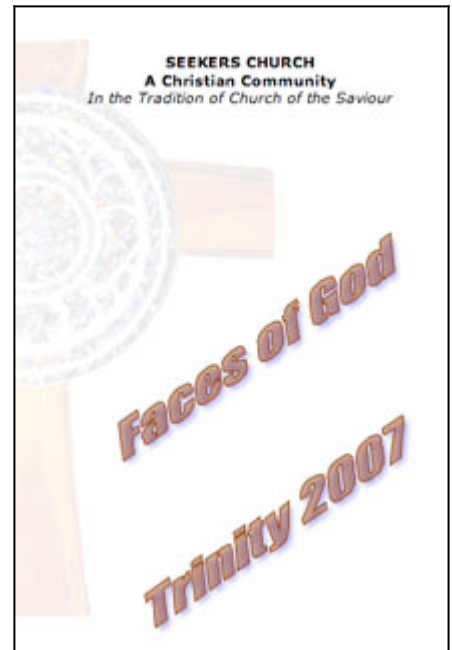


# Call and Companionship by Peter Bankson

## SCRIPTURE



Luke 10:1-20

2 Kings 5:1-14

Galatians 6:1-16

## INTRODUCTION

This Sunday we are looking at the many faces of God. Our image of the Trinity – as three different “persons” in one holy being invites me to reflect on companionship and our relationship with God – Creator, Liberator and Holy Spirit.

Developing a personal relationship with Christ is one important way we talk about our faith in God. We heard a wonderful example this morning from Billy Amoss of how

responding to God's call can change your life. Thank you, Billy, for your passionate testimony. For some, the phrase "a personal relationship with Christ" is as comfortable as a warm hug from a small child. For others it can feel like a stern finger-poke in the chest. Part of the difference is the way we feel about companionship with other human beings. Whether I like it or not, a lot of my theological understanding grows out of my interpersonal experience, from my history with companionship.

I've been thinking a lot about companionship lately. Last week I was accepted as a student in the new course on spiritual companionship at the Cathedral College beginning in September. Marjory will be on the faculty. I'm looking forward to putting some theory around my experience here over the past 30 years. This current interest in spiritual companionship is what drew me to ask to bring the sermon this particular week. This week's lections give us some interesting glimpses of interpersonal experiences from the story of God's people. The Gospel lesson offers us those vivid images of the seventy who were paired up by Jesus as his "advance party" and sent out to precede him as he headed toward his destiny in Jerusalem. What excitement! What fear! How wonderful to be chosen by Jesus – and how terrifying to be sent out ahead of him rather than going with him! And I wonder how they decided who would go with whom? Did Jesus pair them up by age or height, or let them decide who they wanted to be with, or insist that each team have gender balance?

In those days companionship was a core cultural value. People almost never traveled alone. The roads were rough, in more ways than one, and it took a lot longer to walk than it does now to drive or fly.

These days it's easy to think that we're comfortable traveling alone, but I'm not so sure. The other day I was heading into a local Panera bakery, and noticed a man sitting alone at a table by the door, eating a sandwich and having a heated

conversation. As I turned the corner and saw his other ear it was obvious: He was not alone in one sense – he was on the phone! Of course. We might be able to walk, or jog, or shop alone, but for many the courage to do that is reinforced by some remote presence in the ear. The Scripture lessons for this week don't talk about jogging with an iPod for company or offering an Art Camp for kids, but they do offer some ideas that might help enrich companionship in ministry.

## **SPIRITUAL COMPANIONSHIP: SUPPORT FOR MINISTRY**

As I worked with our lessons for this week I was surprised to see companionship everywhere! In addition to the Gospel story of Jesus sending out the seventy, the Hebrew Scripture and the Epistle also offer examples of spiritual companionship. Each one is different, but they each offer us different insights on the importance of companionship as we respond to God's call on our lives. Here's what I saw this time:

† Shared tasks help us learn to trust each other

† Sometimes pride impedes progress

† It's hard to accept help from someone who's in the same boat

But enough! Let me stop this theory and get to the story, beginning with the Gospel.

**Shared tasks help us learn to trust each other.**

In the Gospel reading Jesus appoints 70 “others,” not the disciples, and sends them out ahead of him, to towns and villages where he plans to go, to offer God’s peace and tell folks that the realm of God has come near to them.

