

Deborah Sokolove: Season of Recommitment

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at Seekers Church
by Deborah Sokolove

Season of Recommitment

For the last several weeks, I have been haunted by the juxtaposition of this week's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, and that for next week. It seems to me that they speak both to our condition here at Seekers, and to my own life. They speak of endings and of new beginnings, of hopelessness and of hope restored. They speak of the commitment of God to be always with God's people.

The reading for today is full of sorrow and pain, of defeat. The Psalm which follows it speaks of loss, of torment, of exile. The passage is also a love letter, of sorts. It is not from one individual to another; rather, it is the prophet's speaking for the place left behind, and for the exiled community itself. From the Book of Lamentations, it is a cry of the heart for the desolation of the beloved city, the home and the hearth of the people. "How lonely sits the city that was once full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among nations. ... She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her..." The people have gone into exile, driven from their home by the Babylonian conqueror.

Sometimes, in this unsettled period of the New New Lands, we have felt like that empty city, those exiled people, who said "How can we sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land?" They mourned for what could be no longer, and had no heart to look

at a future of hard labor among strangers. We, of course, have not been conquered by an alien kingdom and driven into slavery; we are not even leaving this church, at least for the time being. But even those among us who have been most in denial now know that things no longer will be as they have been, and nobody yet knows what is to come. Like the exiles of twenty-five hundred years ago, we rightly want to hold on to our past, to not let go of what has been so very precious to us.

But next week's reading is a message of hope, a call to embrace joyously the unknown, unknowable future. Jeremiah sends word from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon, saying "Thus says the Lord of hosts... Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you...and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." The people were called to turn away from mourning what was lost, and to move willingly and lovingly, together, into what lay ahead.

In the season just over, we were invited to a pioneering faith, a pilgrim spirit. We were asked what we were willing to do, to give, to be, on the journey into the New New Lands. While some are ready to go with excitement and eagerness, to discover the shape of our new vision, others go with lagging feet, weary with the very thought of either caring for this building, or finding and moving to a new location. For some, the strife and contention with other parts of Church of the Saviour, and simmering beneath the surface among ourselves, is too awful to even contemplate, and they wish it all away. For some, the daily stresses of work and home seem to leave no energy to give to the ongoing life of Seekers, or to add one more hour to the many already spent in Sunday mornings, mission group, School of Christian Living and other activities. We mourn what can no longer be, and fear the burdens ahead.

And yet, in the midst of our mourning what can be no more and

our fear of what may lie ahead, we are asked to recommit ourselves to this expression of Christ's Body know as Seekers Church. A few weeks ago, Pat Conover declared his love for this community, and in that declaration spell out some of the implications of radical love and trust. Today, I, too, want to tell you that I love you. When I first came here, nearly six years ago, it was love at first sight. I fell in love, not with any particular individuals, but with a community which fairly glowed with the sign which is said to be the true hallmark of followers of Christ, "see how they love one another." Not only did it seem that you loved one another, you honored the children among you as well as the elders. You listened to one another, young and old and in-between, hearing each other into speech. And you welcomed me and Glen, strangers, exiles in a foreign land, and asked to hear our stories, and we knew that we had found a new home.

Some time later, Sharon Lockwood expressed her fear to me that one day I would find out that Seekers, like any human community, has feet of clay – and that I would then leave in anger and disillusion. I was a little surprised at her concern, and, and you can see, I am still here. But, yes, Sharon was right, Seekers does have feet of clay, and I have been hurt and disappointed by one or another person in this community on more than one occasion. And, I have, as well, done my share of hurting and disappointing others. Far from causing me to leave, however, this proof of the real humanity of this Body binds me still closer in the mutual forgiveness of Christ's love. It is this commitment to one another, and to the world at large, that marks us as the people of God.

Today is the beginning of our season of recommitment, the time when we renew our pledge to love one another as God loves the world. The green sheets which have been around for the last couple of weeks include questions to help guide our reflections in the specific areas of participation in common worship, financial stewardship, personal spiritual growth,

call, group life, commitment to inclusion, and commitment to the future. I'd like to share some of my thoughts on each of these.

Common Worship. A few weeks ago, Sonya said that art is the heartbeat of the community. While I am delighted at the sentiment, and understand the context in which she said it, I would rather say (and suppose that she would agree) that our regular worship together is the heartbeat, and art is but one of its expressions. Our regular coming together to hear God's word to us, and dispersing to be God's people in the world, is what binds us as a community, and unites us with that larger community which is the worldwide Body of Christ. Without common worship, we could be just any group of individuals who care about one another and perhaps do good works. Our common worship enables us to be Christ to one another and to see Christ in one another, to remember that we are not only save one by one, but all together in the transformation of the world into the reign of God. It is in joining with you in worship, in song and in silence, in confession and in celebration, that I know most deeply the oneness that is in Christ.

