

Brenda Seat: BEing the Salt of the Earth

Being the Salt of the Earth

[Luke 14: 25-35](#)

[Jeremiah 18: 1-11](#)

[Psalm 139 1-6; 13-18](#)

[Philemon 1-21](#)

Good Morning,

I have realized that God has an amazing sense of timing and humor.

I was asked a few weeks ago to preach today and I agreed without having read the lectionary. On the day before we left to begin our 1600-mile marathon drive to take Marian and Lauren to college, I pulled out the lectionary commentaries to get them copied at Kinko's and saw that the theme for this Sunday was "Letting Go."

The reading from Luke has Jesus telling his followers that they need to count the cost of being his followers. I think this is one of those passages that biblical scholars euphemistically call "hard." It really is difficult to understand especially since the very man that told his

followers to love their enemies now tells them that they must hate their parents, their family and their very life in order to follow him...This is very hard indeed!

As a missionary kid this theme of counting the cost of following Jesus was one that I heard frequently when we visited churches to be a part of their Missions Conferences. At these conferences, there would be a week of presentations from various missionaries from various countries. The common reaction by people who heard about what we missionaries did in various countries around the world was awe and amazement at how sacrificial our lives were. "I don't know how you do it," they would say. Don't you miss America?

Usually on Sunday morning after a week of these presentations, there would be a sermon encouraging people to consider giving their lives in Christian service. The cost of doing that was always one of the points emphasized. The pastor would always talk about what a sacrifice it was to leave their families, to leave all they knew and to go off to some far off country.

This emphasis on sacrifice really bothered me. I didn't feel like I was sacrificing anything...In fact I always felt a bit sorry for these people in the Midwest who had never gone outside their state much less across the ocean. It also bothered me how they set us apart, that somehow we were much better Christians because we had "sacrificed" so much.

After one of these conferences, I remember asking my parents if they felt that it was a sacrifice for them to be in Japan. I remember how they both smiled and told me no, that they were

so happy that they could be in Japan, that they felt it was a privilege. I remember feeling very relieved to hear them say that. More importantly, I knew that it was true. I never heard them indicate in any way that they felt their lives were sacrificial, or that they felt that they were giving up so much in order to be where they knew God had called them to be.

The other time that I heard about the cost of following Christ was when new missionaries came to Japan. This was always an exciting development in our small community of missionaries. I noticed however that not all the people that came to Japan were able to adjust to their new lives, to learn the language or to handle the differences in culture. My mother seemed to have a sixth sense about who was going to make it and who was not. I remember that she was worried about one new family, and I overheard her tell my Dad that they were still "counting the cost." Within a few years, filled with many difficulties, that family went back to the U.S. and never came back.

These experiences taught me that this passage in Luke has been interpreted by some as being about the negative. That it was about all the things that you could not have or that you would lose because you were following Christ. "Counting the cost" meant that you never got beyond the sense of loss you had about the things that were near and comfortable. What I saw from my parents, Keith's parents and from the other missionaries however, was that although there were losses there was also great joy, and a sense of inner richness because they were living in that place that following Christ led them to be.

Unconsciously, I think I have always known that the costs that were being counted by the pastors who preached those sermons

of having to give things up or by the missionaries who couldn't let go of what they had left behind were only the by-products of what Jesus was really talking about. I think I always knew that the cost of following Christ is not about losing but about BEing.

Jeremiah talks about going to see a potter and as he watches the potter the shape of the pot the pot became misshapen and so the potter begins to form another pot. Jeremiah takes this as a metaphor of what God can do to the nation of Israel if it did not repent from its evil ways.

(I must confess that I had a wonderful fantasy about preaching a sermon from this text to an audience where both Bush and Kerry were present, but since they're not here, we can move on...)

This metaphor of clay in a potter's hands is a rich one and although Jeremiah sees it in more geopolitical terms, I see some things in this text that work for us on a more personal level and may give some insight into the cost of discipleship.

Three years ago when Marian was a senior in high school and Lauren a junior I was looking forward to this day when they were going to both be gone. Forward in the sense that I could see it coming, not forward in the sense that I could not wait until it got here. I was struggling a bit with letting go.

One early morning I woke up with this thought: if Marian and Lauren stayed home any longer, even though we loved them and

wanted what was best for them, they would become misshapen. We had done all that we could do and now, in this new stage of their lives, they needed to leave in order to become fully who they were meant to be.

This was both a hard image and an empowering image. Hard because it is difficult to acknowledge that our loving, safe, home could somehow be harmful to those we love, but empowering because I knew that they were ready to move on and that this stage of our job was done. It has also been a source of great comfort to me as we have let them go.

It also got me thinking about the places in my own life where I need to "leave home."

Last month I announced that I will be leaving JWC mission group and will begin exploring with others about starting a new mission group whose mission will be hospitality. JWC has been my mission group since around 1992-almost 12 years, and it has been my only mission group since I started coming to Seekers. It has certainly been a safe haven for me and I felt that I have gained much of my understandings about God, about how God talks to us through our interactions with others, and how call guides us in our daily lives.

