

Bob Bayer: Where Is The Spirit?

Sermon, May 24, 1997

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Where Is The Spirit?

Good morning. This morning I have find myself with a particularly challenging task. In our tradition, I have studied and prayed over the lectionary scriptures to see how the Spirit might be speaking to me ... and us. But I have also come before you this morning as a core member, to share with you my observations on where your core membership is at this point in Seekers' history.

For our visitors, a bit of context is in order. For over 40 years, Seekers and its predecessor community worshipped in this building. For over four years we have been working with the prospect of leaving this place and finding a new home. While our date of departure is not sure, it is likely within the next couple of years. We have spent enormous energy visioning the kind of place we have wanted. Some have actually done the very difficult work of screening properties in the city. Three weeks ago, we met, first as a congregation and later as a smaller group of core members, to decide whether we wanted to enter into negotiations to contract for the purchase of a property, a storefront and commercial building on Penn. Ave.

Most of us participated in community deliberations three weeks ago: attending the congregational meeting, taking care of the children, and talking over the potluck dinner. Those who have been affirmed as core members also spent time together

following that dinner. I hope that you have all had a chance to read the minutes of these two meetings. Since I was the designated note taker for the core members meeting, I published minutes of both meetings. I hope you picked up a copy last week.

The outcome of these meetings is known to almost everyone. ("Is there anyone in Jerusalem who has not heard?") About three quarters of the congregation supported ... enthusiastically or reluctantly ... the proposal to enter into negotiations for a contingency contract. One fourth opposed this step. During the subsequent meeting of the core members, we were able to hear ... in a fashion ... the heartfelt reasons why individuals either supported or opposed the proposal. I say "in a fashion" because passions were high and feelings were bruised. My own reflection is that most of us were better speakers than listeners during that difficult meeting.

As our time drew to a close, we took a poll of the 22 members present. Two thirds were ready to begin negotiations. One-third were not. Consequently, we decided to let the issue rest for awhile.

Many of the issues we aired during this meeting were quite fundamental matters that needed exploration and pondering before we moved forward with any major purchase. At the time I observed that I thought that the entire congregation needed to be aware of these issues. They are not core member issues; they are Seekers issues. I knew that my minutes would not be able to capture the richness and texture of these issues and I felt they merited taking sermon time. This was my own initiative ... may I be so bold as to say "call"? My remarks are my own reflections, not a report of the core members. I know that I will not capture all the complexity of these issues, and hope that this sermon stimulates further discussion and exploration.

The lectionary scriptures for this Trinity Sunday speak of

“God’s Spirit as a wind, a strong wind . Last Sunday, in the account of the first Pentecost, Luke reported the Spirit’s approach as the sound of wind. In today’s reading from Isaiah, the sound of the angels changing “HOLY, HOLY, HOLY” created such a din that the “pivots of the thresholds shook”. In Psalm, 29, the poet speaks of God’s voice as so powerful that it “breaks the cedars of Lebanon”, “shakes the wilderness”, “causes the oaks to whirl”, and “strips the forest bare”.

God’s presence may be perceived as a powerful voice or wind, sort of a Sacred Twister. What might this mean for us? Maybe it was this question that Jesus was getting at when he chided Nicodemus about his unbelief. Jesus was talking about all the external signs and miracles that the public had seen and the people’s failure to grasp the meaning of even these superficial events. Recall that Jesus said, “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” In other words, you experience the event but do not grasp the meaning.

The winds of passion and discord can get our attention. They sure get mine! But these winds rarely bring me clarity. I usually focus on the blowing dust that obscures my vision, and the debris that cuts and bruises. Sometimes the wind seems to be coming from all sides at once, confusing and panicking. My natural instinct in a storm like this is to grab on to what ever is known and solid, and to “hold on for dear life.”

There was a lot of roaring wind at the core members meeting as we shared our thoughts and feelings around the prospect of moving. We were swept up in a whirlwind of dust and debris that blinded and wounded. The wind has passed ... for the moment ..., and we are left trying to clear the grit from our eyes, determine injury, and bind one another’s wounds.

