

David W. Lloyd: The Temptations of Seekers Church

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Lent is the time when we reflect on Jesus' life from empowerment by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, to his death at the hands of political leaders and religious authorities in Jerusalem. Lent is the time when we journey from the forgiveness of our own sins, into our ministry with Jesus that will ultimately confront us with the choice of whether we will dare to journey with Jesus to Jerusalem.

Lent begins with accounts of temptation – the temptation of the archetypal humans, Adam and Eve, and the new archetypal human, Jesus. These are familiar stories, but we may be able to find something new.

One of the great experiences that opened up my spiritual life was attending my first Clown, Mime, Puppetry, Storytelling and Sacred Dance workshop back in 1980 at American University. Alan Dragoo attended as well. During the week, Ed Stivender, a Jesuit storyteller from Philadelphia performed "The Kingdom of God is Like a Party," of which a major portion is a hilarious retelling of what Christians call "The Fall." Ed uses a small naked doll as Eve, and a stuffed sock as the serpent, who introduces himself to her as Sir Pent, because of the all the ideas he has pent up inside of him. The serpent invites her to fill her hunger by eating some of the fruit of the tree of

knowledge of good and evil. She declines, saying that God said that they must not. "You don't believe everything God says, do you, my dear?" "As a matter of fact, I do." "Heh, heh, heh, you weren't born yesterday, were you, Eve?" "Well, yes, as a matter of fact I was." The serpent tempts her to bite the apple by asking, "Eat, eat. You want to be smart as God don't you?" "Yes." "You want to be a good wife, don't you?" "Yes." "You want the Equal Rights Amendment to pass, don't you?"

Eve sees that the fruit looks good to eat, is pleasing to look at, and she has a hunger for wisdom. Therefore, Eve, of her own free will, eats the fruit. She offers it to Adam, who of his own free will eats it, too. Then their eyes are opened and they discover they are naked. Interestingly, the Biblical account does not say that they achieve wisdom, but merely that their eyes are opened and they discover their nakedness. It seems to imply that they discover their sexuality and shame. Moreover, in the following verses, when they are held accountable, Adam, who ate of his own free will, blames Eve – and thus tries to lay the blame with God since Eve is the creature God made for him. In addition, Eve, who ate of her own free will, blames the serpent – and thus tries to lay the blame with God since the serpent is a creature God made.

I think Ed got it right. We frequently succumb to temptation not just because it will feed our hunger or our desire for wisdom, or because it will bring us a desired status, but because it will bring about something we perceive as good for the world. I think of the West's pursuit of science, how that has led us to the secrets of the atom, how those secrets led to the atomic bomb and how the desire to end World War II led to the use of that bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I also think of how the desire to achieve political ends may be leading dissident groups to develop and use nuclear weapons in what we call terrorist activities. Bringing about something good is what the devil proposes to Jesus – assuage his hunger, inspire people to Jesus' faith in God, and

take power over the whole world. Those temptations are still present for us. It has been the dream of Christian evangelism since Pentecost to have the whole world and all religions accept Christianity as **The Way**.

Thinking about how individuals and groups are tempted to do something we should not, especially because it will bring about something **good**, makes me wonder what are the current or potential temptations for Seekers Church.

One temptation would be to fill prematurely the void left by Sonya and Manning when they moved to Charlotte. After all, it is a good thing for any congregation to have someone to connect people in the way Sonya can, and to express hospitality in the way Manning can. We seem to be doing fairly well in waiting for, and I think in praying for, the gifts that they gave us to be evoked and confirmed. In fact, the gift of connecting people that Sonya embodied seems to have been more widely dispersed among people in the congregation, and yet, we have not formally confirmed this gift in anyone. Some of the hospitality gift that Manning embodied also seems to have been more widely dispersed, but again, we have not yet formally confirmed this gift in anyone. While Jeanne Marcus has joined the leadership/staff team, I do not think anyone has expected her to express Sonya's gift. Fortunately, no one is expecting that those expressing these gifts would express them in exactly the same way that Sonya and Manning did. What the Stewards have done instead is to charter a leadership/staff team to examine what are the tasks Seekers Church needs, what are the gifts the congregation have been exercising, and how well do they match, with a view towards recommending a way to address any significant gaps. What the Stewards have not yet done formally is to ask the entire congregation to pray for discernment as to whom, if anyone, is expressing Sonya's gift and Manning's gift, so that we may formally confirm such people in expressing those gifts. That maybe something we should consider. Whether or not we take

that step, I pray that Seekers may continue to resist the temptation to act too soon instead of waiting in fervent prayer for the gift to become apparent.

