings to see if there might be a message that I would miss by reading them piecemeal. Recall last week we had a reading about THE FALL at the end of the creation story. This week, we hear God's news to Abram and Serai that in their twilight years they will become parents ... of a great nation, but in the process must uproot their extended family in the post-Babel dispersion. Speaking for myself, this sounds like the classic good news, bad news story that seems to fill the Bible ... and my life.

As we approach Palm Sunday, we will hear about the Chosen

People grumbling in the desert until Moses, at God's command, strikes the rock and discovers a spring; the Prophet Samuel's search for a successor to Saul among Jesse's sons; and finally, Ezekiel's dream of the dry-boned people being reenfleshed ... reincarnated by God's grace.

Is there a message here, a message for us as we journey this year towards the cross and the cave? I was struck by the recurring cycle of failing or near sightedness of the Bible's human actors, and the enduring love of God. I view the Old Testament as the family history and lore of an ancient nomadic people trying to sort out who they were as spirit/creatures, and how they related *as a people* to that which was both before and beyond, that "other" whose name they did not speak.

These texts, embedded within a larger story, speak to me of our own search for life's meaning, a search where questions change and tend to move deeper. Why is so much of life ultimately unfulfilling? Why do I do evil, even as I seek virtue? Why is tragedy so much more appealing than happy endings (Romeo and Juliet; Message in a Bottle)? Why, when we risk in community, are the fruits so much richer and more diverse than we ever expect?

My reading both the Old and New Testaments suggests that the answers to these questions are more allegorical, than direct; open-ended and pregnant with intriguing new understandings, but never total understanding. The stories, the psalms, and the parables are, in the Jewish midrashic tradition ... descriptive, but not definitive; illuminating by shadow as much as direct light; and suggestive rather than dogmatic. They ... and my life experience ... give me hope, even when circumstances seem hopeless.

We follow in the footsteps of our Biblical ancestors on a journey with risks and wonders, with deceit and heroism. Like their journey, ours is marked by failures and unfulfilled yearnings, as well as the foundational presence of God's love.

As with God's people of another era, we journey in obedience even as we are disobedient; and The Covenant One sustains us, offering comfort and surprise along the way.

In 1968, our patriarch Gordon Cosby joined the civil rights confrontation in Selma. It was a journey of obedience and epiphany. Despite being a Johnny-come-lately to the civil rights movement, Gordon and his companions were struck by God's vision in that bloody time. He came home to ask, "Where is our Selma here in DC?"

One response was the call to close DC Village, a Dickens-like warehouse for the city's unwanted children. Thelma Rutherford, a Black woman who was a part of this congregation for years, joined Gordon and others in this quest, and soon For Love of Children ... FLOC ... was born. Shortly afterwards, a Baptist pastor from McLean, left his people and joined FLOC as its director. About the same time, a displaced Presbyterian named Sonya Dyer joined Fred Taylor as a FLOC volunteer. This was God's handiwork before us.

In 1976, the C of S had a "Babel experience" when Gordon led and cajoled that growing church into its New Lands. Fred and Sonya heard that call, and Seekers was formed. From its earliest days, Seekers mission focus included children ... nurturing our own and, through the many FLOC missions, nurturing the cast-off kids of the city.

Last week I believe you heard of the continued miracles that occur through the faithful work of Hope and A Home, a ministry that receives the largest community contribution; a mission that engages fully a third of the committed members of this church. FLOC's 30 years of service is integrally linked to Seekers' story.

In 1989, Seekers entered another leg of its journey, when it associated itself with another liberation movement and threw its lot with people of faith who would no longer endure the

church being a silent ... and sometimes vocal agent of homophobia. In changing its call to becoming a welcoming congregation, Seekers took the step of embracing and affirming each individual ... straight or gay ... the richness and diversity of his or her sexual orientation. The call embraces each of us not *regardless of* but *because of* who we truly are. Each Seeker is embraced, affirmed and challenged to live a life of integrity within the incarnate expression given to them.

