Deborah Sokolove: All Things New

A Sermon for Seekers Church
for the Third Sunday in Lent
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by Deborah Sokolove

All Things New

As this Sunday approached, I began to wonder why I had signed up to preach. There was not anything special that I needed to say to the community that I had not said when I stood up here last month. I **knew** I did not have anything new to say about the Prodigal Child. Moreover, the reading from Joshua did not seem very inspiring, either. In fact, the only reason I had for preaching was that vow I made ten years ago, the one about preaching in Lent every year, in celebration of my baptism. Therefore, when I realized a few weeks ago that the preaching calendar was filling up, I simply chose an open date, and did not look at the Lectionary until later.

Then, on Wednesday night, Peter began our Celebration Circle worship time by reading from the Epistle, which begins:

> *From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!*

I knew at once that I had been given an opening, a title, a place to start. However, when, later that evening, I mentioned the theme to members of Jubilate who were choosing the music for today, they were startled. “All things new?” they asked,

“How does that have anything to do with Lent?”

Well, the glib answer is that the word “Lent” comes from an old Germanic root referring to early spring, the time of the lengthening of daylight. Somehow, the name stuck to the church’s season of fasting and repentance at that time of year, as Christians prepared themselves for the Great Sunday of Easter, and English-speaking people (at least) forgot the linguistic connection to the natural season.

Here in Washington, the natural season is hard to ignore. The forsythia outside my back door is a riot of yellow; the rose bushes against the fence are putting out new leaves whose color is neither red nor green but somehow both; and the groundcover Paul Crumrine planted in my front yard a few years ago – and which I thought had died from my neglect but was merely hibernating over the winter – now indeed covers the ground with dark green leaves, and fills the spaces between with the paler greens of newly-sprouting hostas and the short, sharp spikes announcing summer’s long-stemmed, yellow-orange day lilies. Surely, every spring is a new creation, in which everything old seems to pass away.

Nevertheless, in our readings for today, the newness of spring is not the point. The “new creation” that Paul is talking about is not that of plants and animals, of lengthening days and warmer weather. Rather, he is talking about repairing broken relationships, those among human beings and those between humans and God. For he goes on,

> *All this is from God, who has reconciled us to God’s own self through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to God’s own self, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making an appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

What does it mean to be reconciled to God? I suppose that depends, in part, on who you think God is. If God is an angry, demanding, old man in the sky who remembers every bad thing we ever did or even thought and punishes us accordingly – well, it will be hard to be reconciled to that sort of God. We would feel that we had to do all the forgiving first, somehow overcoming our resentment at this prying, mean-spirited, jealous deity. On the other hand, if we think that God was some kind of neutral force, neither good nor bad, but not really caring what happens to any individual or even the world as we know it – well, how will it possible to have a meaningful relationship with that? We could acknowledge its existence, the fact that it is bigger than we are, perhaps even find ways to tap into it and use it, but such a God does not love, forgive, or call us to anything other than our own, self-defined desires.

The God who calls us, who wants to be reconciled with us, is neither petty nor inaccessible. The God that the people who wrote the Bible struggled to know, and that shone through the life of Jesus, is, of course, beyond our ability to comprehend completely. Once understood merely as the local deity of a small, nomadic tribe, this God eventually managed to get people to understand a universal vision. God cannot be fully known by any one person or even any group of people. As the creator and sustainer, the life-breath of the entire universe, the Holy, Unnamable One shows different aspects to different people at different times and places, and is known by innumerable names in all the languages of the world. This God is a God of love, of peace, of justice, of mercy; a God who wants to be known, and goes to astonishing lengths to get people to pay attention.

Twenty-eight years ago, long before I knew much about Lent, or even Christianity, I spent the few weeks leading up to Easter in a village called Villars, high in the mountains above Montreux, in Switzerland. The man I was married to at the time

had gone to boarding school there for several years, and he remembered both the small school and the entire area with great affection. He wanted to show me the haunts of his childhood, so, one warm spring day, we flew from the Lod airport in Israel, where we had been living for the past four years, and landed in Geneva in a snowstorm. My two daughters, then ages eight and two, were with us, and I was a couple of months pregnant with my son. None of us had any winter clothes or shoes, and all I really remember of that journey was how cold we all were on the tiny, funicular railway that took us up to Villars.

