

# Carolyn D. Shields: Opening Ourselves To New Wine

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Fellow Seekers, in preparation for this sermon on recommitment, I worked with this parable from Luke 5: 36-39:

*Jesus also told them this parable: "No one tears a piece off a new coat to patch up an old coat. If he does, he will have torn the new coat, and the piece of new cloth will not match the old. Nor does anyone pour new wine into used wineskins, because the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will pour out, and the skins will be ruined. Instead, new wine must be poured into fresh wineskins! And no one wants new wine after drinking old wine. 'The old is better,' he says."*

I took a sample poll of about twelve Seekers, in which I tried to include an equal number of men and women, core and non core members, newcomers and people with a lot of Seekers history. I asked them three questions related to recommitment: 1) Which faith tradition (if any) do you come from? 2) Did you make a conscious decision to leave that faith tradition and why? 3) What is it that you're committed to at Seekers? As you might imagine, I now hold in my possession so much interesting data that I cannot possibly reflect back to you everything I learned from those conversations in one sermon. I did learn, however, that the Seekers I talked to are very different from one another, yet their ideas about commitment, and recommitment, to Seekers have a similar theme.

I will attempt to accomplish three things this morning. First,

I will share the responses I got to the three questions I just mentioned. Second, I will compare these responses to the theories of spiritual development of Marcus Borg and M. Scott Peck. Third, I will share my own responses to these questions.

The faith traditions of the people I talked to are varied, ranging from Judaism to Catholicism, from various Protestant denominations to no faith background at all. When I asked people if they had made a conscious decision to leave their faith traditions, the answers ranged from "Yes, absolutely," to "I've never left my faith tradition, why do you ask?" While some committed Seekers still identify with their faith traditions, most of the people I talked to felt a dissatisfaction with their churches and traditions that warranted a necessary change. Some of their comments about their faith traditions include:

- "I was full of social justice but only saw a fake goodness in my congregation."
- "People only put on their Sunday best—there was no brokenness."
- "After my mystical experience, I felt stifled by the Church."
- "I heard about the Church of the Savior and thought, 'That's how church should be!'"
- "I rarely felt God's presence."
- "There was a lack of spiritual awareness, and the people did not know how to nurture one another."
- "I was mission starved and spiritually hungry."
- "They had the answers to all my questions, but I wanted to wrestle with the questions!"

I found that a lack of a concern for social justice, a lack of nurturance within the community and a perceived lack of a spiritual depth, often following mystical experiences, were the most common themes for why people left their faith traditions.

In the book The God We Never Knew, Marcus Borg discusses two root concepts of God that are found throughout the Bible and the Christian tradition. The first sees God as a supernatural being "out there," separate from the world, but who may from time to time intervene in the world. Since God is "not here," God cannot be known directly, but only believed in, which is what faith is about. Borg contends that there is nothing wrong with this view of God— that thinking of God in this way is a natural inference from main Biblical passages, and it is the view of God that most Christians in the world hold today.

The second root concept of God is God seen as a layer or dimension of reality that is all around us and within us. God is not "somewhere else" but "right here." Borg calls this concept of God panentheism. In the age of science and reason, the first concept of God, God "out there," has become an obstacle for many people. It can make the reality of God seem doubtful, even fanciful. The problem occurs when people who begin to challenge the concept of a God "out there" are not aware that there is a second root concept of God within the Christian tradition, which is this concept of panentheism. It is Borg's belief, and I agree with him, that the introduction of this second concept of God allows people to continue being Christian, or to recommit to Christianity.

In panentheism, God transcends the world, yet God is present in the world too, and in moments, disclosed to us. This concept is unfamiliar to many Christians. However, some people, when they hear of this view of God, welcome it enthusiastically because it makes sense and fits their own experience.

Borg also writes about particular kinds of experiences, experiences that occur in nonordinary states of consciousness, such as visions, mystical experiences and certain kinds of dreams that seem to those who have them to be a direct experience of the sacred. During these experiences, reality is seen as more than what is known to us in our ordinary

consciousness. People who have these experiences consistently say that they involve a knowing of God, and not simply a feeling. They involve a vivid experiential sense of seeing or becoming aware of another layer or kind of reality. Now, if the sacred, or God, can be experienced directly, by ordinary people like you and me, then God is not simply somewhere else but also right here.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a poem about this phenomenon:

*Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush alive with God  
Only he who sees takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit around and pluck blackberries.*

Despite the patriarchal language of the poem, it is my opinion that many of us who made a conscious decision to leave our faith traditions felt as though our churches were sitting around plucking blackberries while we were experiencing – and longing for – deeper connections with the sacred – and each other.

