Deborah Sokolove: Leaving Our Father’s House

A Sermon for Seekers Church
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Leaving Our Father’s House

Today’s Hebrew Scripture reading is from Genesis 12.

> *Now God said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as God had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took with him his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram and Sarai passed through the land to the place of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then God appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So they built there an altar to God, who had appeared to Abram. From there they moved on to the hill country on the east of Beit-El, and pitched their tent, with Beit-El on the west and Ai on the east; and there they built an altar to God and invoked the name of God. And Abram and Sarai journeyed on by stages toward the Negev.*

“Now God said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.'” Not knowing the destination, but somehow trusting in the direction, Abram and his wife Sarai – eventually to be called Sarah – pack up all their possessions, and leave their comfortable, familiar world to wander in the wilderness, discovering along the way a new life, a new understanding, a new relationship with God.

The Hebrew which we translate simply as “go” is *lech-lecha*, literally meaning “walk yourself” or “take yourself,” or “go to yourself,” or even “go for your own sake.” I am indebted to Jo Milgrom, in her book *Handmade Midrash* and in a workshop which she gives focusing on these passages, for pointing out that it is not accidental that this phrase is repeated in the story of the Binding of Isaac, which we will read in a few weeks. Abraham is told, this time, to let go of not his ancestors, but his offspring. In this passage, also not accidentally, we encounter the first use of the word “love” in the Bible, to describe the relationship between Abraham and Isaac. He has already lost his first son, Ishmael, and now, in the only other passage in the entire Bible where this verbal construction meaning “go” is found, God says to Abraham,

> *Take, please*
> *your son … your special/only one … the one you love*
> *Isaac*
> *and lech-lecha, take yourself, go for your own sake …*
> *and leave him there with God.*

Although the attempted sacrifice is stayed by the miraculous substitution of a ram, the passage ends with Abraham returning to Beer-sheva, and no mention is made of Isaac going with him. A Jewish tradition says that he went off to study until it was time for him to marry.

So Abraham’s life is bracketed with leave-taking, with letting

go of the old, letting go of tradition, letting go of all that binds him, letting go even of his children, so that he may be free to know the living God. And here, I want to acknowledge that Sarah, too, left much and lost much, but we know much less about her reasons, her thoughts, her relationship with God. I don't want to slight Sarah, but today I want to deal with the text as it is given, rather than with its omissions, its silences. Another Jewish tradition says that after all the difficulties of her life, the thought that Abraham might actually sacrifice their son was too much for her to bear, for the passage which follows tells of Sarah's death.

Our Gospel lesson for today also begins with leave-taking. Jesus is traveling, healing people along the way, when he passes a kind of toll booth. We do not know if he or his companions paid the toll; rather, we are told that he spoke to the toll, or tax, collector, and that Matthew left his post to join the itinerant group. Did Matthew live nearby? Did he tell his family and friends where he was going, and why? If he did, how did they react? What did he take with him? The text doesn't tell us. All we are told is "Jesus said to him 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him."

One way to understand what happened to Abraham and to Matthew, is to say that they each had a conversion experience. Something happened to each of them that was so powerful, so convincing, so out of the ordinary, that they heard it as God's voice, calling them out of themselves. They were willing to leave everything that they knew, every shred of security, every previous understanding, in order to follow that call. Or were they?

Abraham's call did not come without preparation. His father, Terah, had for some reason left Ur of the Chaldees, heading for Canaan, and had gotten his family as far as Haran. So, in a sense, Abraham was simply continuing something that his father had started. Abraham and Sarah were making a big move, physically, so they took the time to gather their possessions

and dependents, to pack, to prepare. Moving as a family group, they took not only their household goods, their tents, and their flocks. They took also their customs and their mores, their traditional ways of doing things, of believing, of understanding. Abraham left his father's house, but he didn't leave empty handed.

Matthew may have left empty handed when he went to follow Jesus – we simply don't know – but he did not go off alone into the wilderness. He left to join an already-established band of followers, traveling under the guidance of a strong, confident leader. Although he abandoned his financial base, meals and housing seem to have been assured. In the next sentence, in fact, Jesus and the disciples sit at dinner with other tax-collectors, some of whom must have been Matthew's colleagues, if not his friends. Matthew left what he was doing when he got up to follow Jesus, but he didn't just abandon everything.

I believe that, like Abraham and Matthew, all Christians, and all Christian communities, are called by God. We talk a lot, here at Seekers, about call, and we know that call can take many forms in individual, as well as corporate, lives. Often, that call entails risk, entails leaving the known, the secure, the familiar. For many, following the call of Christ has literally meant leaving ancestral homes, traditions, beliefs. For Seekers, following the call of Christ has meant – among other things – a continual examination of what it means to be a Christian community.

Some time ago, when I was a member of Learners and Teachers, we were asked why our Tuesday night classes had to be a school of ***Christian*** living. Why not just a school of living, helping people to live a more responsible, spiritual life? The response to that, and to other implicit questions around that time about just what kind of group we wanted to be, was that this is, indeed, a ***Christian< /em>*** community. To be Christian is part of our identity. So when it came time to name

ourselves as a legal entity, we called ourselves *Seekers: An Intentional Christian Community*.

As an independent, ecumenical community, however, we have no creedal statement to which each and every congregant is expected to subscribe. Among us are many different understandings of, for example, the nature of God; of the relationship between the historical person Jesus of Nazareth and the divine Christ; of whether Eucharist and Baptism are "merely" symbols enacted by human beings, or are actually the physical embodiment of divine activities; of whether explicitly confessing Christ is the one, true way to knowing God, or if all honorable religions are vehicles of divine revelation. On these, and other matters of Christian doctrine, we do not simply, politely, agree to disagree. Rather, we agree to discuss, to struggle, to study, and to pray together, each respecting that the other is equally in good faith as oneself.