The view from our rented chalet, perched along the winding road down to the next village, was spectacular. A line of jagged, tooth-like mountaintops, covered with snow, faced us across a deep valley, looking just like every picture-postcard you have ever seen of the Alps. The village, itself, was the stuff of fairy-tales – wooden gingerbread houses with pitched roofs dripping icicles and window boxes full of red geraniums; a tiny steepled church; shop windows filled with chocolate, pastries, or cured meats; and people sweeping their front walks, greeting you with a cheery “bon jour.”

Soon, we were outfitted with parkas, boots and gloves, and began to explore. A bright sun in a deep-blue sky turned every path into a torrent of melt-water, and yellow and purple crocus and tiny, white snowdrops began to pop their heads out all over the still-snowy fields. Two days later, it would snow again – burying all the flowers – then the next day much of it would melt away, and the flowers would be even brighter than before. Spring was having a hard time, but warmer weather seemed to be winning.

We were having a great time, sledding and hiking and enjoying the great mounds of pommes frites and creamed mushrooms on toast served at a local inn, but when we had been there a week or so, my 2-year-old came down with a fever and a rash. The next day, my older daughter had it, too, and the doctor we

managed to find told us they both had measles! It was some vacation! Stuck in the house with two sick kids, in a foreign country where we did not know anyone! However, God does want to be known, and this time that could have been miserable was made miraculous instead.

Before we left Israel, a friend had asked us to give his regards to two people he considered to be his spiritual parents, and who, as it happened, lived in the same village. Some of you may be familiar with at least the names of these people: Francis and Edith Schaeffer. The Schaeffers founded the L'Abri Fellowship in Huemot – the next village down the road from Villars – in 1955. By the early 70's, L'Abri had become a haven for many restless young people who were hitch-hiking all over Europe, offering shelter, home-cooked meals, and spiritual guidance in exchange for a little help with housekeeping or yard work. Our friend had been one of those twenty-somethings who found his way to God in the Schaeffer's household of love.

Now wait a minute, I hear some of you thinking. Francis Schaeffer, wasn't he one of those hard-line conservative Christian writers? The answer is, yes, he was. But the man who wrote those books, and whose literalistic understanding of the Bible I could never fully accept, was also a man of deep faith, with a great capacity for welcoming the stranger whole-heartedly. No hell-fire and damnation preacher, Scheaffer's sermons and teaching, as I experienced them that grace-filled spring, were about love and reconciliation with God. While the children were ill, we took turns walking down to Huemot, meeting the many interesting people there and hearing their stories, sitting in on Bible studies, and getting to know both Edith and Francis. By Easter Sunday, the children were well, and all of us were invited to the Schaeffer's big house, just a short walk from our rented chalet, for Easter dinner. Strangers only two weeks earlier, we were now part of the family, sitting at table with the Schaeffers' sons and

daughters-in-law, our children laughing with the Schaeffer grandchildren as they ran through the snowy garden hunting for chocolate eggs.

In the warmth and welcome of Francis and Edith Schaeffer, God began to get my attention. Although it took another fifteen years or so for me to accept fully, I already knew that the place to become reconciled to God was in community. When I first came to Seekers, I recognized that quality of Christian love and welcome that I had first experienced at L'Abri, and I felt that I had finally come home.

It is that sense of homecoming that is at the heart of becoming reconciled to God. Yet, when we have come home, when we have begun to know God and to live as one of God's family, something more is expected of us. What is expected is that we will participate with God in the healing of the broken world. Traditionally, Lent is the season in which we examine our lives and our relationships, looking at how we fall short of being the true Body of Christ, alive in the world. This year, when Celebration Circle began to compose the Lenten liturgy, we felt that it needed to go beyond the usual focus on personal failings, and invite the congregation into reflecting on the broken-ness of the world outside ourselves and our collective complicity in it.

