Deborah Sokolove: Recommitment and Dancing Bears

A Sermon for Seekers Church
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by Deborah Sokolove

Recommitment and Dancing Bears

> *"It is the second Sunday in Advent. For a year I have been attending Mass at this Catholic Church. Every Sunday for a year I have run away from home and joined the circus as a dancing bear. We dancing bears have dressed ourselves in buttoned clothes; we mince around the ring on two feet. Today we were restless; we kept dropping onto our forepaws. … No one, least of all the organist, could find the opening hymn. Then no one knew it. Then no one could sing it anyway.*
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> *"There was no sermon, only announcements.*
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> *"The priest proudly introduced the rascally acolyte who was going to light the two Advent candles. As we all could plainly see, the rascally acolyte had already lighted them. …*
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> *"A high school stage play is more polished than this service we have been rehearsing since the year one. In two thousand years, we have not worked out the kinks. We positively glorify them. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God is so mighty he can stifle his own laughter. Week after week, we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens. Week after week Christ washes the*

> *disciples' feet, handles their very toes, and repeats; it is all right – believe it or not – to be people.*
>
> *"Who can believe it?"*

So writes Annie Dillard in *Teaching a Stone to Talk.* You've probably noticed by now that the reflection paragraph for this Recommitment season is from the same deep, wise, and funny book of Dillard's observations about life, the universe, and everything. After looking at the altar for the last six weeks and reading that reflection paragraph, you've probably figured out why there is a life jacket and other protective gear on the altar. What you probably haven't figured out is why God hasn't blown our dancing bear act to smithereens, or blown our house down with an uncontrollable gale of Divine laughter.

As usual, I haven't figured that one out, either, but I do have some hunches. It's those hunches, and my compelling need to see where they lead, that has me driving 230 miles each way every week to pursue an advanced degree in Liturgical Studies. I'm halfway through the first of four terms, and – despite the fatigue, the disorientation that comes from trying to live in two places at once, and the frustration that there is never enough time to read as deeply as I'd like to – I'm loving it. What I love most is looking at all the differences of theology, of language, of music, of architecture, of worship practices, and seeing within them a mysterious unity that binds us, with all Christians in all times and all places, as the mystical Body of Christ. And beneath that is an even more mysterious bond with all people of faith and good will, no matter what their name for God, no matter what the particulars of their sacred story.

Paradoxically, grand universal truths can only be known in the particulars, in the lived details of specific individuals and communities. As we've noticed so often in the sharing of our life histories, when someone tells us a deeply personal story,

we are moved to tears because we recognize in it a piece of ourselves. Today is, of course, an important day in Seekers own sacred story. A few minutes ago, about 20 of us stood and repeated the Commitment Statement for Core Members of the Seekers Church; others who are called to be part of this worshiping community also made a commitment to be consciously and accountably on a spiritual journey with inner, outer, and communal dimensions. While the words with which we made these commitments are particular to this congregation, we share this day of Recommitment with Dayspring, Potter's House, New Community, Eighth Day, Jubilee, and all the other churches that were born out of the Church of the Saviour. And when I have reason to tell someone from outside the Church of the Saviour tradition what we are doing today, I have an easy analogy in the ancient tradition of monasteries and abbeys and other religious communities: we are taking annually renewable vows. Our vows are not just a personal promise made by each one of us to God; they are also with one another, with Seekers not just as a voluntary community, but as one expression of the universal Body of Christ. These vows are not explicitly of "poverty, chastity, and obedience", but rather of the underlying meaning of these concepts. We vow to allow ourselves to be held accountable for good stewardship of our material and spiritual resources, for fidelity to the promises we make and the beliefs we profess, for seeking always to be the living eyes and ears and mouths and hands and feet and mind and heart of Christ.

Among my Methodist, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic colleagues at Drew, I am somewhat of an oddity. With my Jewish past of inherited liturgical formulae that remain virtually the same from week to week and year to year, and my Seekers present in which the liturgy changes at least nine times a year and rarely repeats itself, I find myself somewhat outside the conversations that hinge on knowing the contents of denominational Books of Worship and understanding the intentions of those who wrote them. On the other hand, when

talk turns to inclusive language or shared leadership, the Eastern Orthodox member of the class looks a little uncomfortable, since the chances of a woman presiding at worship or of God being referred to in feminine terms in his community are slim to none. What we do all have in common, however, is a sense that full, conscious, and active participation in regular communal worship forms us, with all Christians, as the people of God.

That phrase – "full, conscious, and active participation" – comes from the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, promulgated in 1963 by the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church. It has become a touchstone not for only Roman Catholics, but for liturgical scholars and theorists from every branch of Christianity. But what is "full, conscious and active participation" in the liturgy? And what is the liturgy that we are asked to participate in? I'd like to explore our own practice a little, to share with you some of my understandings of what we are up to in our dancing bear act, what it is that we just recommitted ourselves to.

