

“Continuity and Change” by Jacqie and John



Recommitment Season

October 9, 2022

John: Jacqie and I were thinking about the Learners and Teachers tradition of preaching sermons for Recommitment Season. Our group asked who wanted to preach when, and we both sort of hesitated and said Well, but we didn't really know what we would preach about. Then Jacqie said, What if you and I preach a sermon together? That instantly sounded

like fun to me, and it would also let some creative energy flow between us.

Jacqie: I first met John 37 years ago when I first started going to noon AA meetings in the Parklawn building in Rockville. He had the awesome attainment of 4 years of sobriety at that time, so he was very much my senior in sobriety, even though he is 10 years younger than me. It was hard for me to even imagine an alcoholically-inclined person going for 4 whole years without a drink. He was very kind and supportive to me and we became friends though we drifted apart over the years. I was so surprised the first time I came to Seekers for worship and noticed John in Circle Time. This was almost 20 years ago and we have been in the same mission group, Learners and Teachers, almost ever since. Sharing 12-Step principles and Seekers values, which have a lot in common, as well as much of our personal history, has created a strong bond for us and we often touch base for reality checks to keep our “stinking thinking” from getting out of control. We also taught School for Christian Growth class (then the School for Christian Living) on the 12-steps many years ago. It was called “The Twelve Steps for Everyone.”

John: In fact, Christianity and the 12 Steps have a lot in common, which is no surprise since the founders of AA were devout Christians – who fortunately had the wisdom to make sure no overt religious creed was ever mentioned in their writings. Our Gospel story today focuses on gratitude, and gratitude is a hallmark of 12 Step recovery. The Samaritan who is healed by Jesus praises God for his recovery, and returns to Jesus to thank him personally.

When I stopped drinking and using drugs, and began attending AA meetings regularly, I was very grateful for this seemingly impossible turn of events. Those of you who aren't addicts

may have a hard time imagining just *how* impossible sobriety appears to the practicing alcoholic and addict. Being cured of leprosy would be easy by comparison! So this kind of instant, heartfelt gratitude that the Samaritan expresses came naturally to me, as it would to anyone.

But the 12 Step program teaches that gratitude is actually a way of life, no matter whether things are going well or badly for me. With our penchant for irritating slogans, we call it "an attitude of gratitude." That is much harder to practice, and after 41 years I'm still learning how. AA offers a simple tool to help with this. We're encouraged to make a "gratitude list" as often as possible – I do it every morning – and remind ourselves of our blessings. This may sound kind of boring and routine, but you'd be surprised how effective it is. The trick for me is that if I name something like "my good health," I have to spend a few moments really picturing and remembering ill health, times when I've been sick or hurting, and then express the gratitude. That way my whole body and emotions are involved, at least briefly. Another way to make my gratitude list meaningful is to be sure to name the small things – a delicious bagel made by Katie, a friendly smile from a salesperson. Maybe this is just me, but these small moments make a big difference in the quality of my day.

I think this kind of gratitude – the attitude of gratitude – is taught by many Christian traditions as well. "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," Paul says in 1st Thessalonians. This is more than a mere gratitude list, obviously. We're supposed to be thankful for *everything*. Right now Katie and I are watching the Ken Burns documentary about America and the Holocaust. I do not have the slightest idea how to be grateful for the history I am learning. But I never thought my Christian journey was a finished product. I have a long way to go in understanding true thankfulness.

Jacqie: Gratitude is one of those values that Seekers and the 12-Step programs share. There are two stories about leprosy and healing in the lectionary for today. One is one is about the Samaritan man with leprosy who is the only one of those healed by Jesus to thank him. It is about gratitude. Both stories stress the importance of listening to people who are different from us. Naaman's story also includes the themes of humility, letting go of ego, and acceptance.

I'm going to read a poem that I wrote (and that many of you have heard before) about Naaman that incorporates these themes. It's called, "Naaman Hits Bottom:"

It starts as a stock dysfunction myth

A diseased hero looking for a royal cure

a king, helpless because his power doesn't extend to healing,

And a household full of codependent women, all with good advice.

Everyone trying hard but getting nowhere.

Then an outsider suggests a prophet healer.

But (and isn't this the way it always goes—

you finally get them some help and they're too good for it!)

Naaman identifies out —

the healer lacks class, and so does the cure

and, besides, where's the fawning welcome his stature merits?