M. Scott Peck, in his book The Different Drum, outlines four stages in the human spiritual life. Peck's stage two corresponds to Borg's definition of God being "out there." People in stage two have a very little understanding of an immanent, indwelling God, and they tend to think of God more along the lines of a "Giant Benevolent Cop in the Sky." People in Peck's stage three correspond to the folks whose education and faith in science will no longer allow them to believe in such a Giant Benevolent Cop in the Sky, but haven't yet discovered the idea of panentheism. Peck defines stage four as the mystic communal stage of spiritual development, when people become aware of a unity, an underlying connectedness between things, a fitting together of things according to an ordinarily invisible fabric, which, in Borg's language, is panentheism.

I believe that many people who are in Peck's mystic communal stage of spiritual development feel homeless until they find a faith community like Seekers that understands where they are coming from. For me, I knew that the Lutheran Church I grew up in had stopped feeding me, but I didn't really realize I wasn't a Lutheran anymore until I found Seekers. I wasn't looking for an intentional Christian community at the time—I didn't have a vision in my mind that such a place existed, as many of you did before you found it, or in some cases, created it yourselves. However, I recognized it as soon as I found it. It was an "Of course!" or "Oh, yeah!" experience for me. But it wasn't until I started realizing the depth of what Seekers has to offer, which is still unfolding to me, that I realized I could not go back to the faith tradition I grew up in. The old wineskins had burst open with the inpouring of new wine.

In the story Jesus tells in the reading from Luke I read earlier, Jesus is using the images of new cloth not being able to fit with old cloth, and new wine not being able to be contained with old wineskins, to illustrate that a new way of thinking will irreparably shatter an old way of thinking. Once the old wineskins have been burst, they are no longer functional. We may mourn for them and even wish that we could repair them, but they simply do not and cannot serve us anymore. We need new wineskins after the old ones have burst—in effect, we must recommit to new wineskins.

I heard Marcus Borg speak at a seminar last fall, where he said that dying to our old way of doing religion and embracing a new way of life is essential for the growth of Christianity. He was firm in his stance that we must now have a tradition where we speak of personal experiences of the sacred. That we are meant to let the Christian tradition shape our way of life and being, and that the Bible mediates the sacred to us, but that the Bible is not an authority over us. The Bible is a place where conversation continues, and that it is the conversation itself that is critical to the health of

Christianity.

Let me share with you some of the responses I got to the question, "What is it that you're committed to at Seekers?"

- "Fellow travelers on a spiritual journey."
- "Being serious about my spiritual life."
- "Seekers is not a social club where we bring our Sunday best."
- "Commitment to the Christian tradition."
- "There's a sense of realness, that's it's okay to open yourself up to God."
- "There's a place for both giving and receiving that creates a wonderful sense of community."
- "The leadership/laity structure."
- "Sonya's leadership."
- "The richness of the disciplines and the service."
- "Mission Group."
- "An honoring and respecting of different points of view, which is an image of the body of Christ."
- "Spirit infuses what happens here."
- "The sense of love, caring, concern and nurturance here."
- "Commitment to social justice."
- "There's a demand for authenticity that just goes deeper and deeper."
- "There's no pressure. Seekers didn't rush me."
- "A first-hand experience of the Sacred."
- "Everything."

I could go on and on with this list. I am reminded of one of Deborah's sermons when she said that people seem to fall in love with Seekers. I found that to be true of the people I talked to. I know that it has been true for me. It's not that people think there isn't anything wrong with Seekers, but people commit to Seekers because there's something here – a depth of passion – they haven't found any place else, and Seekers feels like home to them. One of you told me that

you're recommitting this month because there's never the idea that you've "made it" on your spiritual journey here. Recommitment opens the opportunity for us to choose yes or no, and it forces us to make a decision.

