

Deborah Sokolove: More Doubt, More Dedication

A Sermon for Seekers Church

Recommitment Sunday, 19 October 2003

by Deborah Sokolove

More Doubt, More Dedication

This morning, many of us pledged ourselves to another year of doubt, another year of dedication to the unlikely proposition that Jesus, called the Christ, rose from the dead and now calls us to a ministry of love and justice. I call this an “unlikely proposition” to acknowledge the fact that many people, even some sitting in this room, cannot bring themselves to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was more than a great teacher; an inspiring, charismatic healer; or, at most, a prophet in the tradition of Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah. It is difficult, with our 21st-century, post-Enlightenment, semi-scientifically trained minds, to banish the demand for solid, indisputable, evidentiary proof that there even was a man called “Jesus” in first century Palestine, or that-even if he did all the things he was said to do in life-he was crucified, died, and was buried, and rose on the third day. Like the first-century Jews to whom it was definitely heresy, we have a hard time believing that a human being, born-as all of us are-out of the body of a woman, can also be God.

Yet, despite our doubts, we are a Christian community, “an intentional body which sees Christ as our true life source.” It is not that we are expected to check our minds at the door, so that we can believe in impossible things. Rather, enough of us have had experiences of the Risen Christ in our lives, felt the power of resurrection bring new life to dead hopes and dead relationships, or been so inspired by the transformation

of his early followers from cowering, frightened fugitives into the spirit-filled, resilient, compassionate Body of Christ, that our faith overcomes our doubts.

In our Gospel reading, James and John demand that Jesus give them places of honor in the kingdom which they think he is about to establish. Jesus replies that, even though James and John will share in Jesus' suffering, the places of honor in the kingdom, or realm, of God will go to those who are servants, not to those who are important by human standards. The realm of God, as Jesus described in many parables, is not a kingdom in the usual sense, but rather a time and place when God's standard of steadfast love, justice and mercy is truly followed among humankind.

Throughout his life, Jesus taught that the realm of God is already within us and among us, when, despite our doubts, we dedicate ourselves to loving God and loving one another. It is this Jesus, the one who "came not to be served but to serve," that so embodied God's own loving presence that people began to call him the Christ, the Anointed One, to see in him not only a human being, but the eternally present Word of God. Despite our doubts about the historicity of this or that story about Jesus, we, too, come to know something of God through the image of Jesus' life, through the stories of those who knew both before and after the crucifixion, and the stories that those who encounter the Risen Christ continue to tell about his presence in their lives.

Even people who do not know about Jesus tell stories about their encounters with God. Five or six hundred years before the birth of Jesus, someone wrote down the story of Job that we have been hearing excerpts from for the last couple of weeks. The God depicted in the Book of Job is not particularly loving, at least not in the warm and fuzzy way that many of us would prefer. This God is an autocratic ruler, allowing the voice of suspicion and doubt to arrange a test of Job's dedication to righteousness. In this test, Job loses

everything-his health is ruined, his possessions destroyed, even his children all die when the house they are feasting in collapses. His wife, deep her own despair and grief at the losses, which were as much hers as his, suggests that he just curse God and die. His friends come to comfort him, but the best they can come up with is that the calamity that has befallen Job is somehow his own fault, that it must be punishment for some hidden sin.

Job, however, maintains his innocence. We, the readers, know that Job is correct in his self-assessment. The opening passages tell us that even God says of him, "There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil." So maybe God in this story is more loving than first appearances might suggest, since Job is only human, and probably has a few faults and foibles that God is simply willing to overlook. Nonetheless, God does allow the test to go forward.

Like most of us when things go wrong, Job complains about his afflictions. He curses the day he was born, he talks about hating his life, he wants vengeance for the wrongs that have been done to him. All too aware that many bad people live easy and comfortable lives, while many good people suffer, he calls God to account. How can God expect human beings to live just and honorable lives, he shouts, when God's own actions are unjust?

God, however, never answers Job's accusations directly. God does not give Job, or us, a reasonable answer to the question of why some people seem to have unwarranted good fortune, and others live in terrible pain, poverty, or oppression. Instead, God thunders, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? . . . Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" In asking what Job knows about the true nature of the universe, God questions Job's right to accuse God of anything at all. Humbled and awed, Job answers at last, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too

wonderful for me, which I did not know.”