Doesn't that prophet know how special Naaman is?

The healer (through his servant)

bids Naaman bathe in the unworthy Jordan.

But no, Naaman wants a much more glamorous cure.

Then a slave girl dares to ask what's lost by trying.

Letting go of his pride, that's the real miracle,

as he enters the holy water and is healed.

Naaman was healed because he listened to others who were different from him, let go of ego, accepted reality, and followed advice. We can learn a lot from Naaman.

While we at Seekers are largely in agreement about Seekers values, we are going through a time of disagreement about how we would like to see these values manifested. What needs to change? What needs to stay the same? Are there ways we can change our practices while still keeping our core values the same? We need to listen to others who are different from us, let go of ego, and consider opinions that make us nervous or uncomfortable without getting defensive. John and I are calling this sermon "Continuity and Change." We need both continuity and change in our special and wonderful church. John is going to say more about that and relate it to the subject of recommitment.

John: Here is a philosophical story that asks a good question about recommitment. [Dedicated to Pat Conover.]

In ancient Greece, the hero Theseus built a wonderful ship. This ship was the envy of all Greece, and Theseus was intensely proud of it and made sure that every board and sail was in perfect condition. He kept a careful record of every repair. When Theseus died, his family kept up the tradition. The Ship of Theseus floated resplendent in the harbor, and was taken out for a sail on ceremonial occasions, and all the necessary repairs continued to be made. If a plank started to rot, it was immediately replaced. If a rope frayed, a new piece of rigging was installed.

This tradition of maintaining the ship of Theseus in perfect condition went on for decades, down the generations. The family also continued to keep meticulous records of all their work on the ship. Finally, a day came when the head of the family, whose name may have been Shmeseus, was going over the records concerning the ship. His jaw dropped and he gasped for breath. Shaken, he immediately called an emergency meeting of the entire family.

When all had gathered around the huge table, Shmeseus said, "I have some extraordinary news. I've just reviewed our records concerning our great ancestor Theseus' ship. I've discovered that, as of yesterday, *every single part of the original ship has been replaced*. Having made so many necessary repairs, we now have a ship that contains not one original plank or rope or sail or bolt." He stared aghast around the table.

The less philosophically minded of the Theseus family said, more or less, "And? So what? Where are the refreshments? We were told there'd be refreshments."

"Don't you understand?" cried Shmeseus. "If the entire physical ship has been replaced, *is it still the ship of Theseus?* How is that possible, if Theseus himself never touched a single part of our current ship? What are we to do?"

The less philosophically minded of the Theseus family now ordered out for a cup of hemlock, which they forced Shmeseus to drink, and that was the end of Shmeseus. However, a very young family member named Plutarch wrote down the story, which is how we know it today.

So what does this have to do with recommitment? Okay, hold the hemlock and I'll explain.

Perhaps a church is like the Ship of Theseus. It starts as a glorious achievement that everyone admires and takes care of. But part of "taking care of" is replacing parts as they wear

out. Sooner or later, the church may have a whole new set of physical parts – certainly the people who comprise it will be different. So imagine that, at some point, the church has nothing left of its “original stuff.” Is it still the “same church”?

When I recommit to Seekers, am I recommitting to the “same church” Gordon Cosby inspired, decades ago? Let’s say that we’ve preserved Seekers in very good order, which I think we have. And let’s also say, just for the sake of the story, that all the material parts of the original Seekers – people, mission groups, liturgies, the church building – will eventually be replaced. How then can it still be “Seekers Church”? What’s left if the physical stuff is all different?

I’m actually going to leave you with that question, and just suggest that the answer may be “the spiritual stuff.” After all, the Ship of Theseus was still perfectly recognizable, and could still sail beautifully, even after its complete physical metamorphosis. In fact, only an annoying philosopher would even raise the question of whether it was still the Ship of Theseus.

Maybe, when we think about recommitment, we should ask ourselves, What is the *spirit* of Seekers that we want to recommit to, even if a lot, maybe most, of the old planks and sails have been replaced?

Jacqie: And as we dialogue about the future of Seekers, let us remember the values described in today’s scripture readings. Let us be grateful for what has come before, listen to one another and accept any changes that are needed, and let go of ego as we plan for the future. And let’s not poison the Shmeseuses among us. We can listen to them non-defensively and thank them for their input,