

Deborah Sokolove: Memory, Tradition, and Hope

A Sermon for Seekers Church
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by Deborah Sokolove

Memory, Tradition, and Hope

Since we are in Lent, I have a confession to make: I do not often teach in our Sunday School. I make a lot of excuses – I'm away a lot during the week, and feel the need to connect with Seekers in worship; my Celebration Circle duties keep me busy enough on Sunday mornings; I'm too tired to take on extra duties; and on and on. All these are true, but the real reason, I think, is that I am unwilling to be challenged by a group of bright, thoughtful kids who are used to questioning authority, who ask hard questions and expect to get truthful answers. So it was with some anxiety and fear that I agreed to spend a few Sunday mornings in January helping our young folks prepare to write this wonderful ["Pay Attention" liturgy](#) that we will be using all through Lent. By way of disclaimer, I want to say that I didn't help them with the actual writing – the credit for that goes to Sherri, Sally, and Paul, who stayed in there for the whole six weeks. What I did was help them understand what Lent has meant in the past, how it got started, and what meanings it can have for us today. It was in exploring that history, and in reflecting on the lectionary readings for the entire season, that the theme emerged. The theme **is** unusual, since Lent is often thought of as a dark, inward-turning time, but entirely apt. Lent **is** a season for paying attention.

In addition, one of the things we are supposed to pay attention to in Lent is memory. As I told the kids, in the

early days of the Christianity, the church was kind of a secret society. Someone had to vouch for those who wanted to join, and it took at least two years of serious study and self-examination before a candidate could be baptized and be considered a full member of the Body of Christ. Baptisms were generally done during the Easter vigil, and anyone who wanted to be baptized that year would sign up a few months earlier. Then, in the weeks leading up to Easter, these catechumens, as they were called, would be instructed in the things considered most important, most sacred, for a Christian to know. They learned the founding stories, memorized the Lord's Prayer and a version of the creed and were taught the essential principles of Christian living – a life based on love. They would live simply during this time, not paying much attention to food or other pleasures, but rather spending their time in prayer, study, and introspection as they prepared to die to self and rise again in Christ. Because each local church was a close-knit group, supporting one another as much as possible and extending love to all who came, everyone else fasted and prayed, too, in solidarity with those who were about to be baptized.

As time went by, and especially after Emperor Constantine made Christianity a state religion, more and more people simply baptized their children in infancy, and this long, intense period of preparation was no longer needed for adults to become members of the Church. However, it had become a habit to fast, pray, and retell the founding stories of the faith in the weeks leading up to Easter, even though people forgot why they had started doing it. Because of the scriptural association of prayer and fasting with repentance, Lent became a penitential season, when people thought about their sins, asked for forgiveness and promised to do better in the future. Moreover, we Seekers have inherited that tradition through our ecumenical links with those churches that either preserved it through the centuries, or revived it in the great liturgical awakening of the last 30 years or so. Once thought of as

something only Catholics did, now many Methodists and Presbyterians and even a few Baptist congregations have begun to observe Lent as well as the other the cycles and seasons of the Christian year.

Lent has a special meaning for me. I offered to preach today not because of any affinity with the readings, but because no one else had signed up for this Sunday, and I had made a vow, eight years ago, that I would preach once every year in Lent, in grateful memory of my own baptism. Therefore, it was with a little worry that I opened the lectionary, not knowing what I would have to deal with. If it were one of those difficult texts, the ones that really need to be explained and worked with because we cannot live with their plain meaning, I would have to do some serious exegesis. However – thanks be to God – the lectionary served up something relatively easy, and I am, in good Seekers tradition, able to use the texts as pretext. The first reading that we heard today – the story of how Abram, Father of Thunder, became Abraham, Father of Multitudes, and his wife Sarai, became a princess – may be understood as part of the collective memory of the Jewish people. It is a founding story, a record of the promise that God makes repeatedly to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, that God will be with them, and they will be God's people. The passage from Paul's letter to the Romans – which we didn't read aloud but is also part of this week's lectionary selections – extends this memory to include all those who have faith in Christ, and thus are in some sense the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Moreover, the Gospel reading reminds us that we must not only remember the stories of our faith, but also retell them, and not be ashamed of the Good News that we have come to know.

Last Saturday at Wellspring, memory was on the agenda. One of the questions we were invited to talk about in our small groups had to do with what we thought was good about our tradition. As we talked, it became clear that we did not all

agree on what we meant by 'our tradition'. Were we talking about the separate traditions with which each of us grew up? Did we mean the tradition of Church of the Saviour? Alternatively, should we be looking farther back, at the multiple roots of our heritage in the Christian faith?

I was the one who suggested that deeper look, because I am often troubled by the apparent lack of historical consciousness both here and in the culture at large. Maybe this comes from my own deep Jewish heritage, in which having a long memory seems to be the primary virtue. Whatever the more deep-seated reason, my current interest in sharing things historical with you comes from my recent excitement at discovering some of Seekers' heritage during that period of religious upheaval we call the Reformation.

