

David W. Lloyd: Snakebite and Healing

Seekers Church
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Snakebite and Healing

When I read the [passage from the Hebrew scriptures](#), I thought to myself, now if Ken Leinbach (a naturalist educator who is temporarily away from Seekers) was [preaching](#), or was giving the word to the children, he would bring at least one snake! I did not bring any snakes, although I have a few snake stories. But maybe you do too and we can compare them later.

This passage is a potentially rich one for meditation. Time is passing for the Israelites as they wander through the desert. More and more of their old ties to Egypt have been lost, including Aaron, who has just died. It is not a community, but Moses and Eleazar – Aaron's son, the Levites, and then all the rest of the Israelites. They are in their sullen mood once again, and they complain about the lack of food and water. More to the point, they lack the vision of the Promised Land, "Why did you bring us from Egypt?" And God sent poisonous snakes among them. Some were bitten and some died.

Can't you just see it? Cecil B. deMille directing Charlton Heston. Or George Lucas or Stephen Spielberg directing Harrison Ford. Slithering snakes, dozens of them, maybe hundreds of them, and the people shrinking back in terror. Most of us have seen Westerns that involve the cowboy or the maiden in trouble and the rattlesnake nearby. Some of you may have read the book or seen the movie, "The Little Prince," and

remember the snake. For many of us, the thought of encountering a poisonous snake in the wild, especially in the desert, can engender absolute terror.

No doubt the terror of the people led them to think that once again, they had done something that offended God. By this time virtually any time something went wrong they recognized that they were at fault. So they apologized to Moses for speaking against God and him. And they begged for God to take away the snakes. So Moses interceded for them. The scripture doesn't actually say that God took away the snakes.

What God tells Moses to do is to make a snake of bronze and erect it on a standard so that whoever had been bitten and looked at it would be healed. How extraordinary! I have been thinking that it's like a variation of curing a hangover by having a hair of the tail of the dog that bit you. In another sense, it isn't extraordinary at all. The caduceus, the staff with the entwined serpents, is an ancient Greek symbol of healing and is still the symbol of physicians. So gazing on the symbol of healing sets one mind to be healed, and that is frequently a necessary step before healing can begin. Or, gazing on the bronze serpent reminds me that I was bitten because I had been faithless; I had grumbled about my wilderness relationship with God and the bronze serpent reminds me that God will be faithful to those who keep faith. It heals my broken relationship with God.

But the Hebrew scriptures are almost always about community, not the individual. When individuals are the focus, it is because of their relationship to the community. So it is more appropriate to say that gazing on the bronze serpent reminds us that we were bitten because we had been faithless; we had grumbled about our wilderness relationship with God and the bronze serpent reminds us that God will be faithful to those who keep faith. It heals our broken relationship with God.

I have been thinking about this passage as a metaphor for

Seekers. It seems that with our impending move from this building, we are in the wilderness. To be honest, with the name of Seekers, we can expect to be in wilderness a good bit of the time and it has seemed to me that we have spent most of our 20+ years in one or another metaphorical wilderness! Perhaps like some of you, I have been grumbling about being forced from my Egypt, on Massachusetts Avenue. We know there is a promised place for us, sacred space in a holy place. Actually, we will probably make it sacred space and make the place holy, and not just by a ritual, but by the ordinariness of our life together as a congregation of people on a spiritual journey with Christ. But as yet, I haven't seen it.

Like the Israelites who heard the account of Caleb's spies who went into Canaan, we have had different reactions to the proposed space to purchase on Pennsylvania Avenue Southeast. Some see it as the Promised Land, a place for an ecumenical embassy or the tabernacle of the artist. Others see it as a jumping off point for immersing ourselves in a D.C. neighborhood in a way that we haven't in this building. Others see it as a place that will remain foreign to us, too distant from our daily lives. Others worry that it is potentially unsafe at night. Others see both the interior and the exterior site as not particularly welcoming to families. You will hear later this morning about the efforts of some Seekers who have been looking for space to share with another congregation. There will be another congregational meeting next week. And so there is a muted mumbling among us, but I see this as healthy dialog for us.

But there are other issues involved in this decision, and I think the way they are handled may be potentially toxic for us. They have to do with the dark side of American culture. One of them is about money. Another is about racism. A third has to do with inclusion and exclusion. Let me elaborate.

Whatever we do – whether we purchase, rent shared space or rent solo space, we have to face increase costs. The question

has already been posed on one of the Homemaker group's papers: How much money am I prepared to give to Seekers? How much am I prepared to pay weekly or monthly in increased giving? What are the tradeoffs for me? Am I prepared to give a substantial amount now from my savings? Am I prepared to take from my savings or retirement fund to loan it to Seekers at a modest interest rate?

These are hard questions for me and can produce the first toxic reaction – I am tempted to postpone thinking about the questions. I have a sense of what the answers might be and I do not like what they say about me: that I care about my creature comforts, that I care too much about owning things, that I worry about having enough money for my old age, that I do not trust Seekers to take care of me if really bad things happen. So I avoid the questions. Not only does this merely postpone the inevitable, since I know I will have to deal with them soon, but avoiding them lets me avoid grappling with my love of an upper middle class standard of living. By postponing this, I am denying the discipline of stewardship, and thus I am refusing to turn an area of my life over to Christ. Such a refusal ultimately kills my soul.

