

# Deborah Sokolove: Thinking About Commitment

A Sermon for Seekers Church  
for October 5, 1997  
by Deborah Sokolove

## Thinking About Commitment

You might remember my announcement a few weeks ago, that I thought someone had volunteered to preach today, but I couldn't remember who it was. As keeper of the preaching calendar, it was my responsibility, so when the mystery preacher never showed up, I decided that I would do it. This didn't seem like a hardship, because I had planned to preach on Recommitment, next Sunday, but later found that I needed to be at a conference that weekend. Then, I looked at the lectionary scriptures for this week...

The first lesson which you just heard is from the beginning of the Book of Job. It's a very strange story about a man that lived according to the rules, but had a lot of troubles, including a bunch of friends who tried to help him but only made matters worse. In these opening verses, God and Satan talk to each other like ordinary human beings. Actually, Satan isn't a name, it's a title that means something like "Prosecuting Attorney." He isn't an enemy of God at all, but works for God, walking around on earth, seeing what people do, and reporting back to God. When God brags to this Prosecutor that Job is such good man, the Satan says, "Oh, really? That's just because he's rich and healthy and has a lot of children. Let me take everything away from him, and then let's see if he still praises you!" God says, "OK, Satan, do your worst," and soon Job is very sick, and he's lost everything.

Now, I am very fond of the story of Job, especially the moment towards the end when God appears to him in a whirlwind, but I couldn't see how to make these opening verses fit into a sermon on Recommitment to Seekers. So I looked at the Gospel reading and found something that speaks of a different kind of commitment than I had in mind....

About six years ago, Cynthia Power (who used to be a member of this church) said to me that, as a woman who had been divorced, she hated those passages in which Jesus speaks of marriage and divorce. I think that she is not the only one. Not only for those whose marriages have ended, but those for whom the "one man-one woman" description of marriage is not good news, start to squirm in their chairs when this is the text for the day. This week in my mission group, two people said that they didn't remember reading it at all – although they had looked at it that morning – but had focused on the second part, about the realm of God and little children.

As a person who has been divorced twice, and is now at last happily married, I too would rather not have to deal with a teaching that seems to say that remarriage is the same thing as adultery. But since it is in the Bible, and the lectionary put it in our way this week, I think it is better to talk about it than to read it aloud in church (or silently by ourselves) and then pretend we had not noticed.

So, what is going on here? What is the good news in a passage that sounds like bad news to so many?

The good news, I think, is in the challenge of commitment, the challenge of keeping promises that we have made. Precisely because I know first hand how terribly painful divorce is to all concerned, and how hard it was to promise " 'til death us do part" when I knew that I had broken that promise before, I have found myself counseling friends who were considering leaving relationships to stay with it and work it out if they possibly could. There is no guarantee of happiness, the second

or third or fourth time around, and we carry our problems with us into our new relationships. Too much has already been written and said about the gathering of Promise Keepers, yesterday on the Mall, and I still don't know what I think about either the event or the organization. I do know that keeping promises is a good thing for all of us, men and women, girls and boys. And keeping promises is at the heart of this lesson from Mark's Gospel.

I do not think that Jesus meant to condemn those who had been divorced, and who could not – for whatever reason – live up to their marriage vows. Nor do I think that in his quotation from Genesis regarding God making them “male and female,” that he meant to condemn the kind of loving, stable same-sex relationships that were unknown in his time and place, but which we celebrate in the lives of some here among us. Rather, I think that Jesus wanted people to take their relationships seriously, to neither enter into nor get out of relationships lightly.

In the time and place in which Jesus lived, people did not have “jobs” in the contemporary sense. In general, people lived in extended families, sharing the tasks of living on the land as farmers and herders, or in the towns as weavers, woodworkers, or metalsmiths. In marriage, a man did not in fact “leave his father and mother” (as Jesus quotes Genesis) to go live with his wife's family, but rather the other way around. Women went to their husband's home, to live in an extended family consisting often of elder parents, unmarried daughters, and sons with their wives and children. In the case of divorce, a woman was left with no access to food or shelter, unless her brothers were able and willing to help her. Then, as is often the case now, divorce very often meant poverty for women.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, they were trying to trick him, to get him to admit that he didn't know (or didn't care about) the religious rules of the time. His answer

was not meant to make the rules more harsh, but to remind his hearers that God had provided for human weakness, in this case for human inability to live up to an ideal of lifetime love and respect for one's partner. I cannot believe that God intends for people to put up with physical or mental abuse, or a life without love. But I do believe that God intends for us to live in relationship, to pay attention to the promises we make, and to care for one another in family and in community.