As many of you know, I have been working on a Ph.D. in Liturgical Studies at Drew University. Since people keep asking me when I will be finished, I will just say now that I expect to finish my weekly travels at the end of May. After that, I have some fieldwork to finish in Newark, and a couple of papers to write over the summer. Then I have to take comprehensive exams in January, and if I pass them, submit a prospectus for my dissertation. Then there will be at least a year of dissertation research, and another year of writing. Therefore, I might be finished in another 3 years or so, but I after May I will get to stay home a little bit more. However, do not expect that my life will slow down – as both Glen and members of my mission group have figured out, "complicated" is just how my life is.

In any case, the reason I bring this up is that so much of what I am learning in my studies has particular relevance to Seekers. This semester, I am taking a class on Reformation liturgies. Now, when I say "Reformation," I imagine that many of you will think, Oh, yes, I know, Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the Wittenburg church door. Alternatively, you think of Calvin and his rigorous, logical ideas about

predestination. Or maybe you think of Zwingli, banishing music from worship (although not, as it turns out, because he hated music, but perhaps because he loved it too much to have it done badly, and certainly because he feared the power of music would distract worshipers from paying attention to God). These certainly are among the great figures of the early 16th century, when what they called "the Old Church" was in bad favor among the Germans because the clergy lived dissolute, venal lives; the monastic establishments kept increasing taxes; and religious services were incomprehensible and inaccessible to almost everyone. But what I want to talk about today is not what is sometimes called the "Magisterial Reformers," whose reforms were backed up by town councils, magistrates, and local princes. Rather, I want to talk about the other people, the ones that Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the establishment were as angry with as the Catholic hierarchy was with them. The ones my textbooks refer to as the "Radical Reformers" many of whom quite literally lost their heads in their passion for following Christ regardless of the political or personal consequences. In that way, they were very like the early Christians they strove to emulate.

Now, if your background is Mennonite or Brethren or maybe even Baptist, you probably already know about the Radical Reformers. Names like Michael Sattler, Conrad Grebel, Balthasar Hubmeier, and Thomas Müntzer may be familiar to you. Or not. The Radical Reformers, often thought of as identical with the Anabaptists, were actually an odd lot. Some were pacifists, others advocated armed revolt; some rejected infant baptism entirely, others continued with it as a kind of provisional rite, as long as the parents and godparents promised to teach the child what baptism meant; some thought the church should be a gathered community of the elect, totally separate from civic affairs, while others believed that a purified church would reign on earth as the vicars of the reign of Christ. What they all did seem to have in common was the then-radical belief that worship should be conducted

in the language of the people, and that both bread and cup should be offered to all in Communion.

Now, I have always loved the way we do Communion here at Seekers, by passing the bread and the cup to one another around the circle, each person by turns being served and serving. It is a beautiful symbol of our equality in Christ, of our radical understanding of the priesthood of all believers and an understanding we inherited from those 16th century Radical Reformers. In the circle, no one is more important than anyone else is; there is no communion rail at which to kneel; the sacrament belongs equally to all. But since most of my studies are among more "high churchly" folks, among whom only the properly ordained may consecrate the elements and the people are expected to line up in orderly fashion to receive from priest or minister, and among whom even passing the elements along the pews is somewhat suspect, I've become a little uneasy about our custom, wondering if it had any historical justification at all. Therefore, when, in researching the Schleithheim Confession, a founding document of the Swiss Brethren, I discovered a report of how communion was celebrated in the late 16th century among the Anabaptists of the lower Rhine, I was delighted. It read in part

When the Lord's Supper was distributed . . . as soon as it was given out and each had a piece in his hand, the minister also took a piece for himself, put it into his mouth and ate it; and immediately, seeing this, the congregation did the same. ¹

Well, at least we did not just make it up! Actually, it isn't clear whether the people sat or stood, but what is clear from this and other reports is that real bread was used, and the leader was served last. In addition, in many cases, the "minister" was not a specially trained person appointed by a hierarchical body. Another thing that most of the Radical Reformers seemed to have in common was a healthy distrust of

clericalism. Although many of the early leaders had been themselves priests, most if not all renounced their vows and stood up for the common people against both clergy and secular authority. In many radical and Anabaptist communities, the person titled "minister" was a regular member of the congregation, agreed upon by the group to organize worship and to play a leadership role as needed. In those troubled times, it wasn't uncommon for the leaders of such unauthorized churches to be arrested or even killed by the authorities – Reformed, Lutheran, or Catholic, depending on locale – and when that happened, the group simply picked another of its number to lead. Some reports seem to indicate that in these small, highly spiritual, tightly knit communities, it was not unusual for a woman to be chosen as minister. Therefore, in the area of leadership, also, I have been relieved and delighted to find precedents in the historical record of the Body of Christ.