Last week, David presented one of the classical, historical formulations of the Trinity. As he pointed out, the language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, have been and continue to be the normative language of the church universal, as contained in its documents from Scripture onward through the various Councils, Reformation and Counter-Reformation writings, up to the present time. What he did not say, is that this language was adopted in order to convey a truth that is beyond the words, and that in this day those words, because of their specific maleness, for many, tend to obscure the very truth that they are meant to point at. Rather than revealing the intimate, immanent relationship possible between God and human beings, the language of Father and Son seems, for many today, to shut out mothers and daughters, to elevate the male gender as normative, to deny that both the First and Second Persons of the Trinity, as well as the Third, are ultimately beyond all human categories, including gender.

For some years now, feminist theologians have been looking for

God-language that respects the historical witness as well as contemporary sensibilities. To insist on male images of God, disregarding the scriptural witness to feminine or gender-neutral qualities, is to make a false, idolatrous identification of God with human maleness. As Christopher Morse writes in *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, "To argue that any terminology for God has … a revealed status is to mistake the linguistic means of revelation for God's Word that occurs through them. It is to confuse the cultural context in which a text originates with the cultural context in which God's Word may speak through that same text today. An idolatrous verbal fetishism is the result." Still, one cannot – and ought not – deny or change the fact that Jesus was a man, nor that he referred to the First Person as Abba and Father.

(As a personal aside, I just got back from a trip to France, which included a visit with the man that all my children call Abba. This is the common form of address that many observant Jewish, and all Israeli, children use for their fathers, so it is hard for me to see "Abba" as a useful alternative for de-fusing the image of God as Father. It just kind of makes me giggle.)

The solution to the language problem, I believe, is not to completely eliminate the masculine terms, but to add to them. Those who formulated the Trinitarian and Christological agreements of Nicea and Chalcedon were at pains to point out in letters and other writings that the Father-Son language was explicitly ***not*** supposed to refer to any sexuality with respect to God, but somehow to explain the unique status of Christ as uncreated being. As Paul Holmes so eloquently testified some weeks ago, the image of God as Father points to the intimacy of the relationship, not the power dynamics too often exhibited in many human families. Thus, to address God as Mother, on occasion, is not to slip into a kind of pagan goddess-worship, nor to posit that the First Person must

somehow be two. Rather, it is to affirm the nearness of the One who is beyond gender, yet somehow deeply personal and relational. For some, the gender-neutral word “Parent” is sufficient to express this; others find that a little cold, and have proposed terms such as “Beloved Guardian.” I am certain there are others.

While the Father-Son-Holy Spirit formulation is the classical language for the Trinity, there are other ways of talking about the paradoxical three-in-oneness of God which are just as firmly grounded in the Scriptural witness. It is a commonplace of theological study that the doctrine of the Trinity is, in fact, nowhere explicitly mentioned anywhere in the Bible, but was derived from the multiple ways that people experienced God in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Before Jesus, there were at least seventy names or appellations for God, beginning with the Tetragrammaton, the unpronounceable Name of God which may be translated as I AM. Others include, for example, ***El*** , which means simply “God”; ***Elohim***, a masculine plural formed on a feminine root; ***Adonai Sabaoth*** , which means “Lord of Hosts”; and ***El Shaddai***, meaning “God Who is Sufficient.” In Hebrew, this last is a pun, and can also be construed as “God of Breasts”, or “God Who Nourishes.”

After Jesus, it became necessary for those followed him to be able to explain to themselves who Jesus was in respect to this multiply-named, ultimately nameless God whom he addressed as Father, as well as in respect to the One he spoke of as Comforter, and who had already been known as the Spirit of God. Thus the term “trinity” was suggested as a descriptor for the communal aspect of God’s nature, much as “omniscient” or “omnipotent” (which also don’t appear in the Bible) are descriptors for other kinds of experiences of God. Again quoting Morse, “…the description of God’s triunity is drawn … from the way in which God is said in the gospel to accomplish the dominion of love within creation in the sending of Christ

as Savior and in the giving of the Spirit." Trinitarian language is not about male relationships of father and son, but an attempt to describe how God is, in God's self, based on the evidence of the human experience of and testimony about God, as revealed in the life of Jesus. It is ultimately about relationship, about self-giving love, as a basic truth about God.

This attempt to understand and describe who God is, is the ongoing theological work of the Church, both universal and local. As the great Ecumenical Councils at Nicea and Chalcedon were neither beginnings nor endings, but points along the way, so is the work we do here at Seekers part of the ongoing journey of the Body of Christ. We are part of the larger conversation that is world-wide ecumenism, which seeks to heal what some refer to as the scandal of the divided Church. We are part of the larger conversation that seeks to find new ways, new words, to describe the eternal truths about the living triune God, who is Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

For it is this God who called Abraham and Sarah, who called Moses out of the burning bush, who called each of the disciples out of their homes and businesses and accustomed ways. It is this God who calls us still, saying to each o
f us, and all of us together, *lech-lecha*, take yourself, go for your own sake. Leave what is known and certain and safe, leave your father's houses, and ultimately let your children find their own ways to God.

Yet, we are not called to abandon everything, to go alone into the wilderness without preparation, without companions. Rather, like Abraham and Sarah, we carry with us some of our possessions, as well as our stories, and our dreams. And like Matthew, we each of us have joined an already-formed band of travelers, led by Christ into an unknown, but promised, future. We go on together, discussing, arguing, studying, praying. Sometimes, we stop to build an altar at a spot where God appears to us. Sometimes, we move into the hill country,

build another altar, and wait. Always, we journey on by stages, following the voice that bids us come.

As I have been called, I offer these thoughts in the name of God, who is the Source of our life in Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit. Amen.