They are instructed to accept the hospitality that is offered rather than take matters into their own hands. This was the tradition in those times. The Israelites had a long legacy of being a wandering people and hospitality to the stranger was a strong mark of their cultural heritage. To turn away a traveler who arrived at your door was to turn your back on your history.

Jesus seemed to expect rejection from some, because he advised his teams that if they were not welcomed, they should make a point of leaving, shaking off even the dust of the streets in those inhospitable towns. But here’s a sidebar lesson to ponder: he also told them let even those who rejected them know that the realm of God had come near to them, too. Leave, yes: but leave a word of hope behind.

This sounds to me like a very practical recipe for tackling an important mission: Take two capable people with different skills and experience. Acknowledge their mission and make sure they accept it. Mix in appropriate amounts of companionship and accountability. Add a dash of adventure and season to taste. Let it simmer. Watch what happens.

Shared tasks help us learn to trust each other.

### **Sometimes pride impedes progress.**

The Hebrew Scripture lesson offers us a very different and unexpected example of spiritual companionship – a young girl who was a captive, a prisoner of war, serving the wife of Naaman, commander of the army of the Arameans. Hardly a model of spiritual companionship for our time, but still there are some lessons here about the importance of being acknowledged, accepted and accountable in such relationships.

It's pretty clear from the narrative that Naaman preferred his own ways, even though they weren't being very effective in curing his leprosy. But when the slave girl told his wife that there was a prophet in her land who had a cure, he was willing to give it a try – IF he could get permission from his boss, the king. (Evidently Naaman's wife trusted the girl enough to listen to what she had to say.)

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While there are many ways in which this story is offensive, like the forced labor by a young female prisoner of war and the military raid where she was captured, her situation was not that different from many of us who feel caught in a job within some large, plodding institution. Even though she might not have enjoyed her working conditions, that girl was able to be in ministry.

I remember a poster that made the rounds about 30 years ago. It showed a gorgeous flower in full bloom above a very ordinary pot. The caption was , "Bloom where you are planted!" It was a message I could understand, and seek to follow, as I served in the U. S. Army. It called on me to look for opportunities for ministry where I found them rather than looking for ways to abandon my place for another one where ministry seemed easier to imagine.

I'm not suggesting that every one of us who longs for a clear sense of God's call should feel constrained to search for that call where we are. But that is a valid option. If that girl had nurtured her anger rather than her compassion, the story would have been very, very different.

Sometimes pride impedes progress. But we can learn.

**It's hard to accept help from someone who's in the same boat.**

In the Epistle, Paul reminds the Galatians – and us Seekers, too – that God calls us into particular, rather counter-cultural patterns of relationship with those who are on the journey with us:

*[E]ven if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.*

Those who have the Spirit should restore transgressors in a spirit of gentleness, and bear one another's burdens to fulfill the law of Christ. But all must carry their own loads, and test their own work.

I wonder if Jesus gave any guidance like this to the seventy – maybe at an 'executive session' when there were no scribes present. Or maybe, this guidance grew out of Paul's own experience with the recent converts in the little churches he called forth and mentored. In his note to the Galatians he seems to be offering some corrective guidance, guidance that seems quite relevant to those spiritual companionship relationships that emerge out of a community like ours, based on the experience of some and the needs of others. But, if we look at the nature of the relationships Paul seems to be describing, there are some interesting similarities with those we saw in the Gospel and Second Kings. Here, too, effective relationships are those that are acknowledged, accepted and, accountable.

If those who are spiritual are not recognized and accepted as such by other members of their community, they will have precious little power to restore the transgressor. And unless

the capability of someone else to bear my burden is something I have seen and accepted I'll fight to keep my burdens to myself. (After all, in the next sentence doesn't Paul exhort me to bear my own burdens?)

Part of the challenge here may be the defensive boundaries we maintain to protect ourselves. It's hard to say "I need help" when there are so many others who clearly need so much more help than I, or when those who offer to help seem so needy themselves. There I am, with Naaman, turning angrily away from Elisha's door.

These self-defining, emergent relationships may also raise up the threat of too little control. There's no 'authority,' no little "Jesus" to decide who is paired with whom. We don't maintain an evangelical 'army' to capture folks and force them into a clearly defined relationship 'for their own good.' And, relationships like these require that someone to take the initiative – to claim a hunger and ask for support; to see an opportunity and offer companionship. This kind of spiritual companionship calls forth a different kind of initiative.

