Deborah Sokolove: Blessings

Blessings

Our readings today speak of curses and blessings. Jeremiah tells us that those who believe in mere mortals, turning their hearts away from God, will be cursed. They will be forever dry and thirsty, not even noticing when relief is offered. Those who trust in God, however, will be blessed. They will be like trees that grow on the banks of a river, so generously supplied with water that even extended periods of drought will not dry up their leaves or cause them to stop bearing fruit. This is a powerful image for those of us who live near the Potomac, a great river whose banks are always green even in the most wilting heat of a rainless August afternoon. For those who lived in Jeremiah's time and place, a desert country without reliable irrigation and a seasonal cycle that resulted in drought three or four years out of every ten, the meaning was immediate. To be cursed was to suffer intolerably, while to be blessed was to live in ease and joy.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus tells his hearers that those who are poor, hungry, weeping, or oppressed are, in fact, the blessed ones, for they will be rewarded; while those who are rich, full, and laughing will come to a bad end. This upside-down state of affairs, which will be realized in some unspecified future, suggests that the reign of God will be a time of retributive justice, a zero-sum game of winners and losers. While such promises give hope to the downtrodden, they ultimately result in a perpetuation of injustice that is out of character with Jesus' many acts of compassion for people in power as well as the powerless. I am inclined to think that Luke might have misinterpreted what Jesus said, because the

parallel passage in Matthew does not mention any punishments.

In both Matthew and Luke, the bulk of what follows these words about blessings consists of teachings on a way of being in the world that confounds expectations. In Luke, as in Matthew, Jesus tells his hearers to love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, bless those who curse them, and expect nothing in return. This vision of how to live in the realm of God makes no allowance for retributive justice. In this realm, everyone has the potential to receive the blessing.

What is a blessing? My dictionary tells me that it is connected with the word for the blood that was often used in pagan societies for consecrating or setting a person or thing apart for sacred use. At one time, to bless meant to protect or preserve. More recently, it has come to be used as a plea for divine care, as in “Please bless my friend, who is in some kind of need”; or as a synonym for praise or gratitude, as in “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” Blessedness is a state of happiness, prosperity, pleasure, contentment or well-being.

The word “blessing” comes with a lot of churchly baggage. Outside of an unthinking “God bless you” when someone sneezes, it is not a word that is used much in everyday speech in the secular world. After September 11, thinking that everyone needed a little extra happiness in their day, I started to sign my emails with the word, “Blessings.” One long-standing friend, who-like many Seekers-was wounded by the religious institutions of childhood, took offense, thinking that I was trying to make a convert. I was not, but the word triggered certain associations in my friend that I might have anticipated if I had been more attentive to what I knew about that person’s history. Now, I am more careful to whom I send

explicit blessings.

In a recent sermon, Dan called our attention to the fact that there are certain words and phrases that Seekers seem to avoid in the way that I avoid the word “blessings” with my friend. The problem is, he pointed out, that there is no place to go to find out what the forbidden words are. Therefore, he, along with other relatively recent members of the congregation, keep stumbling over them and getting dirty looks for their clumsiness.

Dan is right, of course. There is no published list of offensive phrases and their Seekerly substitutes. There is no set of guidelines for acceptable language, no handbook for speakers of Baptist-ish or Presbyterian-ese, no translation dictionary to help newcomers know the local idiom for “having a burden.” There is no mention of language at all in any of our guidelines for preaching, choosing music for worship, or the Children’s Word, or, as far as I can remember, in the Guide to Seekers Church or the Guide to Mission Groups. Nevertheless, the words we use, and how we use them, are important.

Because so many of us arrive wounded by the religious institutions of our youth, the language of those institutions often brings up painful memories. Therefore, we do not talk much about “being saved,” or “witnessing,” or even “doing ministry.” Instead, we talk about our faith journeys, we talk about call, we talk about being present to one another. In our recent work with non-violent communication, we began again to pay attention to the many ways that we use language to hurt one another. I say “again” because Seekers has a long history of wrestling with words.

Seekers Church was born in the heady days of liturgical experimentation in both Roman Catholic and Protestant congregations, following the Second Vatican Council. Sonya and other early members were heavily committed to ecumenical dialogue, and found inspiration not only in liturgical renewal, but also in the feminist ferment that was sweeping both secular and religious institutions. Women in the 1970s were starting to realize that they were invisible in prayers and hymns, as well as the power structures, of most churches, even though they made up more than half of most congregations. Many found references to God as Father and King hurtful and oppressive; they became aware that they were left out of texts that spoke of God's gifts to "men" rather than "people," "humanity," or "mortals." Therefore, the Call of Seekers Church explicitly spoke of "empowering the gifts of women and men," and from early on, our worship reflected a commitment to gender inclusiveness, as expressed in words and in visible leadership. Feminism is a strong thread in the fabric of our communal lives.