Of course, those Radical Reformers were not just making things up, either. What they were trying to do was return to what they understood to be the practices of the early church. In the foreword to his German Service Book of 1523, Thomas Müntzer quoted Eusebius, a fifth-century church historian, to the effect that the church had already lost its way after the time of the immediate successors of the apostles, some time in the early second century. Müntzer's attempt to return to a more pristine, simplified practice was not atypical – all of the Reformers, from Luther onward, agreed on this: worship belongs to the community, to the Body of Christ, not just to the clergy. Underlying all those interminable arguments about Christ's presence (or absence) in the sacramental elements was a virtually unanimous agreement among the Reformers, although with differing emphases, that it was the community of faith that is really the Body of Christ.

In discussing the hymns for today, I asked Jubilate (formerly known as The Music Group) to please avoid any particularly

Lutheran hymns, since I was going to talk about a movement that Luther actively opposed. Kathy became concerned, because she did not want us to become identified too tightly with any one Protestant tradition. I assured her that was not my intention – I only wanted to highlight our roots in a particular piece of history that may be less well-known, and that, as I've said, I was excited to discover.

However, Kathy is right, of course, and I, too, do not want to tie us too tightly to any one tradition. Seekers, in fact, does draw on the traditions of all of its members, as well as some that may not belong to any of us in particular but are our common heritage as Christians. Moreover, as part of the mix, we have inherited many of the tensions that were not resolved in the 16th century. As I mentioned earlier, there was a lot of disagreement on the nature of baptism at that time, so much that Luther just lumped all the Radical Reformers in as Anabaptists. Of course, he was more concerned about their collective tendency to stir up civil unrest than differences among their theologies, but the fact does remain that he thought baptism had an objective, sacramental reality, available even to infants; whereas the Anabaptists understood baptism as something that followed true conversion, and as such was only suitable and useful for those who were old enough to believe in their own right. It seems to me that we at Seekers simply agree to disagree about this, without making an issue of it. If parents want to baptize their infants, we do that. If they do not, we do not. Either way, unlike most other churches, we do not make baptism a prerequisite for Communion, or for anything else. In my experience, a great many Seekers take their own baptisms seriously, but I have not noticed a lot of discussion about when or whether baptism should take place.

What has been an issue is belonging, and that was what was at stake for the Anabaptists in the issue of baptism. If infants were baptized, then anyone could be – and often was – a member

of the church. For Luther, the church was composed of both righteous and sinners, and he understood that everyone was both, anyway. On the other hand, the Anabaptists thought that only believers should be baptized, making the church a select, disciplined, tightly-knit community in which everyone could depend on everyone else, and in which it was clear who was "in" and who was "out." Many of our problems with regard to belonging have to do with this double heritage, and with our not fully owning either position. We want to welcome everyone, we want to be inclusive **and** we want to be highly disciplined, tightly bound to one another, able to depend without question on one another. I am not suggesting that we choose one or the other. I simply think that it is good to be aware that the source of this tension is very deep. I also think that holding the tension in love is part of what keeps us lively and creative.

Another area in which the Radical Reformers disagreed with their Magisterial counterparts was regarding the role of scripture. Where the Old Church upheld its traditions as authoritative, and Luther and Calvin saw scripture as the supreme authority, many of the Radicals looked to the workings of the Holy Spirit. For them, scripture was, of course important. But rather than being seen as God's final word, scripture was understood as a record of those who had been moved by the Holy Spirit in the past, and an inspiration to the present generation to whom the Holy Spirit could and did also speak. I think that in general we come down on the side of the radicals, with a good bit of 19th and 20th century liberal biblical interpretation thrown in. In fact, I cannot remember when I heard anyone at Seekers appeal to either tradition or scripture as the final word on anything.

Moreover, here is where we come back to today's texts, which are not really pretexts after all, but rather examples. For when we read the story of Abraham and Sarah, or any of the stories that claim to be our collective history, we read them

mostly for the human lessons contained within them, and for what those lessons can mean for us as individuals and as a community of faith. We read of God's promise to make Abraham the father of multitudes, to make Sarah a mother in her old age, and we read ourselves into the story. How am I like Abraham or Sarah? What unreasonable promises has God made to me? What is it that keeps me hoping beyond hope, dreaming impossible dreams? When people ask me what I am going to do with that Ph.D. when I finish it, I usually just wave them off, saying that I will probably finish it about the time I am ready to retire. I will be too old to be considered for a tenure-track teaching post in liturgy, and anyway I am not ordained in any denomination, so what denominational seminary would hire me to teach their liturgical order? Confronted with this text, I begin to wonder, Am I like Sarah, who said she was too old for God's promises to be true, who laughed when God said she would have a child? Am I unwilling to let myself hope for what I really want?

One of the things we talk about most here at Seekers is call. We know we are following God's call when what we are doing makes our heart sing. Discovering some of our sources in my studies, learning about the people and ideas that have shaped the Christian traditions, then sharing what I have learned with you here today and with the kids in Sunday School, and with anyone else who will listen, is what makes my heart sing. God told Abraham and Sarah to leave their home and go to a place that God would show them. Abraham and Sarah did not know where they were going, but paid attention to the signs of the call of God. Do I? Do you?

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¹ John D. Rempel, "Communion," in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia Volume 5* (Scottsdale PA; Waterloo Ontario: Herald Press, 1990), 652, quoting a late 16th century letter.