In the Jewish mystical system known as the Kaballah, the explanation of the broken-ness of the world does not depend on Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Rather, they say, when God created the universe, it was to be a vessel for containing the Shekhinah, the glory of God. However, when God tried to put the Shekhinah into the vessel, it was too powerful, and the vessel shattered into countless glittering shards. The unity of God's own self was broken. It is the task of humans, the Kabbalists say, to find those shining shards, to repair the vessel that is the broken world, to restore the unity of God. In Hebrew, this concept is called "tikkun olam," the healing of the world.

The reflection paragraph for this season is derived from a Jewish poem that comes from this tradition. One of a group of poems called Hymns of Unity, the Kaballists believed that reciting it with the proper intention would help to restore the unity of God, and thus the heal the world of its broken-ness. Let me read the whole poem:

How shall I come before God, the Most High? And how shall I bow before the God of old?
If the mountains were an altar, and all the wood of Lebanon laid on it;
If all the cattle and all the beasts were slain, and laid as a sacrifice upon the wood;
All Lebanon would not be enough for fuel, nor all the beasts for a burnt offering –
Look! All these are not enough, to come before the God of glory.
For you, our King, are exceedingly glorious; how then should be bow before our Lord?

Really, none living can honor you – How can I, your servant?
For you have multiplied good things for me – for you have multiplied your mercy to me.
Great are the debts I owe you for the good you have done for me.
I have not served you in accordance with your benefits;
one in ten thousand I have not repaid you!
If I say, I will declare their number, I know not how to count them.
And what shall I return to you, seeing that the heavens are yours, and the earth also?
It is written, I, the Holy One, will not reprove you for lack of sacrifices or burnt offerings.
Concerning you sacrifices and your burnt offering I commanded not our ancestors.
What have I asked, and what have I sought of you but to stand in awe of me?

> *To serve with joy and a good heart; behold, to hearken is better than to sacrifice,*
> *and a broken heart than a whole offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit.*
>
> *I will build an altar of the broken fragments of my heart, and will bow my spirit within me.*
> *My broken spirit – that is your sacrifice; let it be acceptable upon your altar.*
> *I will proclaim aloud your praise. I will declare all your wonders.*

But how can my own broken heart, my own broken spirit, do anything to heal the broken-ness of the world?

Recently, a number of Seekers have been raising the issue of our broken relationship with the natural world. Some months ago, Elisabeth called all of us to understand the natural environment as mission; and just last week, Jenneke spoke eloquently of what we can do, not only to make ourselves aware, but also to make a difference. In Celebration Circle, we are coming to understand that our liturgies must reflect this concern that our prayers for the homeless and the helpless must extend beyond the human community to encompass also the animals who are losing their habitat; the trees that are dying of dirty air and polluted water; the deserts and mountains that have been marred by off-road vehicle tracks that will not disappear for a thousand years.

But while I certainly agree that these things are important, even vital, I find myself having a hard time with all this call to new action on behalf of the environment. In fact, I keep feeling like I have to defend myself, because I do not share what often feels to me like a near-universal love of gardening, a mystical yearning to live closer to the earth. I never spent a summer at anyone's farm, and I cannot think of a time when I wished I lived in the country. Although I

certainly enjoy a day at the beach or a picnic in the park, I live in the city because I like the rhythms of city life. Lent being a time for confession, I will say that I am even a little afraid of the great outdoors and only really like it in controlled doses.

When the call comes to be more in tune with the earth, I have a hard time. It is not that I do not believe in the cause, but rather that my inclinations and passions are elsewhere. There is more than enough broken-ness to go around, and sometimes I just get exhausted with all the things that people tell me I need to be concerned about.

As I say these words, I realize that this is only fear talking. Fear of change, fear of having to sacrifice my pride and my comfort and my habits for the greater good, for the healing of the world. I can close my ears and my eyes to the pain and suffering around me, or I can allow my heart to be broken. Only in the breaking of my heart at the beauty of the world can I become open to a new understanding, a new awareness, new possibilities. As I build an altar of the broken fragments of my heart, I become reconciled to God. I am in a place that I have never seen before, and yet I am at home. The old things pass away, and all things are made new.