Now what about the part of the scripture that I read earlier which says the old wine is better than the new wine? To me that seemed a bit paradoxical at first. But when I thought about it more deeply, I saw that spirituality might be more like a spiral than about concrete stages of development. Maybe our work here is to honor and draw from what is life giving about our faith traditions while letting go of what feels stifling to us. In this way, we can continually come up against our constraints and work with them until we find where the Spirit is. This then allows us to go back to work with our origins again. Like a piece of old cloth, our faith traditions give our Christian experience a character or a luster they wouldn't have otherwise. Recommitment keeps us coming back to the idea that faith is not static, that it's a constantly unfolding, changing process, and that the only way to undertake this spiritual journey is in community. Seekers is just that community for many of us.

I found the commitment to outward mission to be a very important piece of what people like about Seekers. While many of us love Seekers for many different reasons, we all, hopefully, are here because Jesus' call to love one another shapes who are, gives us direction and calls us to next steps. As a community as a whole, we know that our work doesn't end with the inner journey. Our own personal issues can only be truly, ultimately be healed by the outward expression of the love we need ourselves. Borg contends that God's will for us – the ultimate goal of the working of the Spirit within us and the reason we open our hearts to God—is to become more compassionate beings. Compassion is the primary gift of the Spirit, and the primary sign of spiritual growth.

Certainly, showing compassion for others is no easy task. Peck

believes that to be a true Christian one must live dangerously. Jesus said "I am the way, " but his way led to crucifixion, which is a pretty scary thing. Peck even goes so far as to say that the vast majority of churchgoing Christians in America are heretics, since for all intents and purposes they have ignored the teachings of Jesus. Jesus rejected the boundaries of the established social order and challenged the institutions that kept them that way. How many churches in America are involved in changing the social structures that keep people from realizing the lives God would have them live?

In the gospel lesson we heard this morning about the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus is exposing the complacency of the rich. The rich man's apathy and indecisiveness about closing economic and social disparities between the rich and the poor goes straight to the heart of our modern situation. In Pat's sermon on [Covenant and Community](#), he raised very important questions for us as individuals, but I extend them to churches: Do churches think putting their energy into love and justice is optional? Do churches think they can opt out of serving God with the lives of their communities?

As a community, Seekers understands that the inner and outward journeys cannot be separated. Jesus' teachings show a deep awareness of how individuals are victimized by society. Compassion for ourselves, compassion for our faith community, and compassion for the poor and marginalized go hand in hand. For all his talk of heretics, Peck mentions that he does see some small signs of hope for the Christian church, and the only church he specifically mentions by name when writing about these signs of hope is the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C.

I see Seekers as an environment rich with nutrients and potential that allows people like me to first put down roots and then to grow and flourish and expand our horizons. I don't think this process ever ends at Seekers. I think that because people here don't pretend to have all the answers, the



questions we ask will continue to go deeper, allowing our roots to take hold ever more firmly, giving us the ballast we need to expand outwardly, more and more fully, and beautifully, and passionately.

I recommit to Seekers because I see it as one of the most loving decisions I can make with my life right now. In the short time I've been here, a little less than two years, I feel that the possibilities for what my life could be have exploded exponentially. I'm having a hard time recognizing my life anymore, which actually is not such a bad thing. I believe that Seekers can draw out the best in people. Don't ask me how I got to be up here today, preaching this sermon. I'm still not quite sure now it happened. I had every intention of being one of those people who attends Seekers for twelve years before even thinking about the possibility of preaching. Tomorrow it will be two years since I moved from Ecuador back to the States. If you had asked me on the plane on the way home from Ecuador to predict what I'd be doing in two years, preaching a sermon never would have occurred to me. Yet here I am. It seems as though God intended that there be more to my life than my own limited vision of it, and I recommit to Seekers in order to continue the search to find that life, and to live into it as fully as I can.

I've shared with you the responses I got when I asked people about their faith traditions and their commitment to Seekers, how they relate to Borg's and Peck's theories of spiritual development, and what I myself am committed to at Seekers. I think that we must continually open ourselves to new wine in order that we may continually burst our old wineskins. If new wine is harvested every year, then commitment to the faith journey can never be a one-time decision.