

David W. Lloyd: Committing to Love God and Our Neighbor

Committing to Love God and Our Neighbor

In the Seekers Church, this is recommitment season. Recommitment Sunday is about a month away. For those of you who are visitors, recommitment is one of the traditions that we brought from the [Church of the Saviour](#), the church in which the Seekers Church was born. During this season, each member of the congregation is expected to spend a significant amount of time during daily meditation and journaling, reflecting on whether he or she can wholeheartedly recommit. Each person is also expected to spend at least an hour of silent meditation here in the sanctuary sometime during this season. We expect each member of a mission group to report on these reflections in his or her weekly spiritual report to the spiritual director of the mission group. If the member is going to recommit, we expect this to be fully discussed. If the member is not going to recommit, we expect this to be fully discussed, too. During our Stewards meeting next month, we will go around the circle and each Steward will say whether he or she is going to recommitment. At some point, each person who will recommit signs the book here on the altar.

In Elizabeth O'Connor's original book on the Church of the Saviour, [A Call to Commitment](#), recommitment season is described this way:

These days before recommitment Sunday bring into the open many expressed reservations and resistances. It is a time of pain and of healing, a season in which we try with brutal

*honesty to examine anew our original commitment to Christ.”
We ask ourselves,*

Are our roots deeper in God’s life? Does the common life that we know in Christ mean more to us than a year ago? Are we willing to give ourselves to the fellowship at greater cost?

Alternatively, is it true that Christ and his ministry mean less as more and more areas of loneliness and uncertainty and uneasiness have been satisfied? Do we toy now with conventional structures, which will be less pressing and less demanding and less revealing, and in which we can settle down more easily?

Do the people who are called by Christ and redeemed by Him seem more ordinary than in the first months of wonderment? Then there was no cost in money or in blocks of time which seemed too great. Do we now question the worth of the fellowship? Does it make a real difference to us whether or not it is there for another person? Do we know that if we are growing Christians then we are always growing more deeply into the lives of those who compose the Body of Christ?

Then on Recommitment Sunday, the Stewards of Seekers Church who are recommitting will stand and recite the [Stewards’ recommitment statement](#) in unison. The Stewards’ commitment has some statements about what we believe, and then goes into the commitment part, which states:

I commit to:

- *Be a faithful witness to God’s presence among us;*
- *Nurture my relationship with God and Seekers Church*

- through specific spiritual practices or disciplines;*
- *Care for the whole of creation, including the natural environment;*
 - *Foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor;*
 - *Work for the ending of all war, public and private;*
 - *Share responsibility for the spiritual growth of persons of all ages in the Seekers Church community;*
 - *Take responsibility for the organizational health of Seekers Church;*
 - *Respond joyfully with my life, as the grace of God gives me freedom.*

Then the members of Seekers Church who are recommitting will stand and recite the [members' recommitment statement](#) in unison.

I am a Seeker. I come today to affirm my relationship with the Christian community in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour, linked with the people of God through the ages.

As a member of this church, I will deepen my relationships in this local expression of the Body of Christ, sharing my gifts from God with others who worship with Seekers Church, and in the wider world. I will:

- *Nurture my relationship with God and Seekers Church through spiritual disciplines;*
- *Care for the whole of creation, including the natural environment;*
- *Foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor;*
- *Work for the ending of all war, public and private;*
- *Respond joyfully with my life, as the grace of God gives me freedom.*

This is the tradition of recommitment that we incorporated

into our life when we began the Seekers Church. It is a rather unique tradition among churches. In the churches of my youth, you joined when you finished confirmation class, usually as a teenager, or when you transferred your membership from some other church. Once you made the initial commitment you were a member on the church rolls, and you were a member of that congregation even if you never set foot in that building again while you were alive. I daresay that was true in the churches that most of you came from.

Last year about this same time, I preached a [sermon about belonging](#). In one part I said,

But to belong to God as a Christian means to surrender my heart to Christ. To belong to Jesus is to accept his invitation to let Him enter my heart, and then I find that I enter His heart as well. And in entering his heart, I enter his Body – and that is you and all Christians everywhere past, present, and future. And so by belonging to Christ I belong to all of you. I don't belong to you all without belonging to Christ. I don't surrender to Seekers Church. I surrender to Christ, and the Church comes with it. Knowing you and being known by you is how I get to know Christ and be known by Christ more deeply. Surrendering to Christ, belonging to Christ more deeply is how I surrender to you more deeply.

I went on to say,

This is hard stuff. To belong to Jesus is to be committed to what Jesus is committed to. That means joy and freedom, but it also means pain and hardship, sacrifice, living in the narrow path. To commit to Christ, to enter the heart of God, is to open myself up to experiences I never thought I would have, to do things I never thought I would do, to be in relationship with people I never thought I would be around.

Sometimes I don't like one or more of you very much and I am sure that sometimes one or more of you doesn't like me very much. But it doesn't matter. We are part of the Body of Christ. To be the Body of Christ we belong to each other. It doesn't matter if the eye doesn't like the foot, or if the nose doesn't like the armpit, or if the ears don't like the mouth. To be part of the Body is to be part of all of it.

It has not gotten any easier over this last year for me to be part of the Body of Christ! At this very moment, I am aware of several relationships that I have with people in Seekers that need some work on my part. I do not think that these relationships are broken, but some issues need some discussion, and the relationships need my prayer and they need me to seek forgiveness. Most of these involve members of the Washington Area Tumelong Team, due to the way I moderated our last meeting. The other I am aware of is with Keith, over his Growing Edge Fund project.

Now if there are others who think I need to work on my relationship with you, if you will form a line along the wall, I will give you a number.