Another temptation would be to move into Carroll Street with a full agenda of what we can and should be doing in this new location. After all, it is a good thing for any relocated congregation to move forward with activities so that the momentum is not lost. We seem to be doing fairly well in resisting this temptation. Although we have had lots of energy in envisioning what we might do in the new space, we are also making many low-key links to Takoma and Takoma Park to see what is already going on, where we might plug into the existing spiritual energy of those communities.

Then there is the temptation to become a congregation of people on a spiritual journey, instead of being church. Over the years, I have watched what we have formally and informally called ourselves. At first, we were the Seekers Faith Community of the Church of the Saviour. At some point, we informally shortened that to the Seekers Faith Community. Then, even as we formally incorporated as Seekers Church, and as we subtitle ourselves a Christian Community in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour, we have more and more called ourselves the Seekers Community, or even "the community." I think that a real and present temptation for Seekers Church is to stop being church and instead to be a community of religious seekers.

Let me be clear, I am a firm believer that we want Seekers to have community and to be a community. In fact, as I look at Western culture, and particularly American culture, I think genuine community is in short supply. For me a faith community is a body of people who share a spiritual journey, using a common vocabulary and common rituals, trusting in God to sustain them and guide them. Depending on the scriptures, disciplines and culture of the group, including those received through divine revelation, a faith community may be much

focused on individual enlightenment, individual piety, charitable works, communal life, evangelism, political action to address societal injustice, eschatology and heavenly reward, or even on warfare in order to forcibly subdue communities of other faiths.

Nevertheless, we have proclaimed that we have been called to be Seekers Church, and being church implies something more than being a faith community. A church has a particular function, and if we claim to remain in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour, I think we should use the statement in the membership commitment of the Church of the Saviour: "the function of the Church is to glorify God in adoration and sacrificial service, and to be God's missionary to the world, bearing witness to God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ." Elizabeth O'Connor's books tell us that each word in this sentence has been examined and reexamined, with possible substitutes suggested but never accepted, since this sentence was first written in 1947.

In common with many other, but not necessarily all, faith communities, the function of Seekers Church is to glorify God in adoration. To glorify means to shed light upon the divine presence so that the eternal divine essence is revealed. Moreover, adoration means with genuine **deeply** felt love and devotion. So the purpose of and our expectation of our weekly congregational worship here and in our weekly worship in mission groups, is that they shed light upon the divine presence so that the eternal divine essence is revealed, and we do this in adoration – with genuine deep love and devotion that reflects God's love for us. Sometimes our Sunday morning worship – the combination of the visual setting, liturgy, silence, music, children's sermon, scriptures, sermon and the communion service – just glorifies God in adoration so powerfully that we feel it in our souls. Our eyes tear up, our bodies are filled with energy, and our hearts burn with love for each other and we just know that we are glorifying God and

the essence of God's love is tangible. Moreover, sometimes the worship in our mission groups just glorifies God in adoration so strongly that we can feel God's presence in that small gathering, and our mutual commitment to each other and to God through Christ just empowers our mission and us that week just jumps ahead.

Frankly, in confession, we can admit that sometimes our worship does not glorify God in adoration. Sometimes we are just not up to it. Sometimes our Sunday morning worship does not glorify God – somehow the combination of visual setting, liturgy, silence, music, children's word, sermon and communion just is not up to it. I am the worship leader in the Learners and Teachers mission group, and sometimes our worship just does not glorify God, it just does not get anywhere near glorifying God. In addition, sometimes on Sunday morning or in our mission group worship we glorify God but we just are not wholehearted enough to be able to claim that we are glorifying God in adoration – with deep love and devotion.

Nevertheless, if we are Seekers Church and claiming to be in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour, that is what part of our function is. As the commercials on the UHF TV channels say, "But wait, there's more." Also in common with some – but not all – other faith communities, another function of Seekers Church is to glorify God in sacrificial service. Moreover, we are not merely to glorify God in service, but that the service that glorifies God is sacrificial – that is, it is both made holy and it is costly to us. This is what "call" is. We are not merely called to exercise our gifts, although that can be costly to us, but we are to exercise our gifts in sacrificial service to something to which God calls us, and that is always costly.

Sometimes, when we see and hear how powerfully a few people that we call a mission group are **collectively** exercising their individual gifts in response to God's call to sacrificial service, we can see that mission group's energy burning as a

flame that sheds light on God's love for all of humanity. That mission group is glorifying God in service that is holy and costly. Now, each of our mission groups glorify God in sacrificial service when each member of the mission group has truly identified God's gift for him or her, a gift that has deep authenticity and is needed if the group is to be faithful to its call, **and** each member is faithfully exercising that gift. Sometimes, Learners and Teachers has experienced this holy and costly service, and the sense of God's energy flowing through the group is clear to us and to others.