By the time we polled each other, we realized that many foundation issues were raised that were much deeper than a decision to begin purchase negotiations. That wind shook the

pivots of *our* foundations. Despite the grit, the wounds, and debris, is it possible to recognize that the whirlwind might have been the voice of the angels shouting “HOLY, HOLY, HOLY”?

I listed six fundamental issues that came out of that meeting. You who were there may want to add to or amend this list:

1. Authority:

Where does authority lie in the congregation? What are the appropriate roles of mission groups, leadership team, core members, congregation? Can we question individual judgments without questioning authority? Remember the line from the Advent skit, “You’ll know we are Seekers when we spend more time deciding how we’re going to decide, than in actually deciding?” That was us!

2. Call and Change:

Becoming a owner of property ... any property ... is bound to change Seekers. As Marjorie pointed out, our congregational call doesn’t reference either the stewardship of property or ministry to a particular neighborhood. If owning a property will change us and change our call, how can we be “called” to something new. At best, we will be called into the unknown, like God called the Israelites. Is the selection of a specific new home a matter of call, or might we apply a different standard for this decision?

3. Critical Elements, Unintended Consequences:

Thanks to the thoughtful questionnaires of the Homemakers Mission Group, we have a set of core features that seemed helpful in finding a suitable property. Two of those features are: unrestricted flexibility to worship on Sunday morning, and locating in the District. These considerations have almost been givens. But now we understand in perhaps new ways, the

significance of these factors in the search.

Unrestricted flexibility to worship on Sunday morning effectively eliminated a variety of options to share space with another church community. It has also had the unintended consequence of virtually eliminating from consideration more traditional worship facilities. For some, having a church-like space for worship is an important consideration. None of the viable purchase options has been a traditional church. Options that would share church facilities would not provide us free use on Sunday mornings. Can these desires, strongly held by some, be reconciled?

Likewise, remaining in the District also presents some tough, seemingly irreconcilable choices. While a central location, new METRO, has been in important concern, we have deliberately restricted our search to D.C. We have said that the symbolic power of worshipping in the City is important to us. However, in trying to also consider cost, convenience, safety, parking and an outside play area for the children, we have been unable to meet satisfy concerns of safety that are critical to many.

Taking simply the issue of safety, maybe we have to consider whether it will be practical to find a site in the District that is both safe and affordable? Similarly, is it realistic to be able to purchase within the District a site that would be large enough to meet our desires to have a child-friendly facility, one that provides room for play outside, and is convenient and safe enough to have our children commute to in their teen years? Put another way, do our critical factors of central location, parking, safety, Sunday worship and a play ground create an impossible task, particularly if restricted to D.C.?

4. Can the Spirit Get Here On Time?

Some have made strong pleas to get on with this decision, to recognize that no site will be perfect, In their view, the

status quo is neither perfect nor viable indefinitely. Others, supporting this view, have been concerned about the difficulty of negotiating a purchase, and have urged us to at least move forward exploring one option in depth. How to weigh these considerations against a standard of “call” that others ascribe to this decision?

In the dialogue that occurred during the core members meeting, we were unable to bridge between those who felt they needed to be called to a particular building ... and were not called to 1101, and those who wanted to make a decision to explore this option further as a way to release energy for other issues in our community life. How to bridge from those who believed they needed to be emotionally comfortable with a site, vs those who were so emotionally uncomfortable with delay that they were ready to “just do it”? And what about the many who were in between these two poles?

What is “of the Spirit” in this? Are our experiences of buying personal residences relevant to choosing a place to worship and live out our community life? If so, how do we reconcile the various ways in which we approach these sorts of decisions? Might the external pressures we face to find a new home, and the many seemingly conflicting considerations of site selection themselves be the Spirit moving among us? Might we be a bit like the Israelites who preferred the comforts of Egypt to the unknown of the desert? Did God use the plagues only to pressure the Pharaoh, or did they also serve to dislodge the Israelites from their comfortable oppression?