I have heard people argue that this encounter between Job and God makes God out to be a divine bully, one who prefers cowering subjects to free and joyful people. Generations of preachers, who have advised that the proper approach to God necessarily includes fear, have reinforced this opinion. I would suggest, however, that something else is going on. There is a profound truth in the story of Job’s encounter with God: it is precisely when I am in the depths of suffering that I most need to remember that I am not the center of the world. When, by the grace of God, I do remember this, my own troubles become lighter, easier to bear. God is not bullying Job, but rather reminding him, and us, that God is bigger, grander and more mysterious than we can ever comprehend or imagine. The love that Jesus exemplified in his human form is but one aspect of God, one attribute of the Nameless, Formless, Indescribable One that is both immanent and transcendent, as near as breath and larger than the entire created universe.

The word our Bibles often translate as “fear” when speaking of God might better be translated as “awe” – that feeling that we get when looking up at the stars on a cloudless, desert night; or on a mountaintop, looking out over the endless earth. Recently, someone referred in a sermon to an Annie Dillard quote that seemed to say that, despite the language of insurance policies, floods and fires, earthquakes and hurricanes, disfiguring accidents and fatal diseases are not acts of God. I would agree that such things probably do not come to individuals or to societies as punishment for sinful behavior, but I am coming to see them precisely as acts of a God that is intimately connected with every atom, every molecule, every blade of grass, every breath of wind. If God is, as the theologians teach us, present everywhere, then God is, indeed, in the hurricane that fells trees onto houses and roadways as well as in the trees themselves, and the people and animals that are injured and killed by their falling.

This is a hard thing to accept – almost as hard as believing that Jesus rose from the dead. Because, somehow, this powerful, inexplicable God, whose acts are beyond questions of justice or injustice, is also the tender presence revealed by Jesus, who calls us to a life of service and compassion. How can we reconcile these seemingly incompatible truths about God? How can a just and merciful God who cares about the life of each individual also be the One who is clothed in majesty, who numbers the clouds and tilts the water skins of the heavens so that rivers run over their banks, washing away homes and lives?

I wish I had good, intellectually satisfying answers to these questions, but I do not. What I have is what Job had: faith. Our reflection paragraph for this season of doubt and dedication has been Annie Dillard's reminder that faith, "crucially, is not assenting intellectually to a series of doctrinal propositions; it is living in conscious and rededicated relationship to God." In this sense, Job never lost faith; he argued, he pleaded, he called God to account. Nevertheless, through it all, Job remained in conscious, dedicated relationship to God. Because he believed in God's ultimate goodness, he was able to accept God's answer, the only one any of us is likely to get.

This conscious, rededicated relationship to God is at the heart of our individual, spiritual disciplines and of our worship together on Sunday mornings. One of our disciplines is to prepare for Recommitment Sunday by spending an hour in focused prayer, if possible here in this room where we worship together. A room may be simply bricks and furnishings, but after so many years of people praying here, even the walls seem to speak of God's presence. When I spent my silent hour a few days ago, I wrote in my journal:

The invitation is to look at what Seekers has meant to me in the past and present, and what I mean to the community and to the wider world. Seekers Church has been a home to me, a

family where I never need to hide who I am. This community, this church, has held me in its prayers and encouraged me to speak in my own, true voice.

Seekers has been a place of challenge, asking hard questions, teaching me through trial and much error how to live with people even when we disagree about what to do and what to believe. I have been hurt and disappointed by people that I love, by people that I, nevertheless, still do trust. There is a sense in which that hurt and disappointment doesn't matter, because the greater truth is that each person is doing his or her best to live out the commitment that we make here together. We all fail. We are all jerks from time to time. That's the beauty, not of Seekers only, but of all of God's people, all of the members of the Body of Christ.

So what do I yearn for in Seekers future? That we know ourselves more deeply as Christ's own, true, resurrected Body, and act out that knowing in a way that is recognizable in the world. Not just doing good, but **being** Christ.

Even after all these years, I am in love with Seekers, and through Seekers, with God. There is a danger here, the danger that I might make an idol of this community, setting it above God. I don't think that is what I am doing, though. It is more that through Seekers, God's love is made manifest to me, and I am called out of myself to help keep it going, so that others may experience that same love.

It is in conscious and continually rededicated relationship to this church that I maintain, often week by week and minute by minute, a conscious and rededicated relationship to God.

Another part of my life that has consistently kept me connected to God has been my studies at [Drew University](#). As most of you know, next Friday will mark the formal end to my doctoral studies in liturgy, having completed and successfully defended my dissertation into the ways that United Methodist

congregations use visual materials to mark liturgical time. It is the end of period of profound dedication to study, of submitting to a discipline of reading, writing, and thinking that often kept me from other things I would have liked to do. Despite my doubts and fears, this dedicated life of scholarship has fed both my heart and my mind, and has brought me great joy.