In these last few weeks, members of the Learners and Teachers Mission Group have challenged us to think about personal and corporate core learnings, spiritual disciplines and practices, and inward and outward journeys. We have been asked to look at how we use our time, our energy, and our money in relationship to the ongoing life of the Seekers Community, and been given a set of questions to help us reflect on our commitments to God, community, family, and ourselves. Next Sunday, something over twenty of us will repeat the commitment statement which we first spoke aloud when we entered into Core Membership (and which we just heard Ken proclaim). In it, we promise

- To be a faithful witness to God's presence among us;
- To nurture our relationships with God and Seekers through specific disciplines;
- To foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor;
- To work for the ending of all war, personal and public;
- To share responsibility for the spiritual growth of persons of all ages in the community;
- To respond joyfully with our lives, as the grace of God gives us freedom.

And any who wish, including children, will declare that they are Seekers; that The Seekers Church is their community of faith; and that they are called by God to be part of this community.

Unlike marriage, these are not lifetime commitments. We formally review and renew these promises every October, but

people are free to leave at any time. Some have made this commitment more than twenty times, but each year we are free to recommit or not. Sometimes, people leave Core Membership, but remain part of the community. Sometimes, people just leave. When someone who has actively been part of Seekers for a while decides to leave, it feels for many of us something like a divorce. We wonder what we have done wrong, what we could have done differently, how we could have prevented the ending of what we thought was a deep and lasting relationship. Still, we bless them as they move on, and pray that they will find another expression of Christ's Church in which to worship and grow.

I've been thinking a lot about belonging, in this season of recommitment. Last weekend at Dayspring, thinking about this sermon, I wrote:

*What does it mean when we say that we belong to Christ's Body, that we belong to a church, or the Church? We sometimes speak of our belongings, those things that we own, possess, have for our own use. When we speak of our belongings, we are usually referring to more-or-less temporary things, portable things, like books or utensils, clothes, cameras, and computers. Usually, we don't include things like the trees in our back yards, or even our houses, because when we go on to a new place, houses and trees don't go with us. Rather, we say that we gather our belongings in order to move on. So to belong to a church, or the Church, is in some sense to be claimed by it. As members of the Body of Christ, it is God who "has" us, not the other way around.*

And, I would now add, unlike the material things that belong to us, it is possible for us to belong to Christ's Body, to God and to one another, in a way that is committed, that is like a marriage. As Ken said in his [sermon](#) last week, and Pat said some months earlier, and I think that I have said before, people fall in love with Seekers. Like any other love

relationship, sometimes there are rough patches. Our feelings get hurt, we feel slighted, we feel left out, we get angry with each other and we get angry with God. But, more often than not, in my experience, there is forgiveness; there is grace.

While it is true that grace “just happens,” it is also true that we need practice, so that we see it when it comes, and remember it the times when it has when we haven’t seen it for a while. Many of us find grace in our commitment to make an annual retreat, usually with other Seekers at Dayspring. Again from my Dayspring journal:

*Sunday morning. The stand of trees across the way from the Lodge looks like an unbroken mass of green. Here and there, a short length of naked branch points to right or left, giving my eye some places of reference. Almost exactly in the center, one straight, white trunk gleams, a slender upright around which the whole horizontal mass seems to arrange itself.*

*In the nearer ground, the dry brown stalks of late summer are dotted with the yellows of ragweed and goldenrod, and purple thistles. Some still have green leaves, despite the summer’s drought. There are a few young trees, the beginning of the forest’s reclamation of what once was farm land. Someone mows paths through the tall grass, swaths of green wide enough for two or even three to walk abreast. The split-rail fence is new, its gates not yet weathered. We wondered at its purpose, two days ago, before we entered the Great Silence.*

*Without words, at least spoken aloud, we shared the blessings of seeing several white-tailed deer and at least a couple of foxes. Now, the only sound is the honking of geese, the wind in the trees near the Lodge, and occasional loud thunk of acorns falling on the Lodge roof.*

*It is almost time to leave the silence, to gather for one more time in the common room, where a fire burns in the hearth and we see God in the natural faces of one another. We will share the words that came to us in the silence, laugh and cry together, and know ourselves again as members of Christ's Body.*

The final hymn today will be "When Love is Found," which I first heard at Trish and Pat's wedding. It is a wedding song, with joyous images of love exploding and filling the sky when "two are one," and as such might not seem to be appropriate to this day. But I invite you, as we sing it, to pay attention to all the words about trust and betrayal and forgiveness and love renewed, and consider how they might just as easily apply to life in a community that is larger than two.

Until I had to wrestle with today's difficult scripture reading, I had never given much thought to the image of the Church as the Bride of Christ, except to dismiss it as yet another somewhat incomprehensible piece of patriarchal nonsense. But as I read Brian Wren's words, and think about the difficulties and joys of living in an intentional Christian community, I think that it is, after all, an apt metaphor. When we rise to the challenge of making and keeping commitments to one another, to this community, and to God, we will know that in Christ we are able to "keep no score of wrong, but hear through pain love's Easter song."