In January, at the annual conference of the North American Academy of Liturgy (NAAL), I found myself – somewhat by accident – in the seminar on Feminist Liturgies. The seminars at this conference are a little like mission groups – composed of small groups of people called to a common goal, they meet for most of the day during the course of the conference. NAAL seminars are where the main scholarly work of the organization takes place, and one is expected to make a long-term (although not permanent) commitment to a particular seminar.

Those of you who are familiar with my somewhat complicated feelings about all-women groups and events will understand that my presence in this seminar is evidence of God's sense of humor. It is not that I am not a feminist – far from it! It is

just that the definition of “feminist” that I hold dear is the one that says, “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people, too.” I tend to believe that women and men are more alike than unlike, and that there are no virtues, sins or attitudes exclusively held by males or females.

Therefore, especially in Christian contexts, I often find myself troubled by notions of separate spiritualities that are divided by gender, just as I am disturbed by too great an emphasis on ethnicity or race. Indeed, one of the most important revolutions of early Christianity was the insistence that in Christ “there is no longer Jew or gentile, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.” [Gal 3:28] While I certainly benefited from my experience with feminist consciousness-raising groups when my children were small, I often wondered then, as I continue to do in some women’s gatherings now, how they differed from the informal griping sessions that women have always had about how their husbands leave their dirty socks on the floor and refuse to help with the childcare. Spirituality, of course, is intimately connected with our day-to-day, bodily lives, but I tend to believe that segregated spirituality is just another twist on the separate-and-unequal spiral of male-female mutual incomprehension.

So, here I was, with all my ambivalence, in a room with ten or twelve other women, set for two days of intensive discussion of feminist liturgy. The group had been meeting together around the subject for a number of years, and most seemed to know one another quite well, both as long-time professional colleagues and as friends. Some of the women I already knew: Heather Murray Elkins directed my study of feminist liturgy while I was at Drew, and was a member of my dissertation committee; I met Janet Walton, author of *Art and Worship: A*

Vital Connection, at a symposium on the place of the arts in theological education; and Martha Hickman graciously welcomed me in Nashville last year, when I went to interview her husband, a noted authority on Methodist liturgy. Others, I knew by name and reputation. I had read Kathy Black's important work on inculturation in the local church, *Worship Across Cultures*; Teresa Berger's *Women's Ways of Worship: Gender Analysis and Liturgical History*; and Marjorie Proctor-Smith's classics of feminist thought, *Praying with Our Eyes Open: Engendering Feminist Liturgical Prayer*, and *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. The others, as I came to know, were also seminary professors, pastors, authors.

By way of opening ritual, each person was asked to name her "alma maters," the "bounteous mothers" who had served as mentors in their lives as scholars of liturgy. Most of them named other scholars and teachers, many with well-known names in the academic world. When it was my turn, I of course named Heather, as my "doctor-mother," and then Sonya, who had baptized me into the Christian faith, and later taught me to lead worship; and Marjory, who opened the door to preaching for me. However, because the question concerned only "mothers," I was not able to name Ken Rowe, the "doctor-father" who patiently guided me along each step of the long journey from bewildered new graduate student to newly minted Ph.D. Nor could I mention Peter, who was my first teacher in the School of Christian Living, my sponsor into Stewardship and my spiritual advisor for many years. Nor was I able to name David and Pat, each of who encouraged me in my studies over the years, asked me hard questions and helped me to put into words what I believe about matters of gender and of faith. It seemed to me that, in trying to hold up the gifts and achievements of women, that we were guilty of the same kind of separatism that we decried when done by men. There

seemed to be a kind of retributive justice operating: if men had shut women out of the church, then we would shut men out of our blessings.

As I was reflecting on this, discussion turned to the Women's Liturgy Group of New York City. This group of women has been meeting monthly since 1981 for prayer, ritual and mutual support. It is not a church, but rather an intentional, ecumenical community of faith for women who do not find what they need in the religious institutions that are available to them. With a shifting membership of about twenty, the work of Women's Liturgy Group has influenced worship in other feminist groups and in churches through the writings of some of its members.

The genealogy of the mothers of Jesus that has been part of our Christmas liturgy in recent years was researched by the group and put together by one of its founding members, Ann Patrick Ware. You may have noticed that, this year, for the first time, we mentioned both the mothers and the fathers in Jesus' line. It made for a long list of hard-to-pronounce names, but in the non-hierarchical world of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the blessing may come to all.