The Liturgical Studies program at Drew grew out of the same liturgical renewal movement that led Sonya and other founding members of Seekers to see creative, ever-renewing worship as a central element in our life together. Like Seekers, the Drew program is broadly ecumenical, with students coming from every expression of Christ's Body. Brian Wren wrote the hymn we just sang, "We Are Not Our Own," in honor of its tenth anniversary; it expresses the ethos of loving responsibility that pervades the program. Through my studies, I have come to see our common worship as the place where we learn what it means to be the Body of Christ in the world.

One of the high points of my course work was the day that Serge, who is Russian Orthodox, brought photos of the baptism of his infant son to a class on Christian Initiation. Another student, of the American Baptist persuasion, spoke of the importance of adult conversion. This led to a deep and thoughtful conversation among the entire class about the many different ways that people come to know the presence of Christ in their lives, and the many different ways that Christian communities have come to mark that passage. It also led me to reflect on my own baptism, here in this room a little over thirteen years ago, and what I understood then about dying and rising to new life in Christ.

When I was baptized, I wrote,

Throughout my life, I have seen a double vision of Christians and Christianity. One is the exclusionary life of churches, which demand . . . adherence to rules and formal, restrictive

ideas of goodness . . . But the other is the inclusionary life of Christ . . . who said, "come unto me you who are heavy laden, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" . . . in whom there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, free person nor slave . . . who is no respecter of persons, but invites everyone into the kingdom of Heaven. . . . I confess that I need the person of Christ, the human aspect of God, to take me by the hand, to shelter me, to lead me into grace.

In the years since then, I have learned at an ever-deepening level the truth of what I then only dimly perceived. I have learned that I will probably always have doubts, that my mind is no more satisfied with easy answers than my soul is with cheap grace. I have learned, through thirteen seasons of recommitment, that my dedication to an ongoing relationship with God is nourished and often carried by my relationships with other people.

Next week, we will end our reading of Job with what many scholars consider a tacked-on, artificial, happy ending. Job repents-rethinks-his focus on his own troubles, seeing a greater truth that he is unable to articulate, but knows at a very deep level. Then God restores Job's fortunes, giving him new houses and herds, and seven sons and three daughters.

I have always had a hard time with this last bit. Yes, money and things can be replaced, but can children be replaced? It seemed too easy. However, the text does not tell us that Job ever forgot his troubles, or ever stopped grieving for his dead daughters and sons. Rather, Job has learned to accept what he cannot change, and has learned a new way of relating to those around him. In a time and place when daughters were thought of as possession, or even liabilities, the names of Job's three daughters are remembered, and we are told that their father "gave them an inheritance along with their brothers." Job, who previously had been good, has now found a

joy that expresses itself in counter-cultural generosity.

The story of Job was written before Jesus was born; before people knew the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection; before people had heard him teach about the surprising way of life that he called the realm of God. Yet the ending verses of the Book of Job describe something very like that realm. Job's fortunes are restored neither by some supernatural miracle, nor by his own effort. Rather, it is as though Job's renewed relationship with God has transformed his human relationships, as well. Job's friends and relatives bring him real comfort, now, even sharing their possessions with him, bringing him money and gold rings.

In Brian Wren's hymn, we acknowledge that, like Job, each of us is only a small part of God's astonishingly complex creation. In our doubt and in our rededication to relationship with God and with one another, let us remember that we are not our own. As members of this expression of the Body of Christ that we call Seekers, we belong to the One who calls us to lives of love and service: Jesus, who is the Christ.

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Abstract of Marking Time: Dressing the Church for United Methodist Worship 1982-2002

Ph.D. Dissertation by Deborah Sokolove

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Liturgical time is marked visually through temporary additions to the fixed architectural environment. Paraments, banners, flowers, and other items change with

the seasons, setting the scene for the liturgical actions. The language of clothing has often been applied to such adornments, using such terms as vesting or dressing the church.

United Methodist congregations draw on received tradition, the recommendations of denominational leaders, and ideas about art and spirituality that are common in the culture around them as they make decisions about dressing their worship spaces. National and regional gatherings of official and semi-official bodies provide examples and instruction in using visual materials to enliven worship. In many local churches, older practices, such as banks of lilies at Easter and poinsettias at Christmas, coexist with a newer visual language of banners, balloons, and butterflies.

Many proponents of liturgical renewal within the United Methodist Church uphold a modernist aesthetic which values beauty, noble simplicity, and honesty of materials. Others suggest that the egalitarian, collaborative, and eclectic aesthetic often found in feminist ritual is more suitable to local congregations that want to dress the church in a way that deepens their awareness of liturgical time and makes a visible connection between worship and their daily lives. This hand made, home made aesthetic is a means of grace for many who experience the presence of God most profoundly in the natural world and the ordinary things of life.