I confess that sometimes we have not experienced this. Sometimes Learners and Teachers has had difficulty discerning and evoking the gift of someone in the group. Discerning and evoking the gifts of each person is hard work, costly work, and sometimes it is almost painful work. As a result, I suspect that on more than one occasion over the years, Learners and Teachers has not worked deeply enough to find a person's authentic gift.

More frequently, I suspect we have not truly held each other accountable for faithfully exercising our gifts for the call of Learners and Teachers. Sometimes it almost seems embarrassing to praise another for faithfully exercising his or her gift on behalf of the mission. Moreover, it seems embarrassing to receive that praise. If we could remember that each of these is **God's** gift, merely on loan to each person to develop and exercise it so that some more of God's kingdom can become reality, maybe we would not feel so embarrassed to give the praise or to receive it. Maybe then, we could see it as part glorifying God in sacrificial service.

On the other hand, Elizabeth O'Connor has written about our unconscious tendency to go easy when we hold one another accountable for exercising the gifts we are to exercise on behalf of the mission, so that the others will go easy when they hold me accountable for exercising my gift in the same way. On the other hand, do we hold back because we do not

think there should be any conflict in our mission group? Do we see conflict as embarrassing, painful and somehow un-Christian? I wonder whether Learners and Teachers prevents itself from really unleashing the potential spiritual power of our spiritual gifts that is untapped because we really do not hold each other accountable. I wonder whether any other mission groups might similarly be failing to really being able to do sacrificial service because we do not hold each other accountable in an authentic way. Are we faithful stewards of God's gifts to us?

Well, if it is so hard to glorifying God in adoration and in sacrificial service, maybe we should just not call ourselves a Church. Then we would not be failing to meet that responsibility fully. Besides, if we did not call ourselves a church we could probably reach out more effectively to the wide variety of faith communities in Takoma and Takoma Park. If you do not believe there are a variety of faith communities in that area, just attend one of the Takoma Park festivals.

We could reach out more effectively because the other part of the function of a church can be off-putting to other faith communities. In addition to glorifying God in adoration and sacrificial service, a church is also to be God's missionary to the world, bearing witness to God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ. The Church is the body of people who proclaims that through the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus that God has expressed unlimited forgiving love for us fully and for all time.

This proclamation separates us from other faith communities. It is not that those of other faiths do not share a spiritual journey, or even much of the same spiritual journey, with Christians. It is not that Christians have the sole claim on the way to touch the mystery that we call God, nor the sole claim on God's revelation to humanity.

Christians proclaim, as did Peter, that Jesus is the Christ,

the Son of the Living God. Christians proclaim, as did Paul, that God's love is both boundless and endless, that it goes into the heart of suffering and comes out the other side, that God's love goes into the very center of evil and transforms it. There is no way around this. Read the gospels and the epistles.

Our testimony as Christians is that God loved us so much, loved **me** so much, that God chose to become human. Our testimony as Christians is that we did not have to earn that amount of love from God by being good people. In fact, we could never have earned that much love and never will earn that much love. Our testimony as Christians is that God showed us how to love others – our families, our neighbors, our co-workers and supervisors, even our enemies – in that same way through Jesus' total self-giving love, agape love, a love that gives life to them and to me and keeps on giving life. Our testimony as Christians is that by loving in this way, Jesus was freely able to accept his death but that death was not the end of that love, God's love endures beyond death and we can tap into it. Moreover, perhaps our greatest testimony as Christians is that that love has forgiven us of all the little things and the huge things we do in evil.

What we bear witness to is how God's amazing grace saved wretches like us, people who were outcast, miserable, who had suffered misfortune. I am frequently bemused by those who want to change the word "wretch" in "Amazing Grace" to the word "soul." The word "wretch" derives from an Old English word that means an outcast, a person who is miserable, a person who has suffered misfortune. Who of us could not have identified with one or more of these situations at some point in our lives? Those experiences are almost part of the definition of being human. Our witness is how God's love brought us from being outcasts to people with a home, to a time when we are not miserable but rejoicing and to when we are experiencing an embarrassment of good fortune, not misfortune.

Therefore, we have a choice. Do we want to continue to be church? Look at all the creativity we could have in Seekers worship if we just give up our insistence that it glorify God in adoration. Look at all the participation we could have in Seekers if we just give up our insistence that it glorify God in sacrificial service. Look at all the ways Seekers could develop and exercise their gifts if we just give up our insistence that they be accountable to us for developing them and exercising them for a mission that brings about the kingdom of God. Look at all the **people** we could attract to the Seekers community if we just give up our insistence on proclaiming the gospel.

We would not die if we stopped being church. Surely, our eyes would be opened...