While I was thinking about these commitment statements, I was blown away by a recent issue of The Christian Century, which had a wonderful article by Scot McKnight, entitled, "Jesus Creed: What is the Focus of Spiritual Life?" McKnight says that the words "discipleship" and "disciplines" have been the quintessence of following Christ. "Discipleship" is associated with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and is generally understood as a radical commitment to social justice. The Sojourners community, Dr. Martin Luther King, and the Berrigan brothers exemplify it. In Seekers Church, it is probably best personified by Pat Conover. The word "disciplines" is associated with practices that turn us inwards to find the

source of spiritual sustenance, such as worship, prayer, meditation, and fasting. It is associated with Julian of Norwich, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton and Kathleen Norris. In Seekers Church, it is probably best personified by Muriel Lipp.

McKnight asks if it is discipleship that stands behind the disciplines, but he says,

When I get up in the morning, my first thought is not, 'Today is a day to be radically committed.' Good though that thought might be, it is not enough to sustain me. It was not enough to sustain Jesus himself, radically committed though he obviously was...Radical commitment is an important concept, but it is not what the Christian life is all about. There is something behind discipleship.

McKnight asks,

Is it the disciplines that stand behind discipleship? Jesus prayed, meditated, fasted, kept periods of solitude, lived simply, worshipped and celebrated. But he rarely spoke about the disciplines. They are there, but they are not his focus...The disciplines are important, they are well-worn paths, but they cannot become the central focus of the spiritual life. As there is something behind discipleship, so there is something beyond the disciplines.

McKnight points out that Jesus' call to costly discipleship can be abused, especially if the focus becomes on justice in the abstract and not on the individuals who need justice on their behalf. He also points out that Jesus' disciplines can be abused. They can lead people to compare themselves favorably or unfavorably to others, which can lead to a sense of accomplishment and superiority. They can also lead to

egoistic spirituality that, in McKnight's apt words, "assigns God the task of serving me – of making me a better person, of making the world clear to me, of swooping down to earth just for me."

McKnight asks, "What is it that turns discipleship into a commitment that keeps us faithful? What turns the disciplines into a path of spiritual formation?" He believes that the answer is found in the story of Mark's gospel, where a scribe asks Jesus, "Which commandment is the most important?" McKnight says that another way of asking this is to ask, "What is a life of discipleship? What are the disciplines designed to accomplish?" Jesus cites the Torah, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no greater commandment than these." The scribe acknowledges this, and adds, "To love God totally and to love your neighbor as yourself – that is far greater than any burnt offerings or sacrifices."

McKnight says,

Behind discipleship and beyond the disciplines is love – love of God and love of others. Radical commitment is fine, if it is fired by love. Spiritual formation is noble, if it produces love for God and others. Without love, to modernize Paul's words, we become either fanatics or egoists ... Love of God is to be joined, at all times, with love for others. Both, always. Apart they turn humans into fanatics and egoists. Together they turn humans into the imago Dei, walking expressions of God's love. If our foundation of radical commitment is love for God and others, we live as God would have us live. And if we practice the disciplines in

order to deepen our love for God and others, we live as God would have us live. Discipleship is not so much about radical commitment as it is about radical love, and the disciplines are not so much about spiritual formation as about love formation.

This year our lectionary gospel has been the Gospel of Luke. Luke has a different context for this commandment. Instead of a scribe asking, in sincerity, "Which is the most important commandment?", he has a scribe present Jesus with a test question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, always alert for such tests, turns it back on him and asks, "What does the Torah say?" In Luke's gospel, the scribe pronounces the commandment that links love of God with love of neighbor. When Jesus tells him, I suspect with a knowing smile, that he is right, the scribe asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, a story we have heard so many times that it has lost its punch. To get the same shock value that such radical love would have had for the scribe, the disciples and the other listeners – all Jews – we would have to replace the Samaritan with a Palestinian terrorist. Alternatively, to get that same shock for ourselves, we would replace the half-dead man with an American, and the Samaritan with a member of Al Qaeda.

Jesus does not tell the scribe who his neighbor is, which might have allowed the scribe some room to debate whether a particular person or group was his neighbor. Instead, Jesus once again questions the scribe, "Which of the three men was neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The scribe gives the only possible answer, and Jesus finishes by telling him to go and do as the Good Samaritan, the Hamas terrorist, the member of Al Qaeda, did. Not to be a terrorist, but at least in this one instance, to give out of radical love.

I want to point out that in neither gospel does Jesus say first that we have to learn how to love ourselves before we can love others. Perhaps it is in loving others out of our radical love of God that we learn to love ourselves.

When [Learners and Teachers mission group](#) was planning our fall semester, unknowingly Margreta Silverstone and I both independently hit on this same issue of loving our neighbor as the theme of our respective classes. I will be leading a class that explores Luke's gospel, which has plenty of radical commitment in it, and plenty of Jesus' spiritual disciplines in it. Nevertheless, what radiates through the Gospel of Luke is Jesus calling us to love God totally and love our neighbors as ourselves, totally. Margreta has seen this fall as a good opportunity for us to get to know this neighborhood, in two dimensions – who are our neighbors that we need to love as we love ourselves, and who of our neighbors are being neighborly to them already, and may be inviting us to a radical commitment with them. My class starts this Tuesday evening; Margreta's hosting of guest speakers starts early in October.

So, rather than focusing on the particular words of the Seekers' commitment statements during your recommitment reflections, I invite you to think of your recommitment as a decision to love God radically, with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and a decision to love your neighbor radically, as yourself. To help you do that, join us in one of our two classes on Tuesday night. You will get some ideas about how you can love God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and some ideas on how you can love your neighbor as yourself. And those ideas may make it easier to stand and make that commitment next month.

Remember, the line of my closest neighbors in Seekers Church,

who think I need to work on my relationship with them forms over here!