Another founding member of the Women's Liturgy Group is Cindy Derway, who compiled *The First Six*, a book of interviews with those who began it. In her introduction, she wrote,

> *[W]e have learned to prepare services for ourselves. These services are liturgies which are drawn from our own traditions as well as from a wide range of imagery, language and concerns drawn from the world now, the world in which we make our home. The liturgies require consistent effort, hard*

> *work, planning and writing. We also look for our own sacramentals and research music, both old and new, in the service of creating a place for authentic worship and sacred search. There is no cleric. We are all active participants. . . willing to be apprentices to each other . . . skilled in the art of creating liturgical forms so structured that each can express her own voice within the celebration . . .*

She might as well have been writing about us, for our gatherings, like those of the Women's Liturgy Group of New York City, have many of the hallmarks of feminist liturgy. We sit facing one another, honoring the sense of a circle as much as our space permits; we have no physical manifestation of hierarchy, such as platforms or a raised pulpit-instead, all sit and stand at the same level; we place symbols of our daily life at the center of our circle, laying the natural, the handmade, and the ordinary on the altar; and we try to use language in emancipatory ways, to allow each person to find a place of connection to the larger story of faith.

Where we part company with women's ritual groups, is that we are trying to find ways of worship that are good news to men and boys as well as to women and girls. I often forget just how privileged we are, here at Seekers. As I listened to the other women in the Feminist Liturgies seminar, I heard stories of professional discrimination in seminaries, churches, and other institutions. I was reminded that ordained persons sometimes lose their jobs when their congregations find out they are gay, lesbian or trans-sexual; and that many denominations still will not ordain women at all. Gender-inclusive language is often not an option for worship in many churches, either because the pastor or the rest of the congregation resists, or because the denomination requires certain hymnals, certain liturgical formulas, certain names for God. Many women in these situations feel forced to band

together, to find a new way for themselves, to create rituals that heal the wounds inflicted by the religious institutions that should be places of sanctuary and healing.

That is, of course, what we are doing, but we are doing it as a mixed-gender assembly that I have begun to think of as "post-feminist." What I mean by that is that the ideals of feminism are so deeply ingrained in us as a community that it is no longer startling to hear someone refer to God as "She" or to address the prayer that Jesus taught us to God as "Mother and Father of us all." Unlike our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, we do not have to argue about women's right to leadership in the assembly, to preach, or to serve Communion. While not all the gender issues are resolved here, they have taken on a different character in recent years.

When I arrived in early 1990, the Pilgrim Hymnal, with its archaic language of "thee" and "thou," was in the backs of the chairs, but rarely used. Seekers was just planning to adopt the recently published, modernized *United Methodist Hymnal* as a welcome addition to the well-thumbed paperback copies of the more-gender-inclusive *Everflowing Streams*, and *Joy in Singing*. Sometimes, during Circle Time, slips of paper were handed out with the words of familiar hymns changed, so that "men" became "us", "Lord" became "You", and "he" simply vanished as a pronoun, at least when talking about God. No matter if the results rhymed, scanned or even made grammatical sense-we were trying to learn a new way of thinking about God and about ourselves.

A few years later, Pat suggested that we add the *New Century Hymnal* to our collection, as its compilers had already done the hard work of converting many older hymns into reasonably

gender-balanced, modern, language, and had chosen new hymns that expressed a growing sense of the ecological and international justice for which many were yearning. This was a good step towards a more inclusive vision of blessedness, but some of those re-workings are not very poetic. As Brian Wren writes in *What Language Shall I Borrow*, "'Parent me, O great Sustainer, as I traverse the alienating institutions of industrial society' is no substitute for 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land.'" I am always delighted that the *New Century Hymnal* includes so many of Brian Wren's hymns, such as the one we just sang this morning. Like few other contemporary hymn writers, Wren is always careful to combine solid theology and respect for tradition with imaginative language that opens up our collective vision of who God might be.

I do find myself wondering, however, how – as a post-feminist, mixed-gender assembly – we might reclaim some of the traditional language of Christianity, that poetic and musical heritage that admittedly enshrines outgrown attitudes yet tugs so powerfully on some of our hearts. Can we put aside our needs for retributive justice, in which the blessing of one is inevitably the cursing of another? Can we learn to drink deeply of the river of life, in which ancient and modern understandings flow together into a mighty, healing stream, nourishing **all** the trees along its banks? Can we learn to sing with the thousand tongues of humankind, knowing, at last, that to bless one is to bless us all?