The Sexuality and Spirit Mission Group was formed in 1990 out of this discernment. Like every Seekers mission group, we strive to support the life of our members and the spiritual life of the congregation. Like other mission groups, we challenge, support, and hold accountable our members in their calls to corporate and personal mission. So it is that Kate witnesses as a lesbian spirit leader; so it is that Mollie and Kate help support and lead the Kirkridge Retreat Center's national mission to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered believers; so it is that Seekers supports a young lesbian support group here every week and has helped fund and lead the biennial, interfaith conference, Sharing Our Rainbow of Light or SOROL; so it is that Kevin ministers to many questioning folks as a pastoral counselor and Pat has assumed leadership in the transgendered community. And so it is that I found my mission call matured first at SOROL, then with Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), and finally through the founding of the Bridge Builders Fund.

Eighteen months ago, a diverse group of 12 individuals came together to form the Bridge Builders Fund under the auspices of the Community Fund of the NCR. We came together around a vision ... that many needs of the community could be addressed if the energy of gay and straight identified organizations could be harnessed in collaboration. Out of that collaboration, badly needed work would be done and homophobic barriers would diminish.

On the strength of that vision, we are receiving over two

years, \$100,000 in matching funds from a National Gay and Lesbian Funding Coalition. As part of Seekers advocacy budget, the community invested \$1000 in this vision. Individual Seekers have contributed several times that amount. To each of you, and to all of you, on behalf of the Board and our grantees, a very heartfelt THANK YOU!

Last November, almost 200 people as diverse as our vision, joined in our first awards ceremony. Your contributions were used for:

- Reducing homophobia in a pilot project of the National Council of Negro Women to strengthen and heal the ties Black mothers to their gay/bisexual sons.
- Monitoring police conduct via the ACLU's support of a civilian review board in DC.
- Examining breast cancer and sexuality with Black women of all sexual orientations through social drama.
- Creating safe schools for all children through support of gay/straight student alliances and an expanded gender-based violence curriculum.
- Supporting dialogue in traditionally Black churches and providing training to church youth ministers/leaders on the needs of gay and questioning teens via the Northern Virginia AIDS Ministry.
- Providing safe and nurturing foster homes for gay and questioning adolescents ... some of who lost their homes because of their sexual orientation ... through training and recruitment of foster parents by FLOC and two other organizations.

So we have come full circle. From Selma to FLOC, through Seekers and the Sexuality and Spirit Mission Group, to connecting Bridge Builders to FLOC's outreach to sexual minority foster children. As I reflect on this journey, I marvel at the work of God's hand. I am humbled and grateful that my journey was a part of this larger journey.

Bridge Builders has begun its outreach for 1999 proposals, which are due by mid-May. We hope to award our 2<sup>nd</sup> group of grants in the fall. You can continue to help in this work through your prayers, your continued contributions, and by your own outreach. Please take copies of our RFP and encourage groups in your neighborhood to become Bridge Builders by proposing collaborative projects.

Like the Israelites, we walk our personal and community journeys trying to listen to and obey God's promptings. I have seen many fruits from my mission group's life. The Spirit's entree has come through the questions, "What does it mean to be incarnate? Is my sexuality only a source of temptation and pain ... which it has been, or is it also a gift to be celebrated?" Does your spirit dwell within a lively body, or do you feel more like Ezekiel's dried bones?

In this moment of our history, when individuals are maligned and killed for who they are, when reparative therapy of homosexuals is preached from Christian pulpits; when our nation is racked with confused feelings about our president's philandery, will you take 36 hours to pray, explore, share ... and perhaps reclaim what is true for you about being incarnate, about being a sexual/spiritual child of God? Join us on April 30<sup>th</sup> at Wellspring.

In an age of sexual objectification, the journey to wholeness as incarnate creations is not just a personal venture. It is communal adventure. Thank you, Seekers, for the miles we have walked together. Be a part of the unfolding story.