My dis-ease was not about my mission group or even about the importance of its call. What I realized was that although I was developing the gifts and visions I had for children and their spiritual development something that I feel deeply called to; there was another deep longing and desire that was not getting attention. I was becoming misshapen in a warm and supportive environment.

When I told my mission group about being called to do something about hospitality, Trish told me something that she remembered that Bob Bayer had told her about the difference between pruning and cutting off dead growth. Dead growth is something that you trim away-it has no life and it is dead weight. Pruning is done to branches that have life and vitality but they need to be pruned in order to give balance to the whole.

So I am leaving my safe home. I do not know if anyone else will join me, I do not know if we can build a mission group around this call, but I am going to follow this through and see where it goes.

It feels risky, and I am vulnerable.

When we were in Guatemala on our first day of work we were welcomed by the village with much ceremony ... We were the gringos from North America and it was clear that having us all there in that small village was a pretty intimidating thing for the all the villagers. The first task after the ceremonial groundbreaking was to mark the perimeter of the building with chalk so that we could dig a trench to lay the foundations. Some of us got some pitchforks and began to try to begin to dig the trench. The ground was so hard and so packed down the picks just bounced off the ground. We struggled and struggled as the men from the village looked on with some amusement. Slowly they began to drift on to the site. They picked up the picks and they began to make real progress in digging the trench. After all, they knew this land and they knew what it took to make it useful. Our group fell into a pattern of following the village men using the picks and digging out the loosened chunks of dirt with shovels and our hands and hauling

it away in wheel barrows.

This image stays with me: of us coming into this village as the **strong**, rich North Americans, and being revealed and made vulnerable by the fact that we could not do the heavy work of picking the dirt. But we could support those who could use the picks and by being willing to do that, we, the rich, **weak** North Americans and the **strong** villagers could work together and build the school.

BEing vulnerable is one of the costs of following Christ.

Our text from Philemon gives us another insight into the cost of following Christ.

(I really love this little letter...It feels so real and I always imagine what the original letter must have looked liked where it says in verse 19 that "I, Paul am writing this with my own hand." I always imagine that there is this big scrawl across the page before the person to whom he is dictating takes over again.)

Paul is asking Philemon to take back his slave Onesimus, not as a slave but as a "dear brother." This must have been a real shock to Philemon. We do not know much about the background...maybe Onesimus ran away and followed Paul or maybe Philemon gave him to Paul because, as verse 11 says, he was "useless." We do not really know the whole story. But what we do know is that Paul is asking Philemon to be open to looking at his slave in a new way... to see him as a brother rather than

as a possession. In order to do this Philemon is challenged to see this situation in a new and different way.

Around four years ago, Keith told me that he wanted to stop working at MCI and begin to do mediation work on his own. Initially, I was not very open to this idea at all. I knew that Keith was not happy in his work. I knew that he felt trapped. However, I could not figure out why Keith could not just find another job or another place in MCI where he could be happy. I was wary of having both of us be self-employed and I was concerned about the fast approaching college costs for our kids.

As we talked through our options I began to glimpse that Keith was being called to something new, and that although I might have preferred for it to come in some other way, if I really wanted to support Keith, I needed to let go of my preconceived ideas and to be open to something new.

Keith will tell you that I was not always supportive in his transition...I would go in cycles...supportive to a certain point and then the fear and the feelings of having no control would wash over me and I would dig in my heels.

But I was learning something through this process...being open means letting go of what you thought it would be like, and to really open your eyes and live into being in a new reality.

Thankfully, Keith has made his transition slowly, going part time at MCI for a little over 2 years and then just this past

December becoming a fulltime mediator. We are still adjusting, but I can see how life giving and soul nurturing this transition has been for Keith. In many ways I think this has been a rebirth for Keith, and I shudder every once in awhile at the thought of how my fears and anxieties could have prevented that from happening.

For us like Philemon, one of the costs of discipleship is BEing open to the new reality of life in Christ.

BEing vulnerable and BEing open makes us ready to hear God's voice. Luke tells us, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

The Psalmist asks, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"

Psalm 139 is a wonderful description of God's presence in our lives. God is in the heavens and God is in the depths, and in the dawn, and the far side of the sea. God is present always.

Philemon heard God's voice through Paul's letter calling him to do what went against all that he knew- to treat his slave like a brother.

Jeremiah heard God's voice through the hands of the potter, and he challenged Israel and its leaders to return to God.

God's voice is all around us if we are only willing to hear it.

Jesus calls us to be salty...to season the world that we live in, to change it's flavor.

What is the cost? It is to let go of whatever is preventing us from being more vulnerable, or more open, or hearing God's voice more clearly...The cost is to not just go through the motions of a life, but to really live into all that God is calling us to BE, all that was envisioned of us by God when we were "fearfully and wonderfully made."

God is calling us to BE the salt of the earth!