That need for individual initiative has created frustrations for more than a few of us, particularly as we work hard to share leadership but don't make a big point of letting folks know who is in charge for each element of our life together at each moment of the week.

It's hard to accept help from someone who's in the same boat. But we can learn.

## **Conclusion**

I have been here at Seekers Church long enough to see that our

commitment to Christ and our journey together as a faith community are based on distributed leadership. And central to our call is the commitment to help each other live out Christian servanthood in the ordinary structures of our lives.

Companionship is an essential element of our faith journey. I see that in mission groups, and through the spiritual direction relationships that support a wider circle of Seekers. But there are some, too many, of us who do not have the support of an acknowledged, accepted, accountable spiritual companionship. I yearn for ways to offer that to more of us.

How might we nurture our abilities to “be there” for each other?

Three weeks ago we commissioned Ron Kraybill as a “missioner” of Seekers Church. He was commissioned to “... carry forth and live out in the Middle East the call we share at Seekers Church to live in peace as one humanity. And we, the members of this church, will know our fellowship bears fruit in one more place in God’s Creation.” Ron was called out at his own request, sent forth with our blessing, and will be connected with us through Pat, who will stay in touch with Ron while he is away. One model.

This Friday Dave Lloyd and I spent the morning here working together to build a folding desk in the back room of the upper level. We worked up a sweat, measuring and marking, sawing and sanding, making Dave’s vision for that project fit into the reality of the space. We spent the time working shoulder-to-shoulder, the way guys often do. We didn’t talk much theology, but as we worked together we discovered how to reach into each other’s space and help get things done without getting in each other’s way. As I held a board while Dave cut it with his power saw I had a fleeting image of two of the “Seventy” working through some mundane challenge that confronted them as they responded to Jesus’ assignment. I suspect that a lot of



what kept them going was working together long enough to learn to trust each other.

While we were working away upstairs, the rest of the building was rocking! It was the final day of our third Art Camp, and the kids were having great fun! The Artist's Mission Group was here in full force, teaching and encouraging, coordinating and corralling, helping the kids learn some new skills while they experienced an energetic companionship themselves.

I'd like to take a minute to thank everyone who helped bring the dream of Art Camp into reality. Its another model of how companionship gives us the courage to respond to God's call. Would those who are here who helped with Art Camp please stand? Members of the Artists Mission Group ... other teachers ... the lunch crew ... recess coaches ... others... That offering drew a lot of us together for a week of work and learning – and joy. Thank you!

These aren't the usual pattern of 2-by-2, like the image from our Gospel lesson for this week. We were able to create a new kind of relationship for Ron, one I hope we can offer to others of us, even those of us who are not moving halfway around the world to work for peace. And the other kinds of companionship offer models of relationship as well, relationships where acknowledgement, acceptance and accountability help us find the courage to say "Yes" to Christ.

Our School of Christian Living is one more place where we have the opportunity to plant and nurture seeds of spiritual companionship. On Tuesday evening we will begin the next session, a two-week look at preaching here in Seekers. Whether you are interested in preaching as a verb or a noun, this class offers an opportunity to build relationships that help support us as we respond to God's call on our lives.

## Remember :

† Shared tasks help us learn to trust.

† Sometimes pride impedes progress.

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My vision is that before long, with a little help from our friends, each of us will have a clearer sense of where we are about God's work in the world, and how this family of faith is walking with us on the journey. If you are interested in exploring this idea, sign up for the class, or let me know.

One last, out-of-the-box image. I don't have "On-Star" in my car, but I have seen a few of their ads on TV. It seems like a pretty handy service when you need it. Can you think of your spiritual companion like On-Star, a source of support for you when you run into a challenge while responding to God's call? Wouldn't it be interesting if – in addition to prayer and e-mail – we had some way to connect with our companion when we're in the middle of something big and can't quite see the next step? Maybe we could think about developing a kind of "On-Cross" to reinforce our support for ministry in daily life. Who knows, if we're being called by God into this new kind of companionship, in a year or so that guy at the Panera having an intensive conversation over his Caesar salad and pannini might just be getting a little support from his spiritual director!

Stay tuned ... and keep praying!

Amen.