The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek "laos", the people, and "ergon", work. It is connected to our words "energy" and "ergonomic." Liturgy, then, has been translated as "the work of the people," but also may be translated as "public works" – work done on behalf of the people. Liturgy is God's work – the Divine Service to and for humanity – as well as the people's work of service to and for God. Liturgy, then, is not only what we do here on Sunday morning, but taking the Good News that we share together here, and carrying it outside to our daily lives of work and service to the world.

In its more narrow, technical sense, however, the word liturgy does refer to what we do together on Sunday morning, on Christmas, on Maundy Thursday, at weddings and funerals, when we gather for communal worship. The liturgy is the order of worship, the prayers and songs and readings and actions and silence that make up this recurring and ever-renewed moment of

our life together. Because the shape of our liturgy, the order in which we do things, is so familiar to me, so obvious, I am always surprised when a new member of Celebration Circle says "what's the assurance?" or doesn't know that the first hymn comes after the invocation and before the Word for the Children.

This ordering of liturgical elements is neither random nor set in stone, but is a kind of distillation of Christian practice over two millennia. As inheritors of the Protestant wing of the tradition, our usual liturgies resemble the form known in some churches as the Liturgy of the Word. The liturgy begins before we enter the chapel and open our bulletins. It begins in the act of gathering, starting with getting up in the morning and preparing ourselves with the intention to go to church; traveling from our homes in Northern Virginia, Maryland, and the District; entering the building; and finding our places in the circle for sharing news, singing Happy Birthday, greeting one another, and welcoming guests. This is why the leader of Circle Time says, "let us now **continue** our worship with a moment of silence before we enter the chapel." Our movement from the gathering circle to the more formal space of the chapel, although it most often resembles a disorderly mob, is what in other churches might be called an "entrance procession." In our case, however, it is not the specially dressed presiders and choir who process as the rest of the congregation merely watches the spectacle – rather, it is all of us, dressed as ordinary folks, who enter as a holy people, our bodies the living stones of God's holy church.

After the prelude (or maybe we should start calling it the processional?) helps us to settle into our places and prepare ourselves for what is to follow, the liturgist says something like "welcome to the **continuation** of worship at Seeker's church," again acknowledging the fact that we have already been at worship for some time. It may seem odd, therefore, that the next action is the Call to Worship. Nevertheless, a

Call to Worship has been an intrinsic part of liturgy for much longer than Seekers has been in existence. It serves to focus us and to deepen our intention to pray together. In reading responsively with the leader, we begin to listen to one another differently, to pay attention to our breathing and to the rhythm of our speech, as well as to the meaning of the words. As we stand for the invocation, we know intellectually that God is always present, but the leader asks on behalf of all of us that God's presence become known particularly in this moment, that God's nearness rest between us and among us. In the first hymn is a congregational response to God's immediacy. It helps us to breathe deeply together, to fill us with breath, with spirit.

As we sit for the Children's Word, we are asked to pay attention to that part of our Call that speaks of generational inclusiveness. Recently, we in Celebration Circle have had some discussion about the point of the Children's Word. In one sense, it is an opportunity for all of us to "become as little children," to hear with the ears of the youngest amongst us how God is working in the world, how to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. In another, it is a moment when the children are literally at the center of our community, embraced by the love and care of the adults who are praying for their welfare. And in yet another, it is a chance for all of us to hear the thoughts and concerns of the children in our midst, as well as to share with them some of ours. It is for all these reasons that sometimes Sonya or Emily admonishes us not to laugh when one of the children says something that betrays their innocence and ignorance – it makes of the children objects for our entertainment, rather than the subjects of our love.

When the children and teachers leave for Sunday school, it sometimes feels as though the life and excitement of the community goes out the door with them. As the noise and bustle fade up the stairs, a new quality of silence fills the chapel.

We have no more distractions, no more responsibilities but to sit with one another in the presence of God. Another responsive reading punctuates the silence, making it seem even deeper by contrast with the sounds of our voices reading the season’s litany.

In other churches, a litany is a series of prayers recited by the leader, each followed by an invariant response from the congregation, such as "O God, hear our prayer," or "Saint so-and-so, pray for us." For us, it usually takes the form of a poem, or verses from the psalms, read aloud by members of the congregation, either as solo voices, or antiphonally as in "those near the windows will be voice 1, and those near the piano will be voice 2." Composed in juxtaposition with the reflection paragraph, the litany serves to highlight the seasonal theme, to help us consider our own places in the sacred story, both individually and communally.

The deepening silence takes us face to face with our own failings and shortcomings, and we come to the place of confession. Confession has always been part of Christian worship, but it has been put in a variety of places within the liturgy, often somewhere in the middle of the Eucharistic prayer. As I was in the midst of writing this sermon, I went to look something up and found myself reading about how, for somewhat complicated reasons, some congregations of the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches joined together in 1948 to become Uniting Church of South India. They needed a liturgy that did not come entirely from any one tradition, and the committee made use of many of the ideas that liturgical scholars had been advocating. One of these ideas, an innovation at the time, was to place the confession and absolution (or assurance of God’s forgiveness, as we understand it) before the reading of Scripture. The rationale was "that we need cleansing to hear the Word aright." It seems to me that in our liturgy we are saying that before we can even thank God for all that is good in our

lives, or intercede for those in need, we need to look at ourselves clearly, to confess where we have fallen short, and to know that regardless of what we have done or neglected to do, God loves and forgives us when we return to God. Only then are we capable of giving thanks with our whole hearts for what we have already received, and are we capable of opening ourselves to new possibilities for healing for ourselves and for others.