Even if I do resist the temptation, and so far I have given in to it, I know that the questions about money are harder when they involve another. I tentatively began to engage in discussion with Sharon and found out there are areas of significant disagreement. This leads to the second poison: avoiding the discussion within my family, because the discussion can have so much conflict. After all, we are paying out of state tuition at the University of Virginia for Meredith and Erica will be entering college in 1998. And Sharon loves our living standard as much as I do. And so I miss the opportunity to deepen our family life by wrestling with hard issues in love.

And when it moves beyond the family there is the temptation to compare giving with other individuals and families, which can

lead to several other poisons: worry, being judgmental about others, being self-righteous, being defensive, resentment. Worry – Am I giving more than this person or that person? Judgment – Why isn't so and so giving more? Self-righteousness – Look how much I am giving, I must be a good person. Defensiveness – If you only understood my situation, you wouldn't expect me to give more. Resentment – OK, I will increase my giving, but I feel I am being forced to. I get no joy out of doing this but I can't leave because so many other congregations are worse.

In all of this we may find people poisoned by the process and they will leave us. Even if we remain friends it will be as if they are dead to the Seekers congregation because they will no longer be here. And if we don't come up with enough money, we can have really poisonous feelings.

Race is a second area. If we go to any place east of 16th Street we will probably be involved in a neighborhood that is heavily African-American. We did some analysis of our personal and societal racism in the Wednesday night Potter's House back in the mid to late 70's, and shared some of that with the newly forming Seekers community. That is nearly 20 years ago, and racism is still alive and well in our society. We have some homework to do in Seekers on racism. And it may be hard work. How we go about wrestling with our unconscious racism as individuals and as a community will have a lot to do with how well we become a part of the new neighborhood. I have heard discussion in Seekers of what we could give to our new neighbors. I haven't heard anyone ask what our new neighbors might like to receive from us and ask how we might deal with having our offerings rejected. I haven't heard anyone ask what Seekers is willing to receive from our new neighbors. A failure to have genuine dialog with our new neighbors will be toxic for us. We have the potential to learn and grow from our hard work on our racism but we also have the potential to become poisoned by our feelings. And we may find people

leaving us because of the pain that results when we discover our own racism.

And we still have issues about inclusion and exclusion, about authority. I have been impressed by how the core members and the leadership team have tried to keep the process inclusive. From the beginning, Peter Bankson has hosted discussions about the impending decision of the Church of the Saviour Council about this building. Learners and Teachers sponsored Deborah's class on holy space and have made evenings available for discussion and congregational meetings. The Homemakers group has sought to involve the entire community in every step along the way. The members have genuinely sought guidance from the larger community. And yet, there are voices concerned about how the decision will be made, especially decisions about finances. Voices that raise questions about whether the non-members can trust the members to share the decision. And those concerns are potentially poisonous because they can sow dissension. Some people may leave.

So if we are bitten by these poisonous issues, is there healing for us? By gazing on them as bronze standards? How does this healing work?

For that we must look at the Gospel. Jesus has been in discussion with the Pharisee, Nicodemus. Now Nicodemus knows that God has sent this wonderful teacher because of the signs. But Jesus tells him that seeing signs of God is not the same as seeing the kingdom of God. To be part of the kingdom one must be born again of the spirit. Nicodemus cannot handle this. And Jesus tells him that the Son of Man must be lifted up the way Moses lifted up the bronze serpent as a standard so that if we have faith in Him we may have eternal life. In contrast to the snakes, which were sent as judgment on the Israelites for their lack of faith, s God's only Son was sent into the world not as judgment, but to heal the entire world.

Notice that Jesus has moved the metaphor from being healed

from snakebite to having eternal life. But notice also that the icon that heals is not a mere bronze representation of a serpent, but rather a real person who freely chose to die to show us a way to live in freedom. And notice that while the bronze serpent reflects the light, Christ is the light. Finally, notice that Jesus was lifted up to die on a cross, then lifted up to equality with God.

So I am healed from our poisons by living in confidence that God truly loves me and is with me. I am healed by living each day in freedom. This is not easy, because it is so threatening to me, to you, to those outside this room, that it causes trouble, it threatens the established order. To be born again means that I know that there are people who will want to kill me again. But if I am born again, I've already died, so why should I fear death now?

Last week in the member's meeting as we spoke what was on our hearts out of our prayers about our new home, I spoke about how the search for new space is for me going with Jesus to Jerusalem and I don't want to go. While I am not that attached to Mass. Ave., there is much for Seekers to do in Galilee, and I know that we are going to be tested in Jerusalem. I spoke of past frustrations in engaging with the city of Washington through its city government, of living in a mixed neighborhood, of not feeling free. I don't feel I have the energy now and I wonder if I have the courage now. And I can see myself falling asleep in the garden of Gethsemene while other Seekers are praying for guidance in how to design new space. And I can see myself denying that I know him while other Seekers mark his lashes by taking on the pain of this city.

But I can look up and see this cross and know that I too can be healed. We can look up and see this cross and know that we can be healed. And somehow I know that we Seekers can be bitten by poisonous things that slither among us, but we can be born again into a new people. And our life together will be

full of light.