Stewardship. Actually, the green sheet says "financial stewardship," but as Pat reminded us, stewardship is more than proportionate giving, more than just money. Stewardship is an attitude towards life, and extends to how we use all of our money, not just how much (or whether) we give to the church. Stewardship speaks to how we use our time, whether we work too hard and forget to play, or the other way around; whether we make time for relationships and for solitude; whether we overextend ourselves and give too much, or keep only for ourselves our daily gift of hours. Stewardship considers how we treat our bodies, whether we get enough sleep, or eat nourishing food, or attend to the signs of illness before they get out of hand. And stewardship speaks to our attitude towards the earth as acted out in our care for possessions,

our choices about transportation, and our many other relationships with the material world. Lately, I have been aware of the relationship in my life among these various areas that call for good stewardship, and how when one is out of balance, the others probably are, too.

Spiritual growth. The disciplines of daily quiet time, of prayer and journal and scripture, are tools, not ends in themselves. I think that prayer, understood as an ongoing conversation with God, is essential for spiritual growth; but prayer may take many forms. Familiarity with scripture and the writings of other persons of faith helps us to understand our place in the ongoing story of God's people. But there are other disciplines— painting, running, breathing, walking, mindfulness, gardening, washing dishes – which, like journalling, bring us face to face with ourselves. The end, the goal, is to know God, to be aware of God's loving presence in every moment, and to show that love through every action, every relationship in our lives. The measure of spiritual growth, I believe, is the measure of our ability to love and to accept love, to forgive and to accept forgiveness. It implies self-knowledge at the deepest levels, awareness of who we are, of how we behave, of what we think, and the willingness to test these things against the standard of love, of forgiveness. It is through my commitment to disciplines of spiritual growth that I know how much I fall short of the glory of God, and know God's love and continuing forgiveness as grace.

Call. Last week, Sue Johnson showed us, in story and in movement, her joyful acceptance of God's call on her life. Sue was transformed in our presence into the likeness of Christ, in her offering of self to God and to us. But call is not always that dramatic. Sometimes, call is in the day-to-day, in cooking, cleaning, correcting, listening and loving of life with one's own children. Sometimes, it is in the daily grind of work in public service, or in advocacy for children or the

elderly or the disadvantaged. And sometimes, it is in simply doing the task at hand as well as possible, in being available to those in need of a smile, a friendly face, a hug, a pat on the back, a shoulder to cry on. There is no privileged call, except the one Jesus addressed to the disciples: "Follow me." And sometimes, I have found, I am led into some very strange and unexpected places. The way is not always clear, and I rarely know where I am going, but I am learning to trust the voice that bids me follow.

Group life. I don't remember the topic of Gordon's sermon the first time I came to Church of the Saviour, but something he said made a deep impression on me. He talked about what happens when we make a commitment to meet regularly and pray with a group of people whom we might not have chosen individually. He talked about learning to love one another not in spite of, but because of, being somewhat lumpy, not-quite-finished, breakable (and often broken) clay pots. Those words stuck with me, and have helped me to understand the value of our mission groups, which are not based on personal affinity with one another, but on commonality of call. Although I may hold the record for membership in the largest number of mission groups in the shortest period of time, I was in the Artists' Group and Learners and Teachers long enough to develop trusting, caring relationships that did not end just because I am now part of Celebration Circle. In small groups, we share our stories and hold one another's histories in trust, to remind each other of our dreams when we forget them ourselves. In small groups we do much of the work of the church, which (as is stated in our call) is both Spirit-filled Body of Christ and fragile, earthen vessel.

Commitment to inclusion. I have already spoken of the evident love and respect for persons of all ages which is part of the very fabric of Seekers. Our call as a church says that we welcome women and men of every race and sexual orientation. Inclusion is another word for "hospitality," that openness to

strangers, rich or poor, educated or illiterate, Jew or Greek, slave or free, that was the core of Jesus' ministry and the hallmark of the early church. A commitment to inclusion challenges us as a body to welcome the stranger, to hear and respond to the many voices of the city, to maintain our connections with people who are part of us but are currently unable – through illness, distance, or family needs – to be physically with us. A commitment to inclusion challenges me to know, to honor, and to love people who are unlike myself, and to welcome them into my life.

Commitment to the future. Last week in the meeting of the Core Members, someone said that in the past deciding whether to recommit had meant looking back over the previous year. It meant considering whether promises made had been faithfully kept, asking whether I was worthy based on past performance to make new promises. But this year, the speaker said, it is felt as a call to look forward, to consider what I want to bring to the ongoing, common life.

This brings us back to where we started. The reading from Lamentations looks backward, mourns lost opportunities, wails of the desolation of ruined hopes. But Jeremiah also brings words of new hope: Look to the future, he said. Put down roots, plant gardens, build houses. Seek the welfare of the community where God has put us...and pray to God on its behalf, for in its welfare we will find our own.

We are called to love one another, to love the world, to carry the story of the past into the unknowable future, where the fulfillment of God's promises awaits. A commitment to the future is a commitment not just to Seekers, but to the city and to the nation, to the generations to come. It is a commitment to ongoing life as members of the Body of Christ, for the salvation of the world.