The relatively long silence, broken only by the soft voices of individual prayers, is for many of us the heart of our time together. When people ask me about our worship, I sometimes say that we have too much silence for Episcopalians, and too little for Quakers. It is in this prayerful silence that we are most within our own thoughts, and most united. Peter has told me that sometimes when he is liturgist, he is aware of the whole congregation breathing together as one body. As we hear one another's prayers for family, for friends, for troubled places in the city, the nation, and elsewhere, the Holy Spirit prays through us and with us, joining us with Christ for the salvation of the world.

There are times when I am so deep in the silence that the second hymn comes as a shock. As we rise to sing, fumble for our hymnals, some of us look around at one another in astonishment, as though waking from a common dream. This hymn is generally chosen to complement one or more of the themes in the scripture lessons and sermon, and marks the transition from looking inward to looking outward, opening us for the hearing of the Word.

Reading from the Bible has been part of Christian worship since the beginning, and has been part of Jewish worship before that. However, when I first came to Seekers, Scripture was not read aloud in the service. Only after a sermon given by Brenda in which she spoke of how much it meant to her did we start reading the Gospel lesson, and a few years later I suggested that we needed to hear the lesson from the Hebrew

Scripture, for the sake of the unity of the sacred story.

As most of you know, we follow a lectionary – a prescribed set of readings that covers about 60% of the Hebrew Scriptures, 80% of the New Testament, and most of the Psalms over the course of three years. Besides giving some structure and continuity as the scriptural basis for sermons – not unimportant with our commitment to an open pulpit – the lectionary also helps to unite us with the Church Universal. There are actually several lectionaries in use throughout the Christian world – the Roman Catholics, the Episcopalians, and the Lutherans each have their own, while many Methodist, Presbyterian, and others follow the Revised Common Lectionary, which was prepared by an ecumenical committee. Still others follow the Inclusive Language Lectionary, also prepared ecumenically, but with an eye to including more stories about women as well as using more gender-inclusive language. This all sounds like there isn't much unity after all, but in practice there are relatively few differences between the various lectionaries, and on any given Sunday, at least one, and perhaps two or even all three of the readings, and probably the Psalm, will be the same in a majority of churches worldwide. It is somehow reassuring that I can – as I did a couple of years ago – attend Mass at the Notre Dame in Paris, and hear the same Gospel lesson that is being read here at home, at Seekers, that same Sunday.

We at Seekers believe that any one of us is capable of hearing God's word, and proclaiming it to the others, and it is for this reason that our pulpit – as some of the teenagers pointed out – that is open to anyone tall enough to see over the top. Celebration Circle keeps the preaching calendar, and while anyone can sign up for practically any Sunday, it is our responsibility to see that there is a balance in the preaching – that there is testimony and teaching, scriptural interpretation and life lessons, and above all that what is said from the pulpit feeds the need of the people of God for

the Good News that makes us church.

In more traditional churches, the offering that follows the sermon is sometimes called the Response to the Word. We do, of course, pass the offering plate after another time of silence in which to consider (or maybe recover from) all that has been said. But unlike most other churches we really do have a chance to respond to what has been offered each Sunday, to add to what the preacher has said out of our own reflections on the lectionary, out of our own experience of worship and of the world. Some time ago, in a group of mostly Catholic, Episcopalian and Lutheran priests and pastors, I mentioned this practice, and they were all simultaneously horrified and intrigued. They could hardly bend their imaginations around what might happen if they allowed their congregations to respond publicly, immediately, to one of their sermons.

Like many churches, we share Communion on the first Sunday of the month, as though it were too sacred (or perhaps too much trouble or too little understood) to celebrate more often. There are good, historical reasons why participation in Communion, or Eucharist, became infrequent, but scriptural evidence about the early church implies that it was a central part of every gathering for worship. In the more "liturgical" Protestant churches, there is a growing understanding that every Sunday celebration should include Eucharist, a gathering of God's family at God's own Table. But this sermon is already getting long, so I'll leave that conversation for another day. (Maybe we don't need frequent Communion as long as we have coffee hour, Easter breakfast, Christmas Eve supper, and overnights at Wellspring.)

I'll also leave a closer look at the uses and meanings of music in worship to Jesse and the others to whom music is call. For now, it is enough to say that the closing hymn and the benediction are our transition from prayer to action, sending us out from worship with a renewed sense of God's presence in our lives. It is the salvation of the entire

world, not our individual souls that, after all, is the point of our Recommitment, our awareness that it is only by God’s good grace that our dancing bear act, again today, hasn’t been smashed to smithereens.