

“By What Authority?—The Value of Community” by Cynthia Dahlin

October 1, 2017

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost



Today it is almost Recommitment Sunday. It is a week after we remembered Muriel Lipp for her strength and commitment in building the Church of the Saviour and shaping Seekers as it emerged 40 years ago. It is the time of year each of us considers why we want and need a community of Christians and not a more typical church where you can attend or be absent and no one notices, or where you don't have to choose to put down your roots and dive deeply, as we do here.

I need Seekers. I searched for a church which struggles over the words and actions we commit to and which also makes room for those who find that some of our words pinch too tight and some promises are too big or too vague. I found Seekers to be

a community which thinks hard and also sees the grays and blacks in life, tensions in words, policies and situations, and understands that we all bring backgrounds, past experiences and different paradigms to look at the decisions and policies we make. The concepts in our Seekers Call and Commitment Statements may seem at first glance either vague or pedantic, depending on what a reader's own history is with them, but to those of us who have attended Steward's meetings for several years, the idea of changing each phrase may evince a chuckle, wince or groan. We have talked about what shared leadership means, and what the role of our Servant Leadership Team is in evoking and enhancing that shared leadership. The idea that we choose and pay Servant Leaders to not take charge is perplexing and wonderful. Seeking servanthood in the normal structures of our lives—work, family, citizenship and church—was a breakaway idea from the rest of Church of the Saviour, that did not embrace family life as part of our Christian service. Inclusion of all types, ages, colors, genders of people has been an ongoing work of our church, with waves of success and feeling like we've fallen short over the years. I remember so many times we talked about all trying to learn Spanish, for example, before we moved into this building and were thinking about trying to be most helpful to the immigrant community we had seen we might be joining in Takoma Park. We were going to have Carolyn Shields be our teacher (she now lives in a community in Massachusetts, but maintains contact with many Seekers). You could see that as a failure, but I am using it as an example of how we try to envision big, think broadly, try to imagine new ways we can bring the Kingdom of God into being, and in fact, while we did not have a Spanish school in our School for Christian Growth, we have found different and unanticipated ways to help and include immigrants.

Using a broad and other-focused imagination to find ways to help make the world a better place, a more Godly place, is what I think gives our church spiritual authority to act. In

the passage from Matthew, the key question is: "by what authority are you doing these things?" In Seekers, we try to empower members to follow their calls, and give mission groups and individuals authority to act for Seekers in the avenue of their calls. How do we ensure that their actions are good ones? How do we grant spiritual authority within our church? We do this by requiring people to act in groups in which they have built relationships and can hear honest affirmation and criticism. Not all actions people want to take are actually in the interest of others. Without careful consideration, we can diminish the capability of others, we can steer actions in ways that are easier for us to deal with rather than in a direction most helpful to others, or we may not be in control of the best information about a situation. But a mission group can require a person to express in detail his or her own values, aspirations for an action, and evidence about a situation before the call or mission is affirmed. And sometimes, we quietly quash an action, or point out that others do not agree or see a different way. Mission groups are required to contain at least two stewards, so that there are long term members of the community who will know and encourage the power of disciplines and honest relationship to help keep actions moving in a direction that hopefully, would be considered Christ-like by the rest of us. Sometimes this makes us slower to act than some of us might want, but it empowers and opens all of us by making us hear the alternative views or ways of doing things, and deciding which stands or actions we really feel we need the church to take, and which things we may have to work on individually, or through another organization.

I hope everyone in this room ultimately decides to one day join Stewards. We have discussions on nearly every section of the commitment statements-not every year, but over the years we have discussed whether we still profess belief in the Trinity, how tightly we hold accountability for spiritual disciplines, how we foster justice and be in solidarity with

the poor, and so on, through each statement. This discussion rarely leads to much change in our commitments, but leads to a lot of thought and personal action to hold ourselves to these pledges. This interaction is what, I think, gives us spiritual authority to act to hold this community together and help us continue to support so many missions in our country and throughout the world.

The discussion and interaction I have described is also a part of Seeker's integrity. And this quality is also borne out in our use of our resources. It is remarkable that our small community can give \$110,000 each year, \$60,000 to missions in the U.S., and \$50,000 to missions around the world, each of which one or more Seekers has a direct personal connection to. This giving is supported by member giving and stewards tithes. I want to use my own tithe as an example of how my sponsors used their spiritual authority to interpret a standard that might have negated my own inclusion in Stewards. Just as I was joining Seekers, I gave up my management consulting job. I had always been proud of my own income, and tithed on that basis. My husband is not a Christian, and while he loves Seekers, and has deep relationships with many members, he would not be willing to tithe his income, which was more than mine was. I would have remained a regular member, and this would have been a deep loss to me. But our marriage is an equal one, my husband believes we share 50-50 in everything, and he could agree that I could act as if 50% of his income was mine, and tithe on that. So some people might feel I am only giving 5%, others might feel I am not giving enough. But my sponsors into stewardship, Sonya Dyer and Marjory Bankson found this solution to be one that involved a deep consideration of the need to give sacrificially within my family, and one that represented a holding of the discipline. I want to note that my husband does not mind giving more of his income, he is a generous giver, but he wants to choose and have a say where it goes, and he is not comfortable with our consensus-type group

processes in the Domestic Giving and International Giving Groups. This is an example to me of how we have deeply held beliefs and policies, and we give Stewards, SLT members, and mission groups the spiritual authority to work with the policies and adapt them.

I have been talking about what made me join Seekers and make the commitment to join Stewards. But what makes me stay? It's authenticity, being known, loved despite my flaws and "issues." And I think that our authenticity allows us to experience the healing presence of God. When I was in seminary, I was drawn to liberation theology, and the idea of the preferential option for the poor. God is available to those who call on her, the poverty being of goods or spirit. And in today's passage from Matthew, Jesus says: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." When I work at N Street Village, I listen to women who have earned money for the drugs they are trying to free themselves from with their bodies, and they are deeply able to ask for God's help. They seem to be able to need, want, and find closeness to God. I believe that we at Seekers have created a community where we can tell each other of our true selves, express the true pains in our lives, and thus, we are able call on God, and hear his answer, asking us to to bless and forgive each other, and serve as the hands and body of Christ.

The commitment to Seekers as a community and the careful consideration of our values and commitment to spiritual practices nurturing our inner journey give us spiritual authority, but I want to stress that we do not claim that members or stewards are above or separate from those who come occasionally or from other Christians. At any time, any one of you who is not a steward can step forward and decide to commit, as best you can, to our joint disciplines and community meetings we have developed to build and nourish our community. There is no formal invitation and this is not a

competitive entry process. Rather, there is always the open door to explore deeply relationships through mission groups and then enter a process of working with a sponsor or sponsors you have chosen to write and share a spiritual autobiography and then begin attending stewards meetings to see if the opportunity fits you.

I think that it is sometimes difficult for someone coming into a community as a newcomer to understand the value of deciding to commit to a group, imperfect as we are, and plunge into deep relationships. But I hope as Recommitment approaches, those of you who have attended for a while choose to become members and take the plunge—and remember, we only commit for a year. We rethink and reclaim our relationship year by year to require the commitment to be fresh and real, so you can join us, and when it is no longer right for you, we will pray you move on to another expression of Christ's church. And I hope that those of you who have been members, and not chosen to be stewards, but have that nagging desire to come into the fold, choose to take up that inner challenge this season. Remember that in our passage, Matthew honored the second son, who at first declined to go and work in the vineyard, but later changed his mind. If you want to join us in the vineyard, you will be welcomed whenever you come!