5. How Do We Make a Decision?

In the past, the core members have set consensus, rather than majority, as the standard for important decisions. We have found the Quaker tradition of consensus a powerful example. Yet even in the abstract, we opted for an ambiguous standard called “modified consensus”. While I don’t think anyone really knows what this means, my recollection is that we wanted to

have our spiritual cake and our secular schedule. We hoped we could reach a consensus based upon community discernment. But if that failed, we were unwilling to give any particular member or members the power to delay indefinitely.

The truth be told, while we admire the Quaker process, few of us have actually studied or experienced it. The community has not lived and prayed out of the spiritual discipline that is the foundation of this decision process. Consequently, when we now come to trying to apply a consensus process to a complex, emotionally laden decision, we seem to lack the fundamental understanding of the spiritual basis for this practice, and the trust to see it through. While we want the affirmation of the Spirit working through each of us to a point of consensus, we have difficulty listening ... truly listening ... to one another. We seem to lack the trust that each of us is continually doing the spiritual homework that the Quaker tradition is built upon. In the absence of this deep, abiding trust, consensus feels very much like an illogical power sharing arrangement.

We need to learn more about how our Quaker friends work through difficult issues. What processes do they use to get beyond personal feelings and hubris, to really open themselves to the Spirit in every member of a Meeting? Maybe we will find that we simply do not have the spiritual grounding to use consensus. If that is the case, then how do we proceed? How do we validate the spiritual significance of heartfelt minority, with the equally significant views of the majority?

At the moment, we seem to be unable to hold conflicting views in a gentle way. The tension is painful and seems corrosive to our community's life. Are there ways to bear our differences in integrity and love, and turn our culture on its head to embrace these opposites? I confess I do not have practical answers to these questions, but my spiritual gut tells me that the power of the cross somehow marks the way.

This brings me to the final issue.

6. Trust:

Can we trust one another enough to work through these important questions ... and site selection too? Can we see these fundamental questions about how we relate to one another and how we hold priorities in our lives ... as grace?

I believe that I encounter grace when I am pushed up against my silent, internal contradictions; when I am forced to name them and face them. Likewise, I believe it is only through grace that I reach a point of reconciliation ... incomplete as it usually seems to be, It is only through grace that I ever move to trusting in the future that lacks clarity.

So these are the issues I heard raised earlier this month: *authority; call and change; critical elements, unintended consequences; timeliness; decision making, and trust.*

In listening carefully to the sharing of the larger community in congregational meetings and other settings, I believe that the issues we encountered among the core members are representative of the larger congregation. These are not just my issues, or the core members' issues. I suggest that they are Seekers issues.

Where and how do we go from here? Some have said that we really need some heavy duty, industrial strength pastoring. Where is that pastoring going to come from?

Peter often says of Seekers that we are a "do it yourself church". I think that is true The very quality that is so freeing, so enlivening, is the quality that calls each of us to accountability at this time. In our vision of church, each of us is a pastor, and the core members are particularly ordained in the call of pastoring the community. In our vision of church, each of us has the power of the spirit; each of us has the responsibility to exercise the Spirit's gifts in

community.

If the communion circle is a symbol of our bonds to one another, can that circle also be seen as the perimeter of a vessel that holds our conflict, our pain, and our confusion? Can we see ourselves as each playing a critical, unique role in holding us together... listening to one another, praying for one another, healing one another?

In my view, for too long we have talked about membership in terms of exclusivity or power. In truth, the call and the ordination of core members is an issue of service. Speaking for myself, I ask your prayers and support for each of us in Seekers, but particularly the core members at this critical time.

The Spirit is indeed blowing through Seekers. The oaks are twisting, the thresholds are shaking. Can we feel the wind and believe, even when we do not know where it comes from and where it is going? Can we recognize the power shaking us as the angels shouting, "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY"?