Deborah Sokolove: Wading into Deep Water

A Sermon for Seekers Church,
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by Deborah Sokolove

Wading into Deep Water

When I signed up to preach today, it wasn't because I had some burning issue I wanted to bring up. Indeed, I would have preferred that someone else fill the hole in the preaching calendar, since I just got back from LA, and I'm leaving from here for a week-long bike trip up the C&O canal. I didn't really think I had the time to write a sermon. But I kept getting that nudge from God, so I put my name down.

As you know, I have the advantage of being married to the guy who runs the tape recorder, so as I drove to work one morning earlier this week, I was able to hear both David's sermon last Sunday and the lively exchange that followed. As I listened to the comments in the response time, and Sally's desperate attempt to end the service at something approximating a sensible time, it seemed to me that the conversation was just getting started. A long discussion in Celebration Circle on Wednesday evening confirmed that notion.

In his sermon, David invited us to embrace the cross as a way of bridging the great oceans that seem to divide conservative and progressive Christians. While I don't disagree that embracing the cross may be a path towards Christian unity, there are many ways to understand what that might mean. I'd

like to explore some of them by holding today's lectionary up against some of my own experiences and observations, and wading out into the deep water that connects us to our Christian brothers and sisters who are standing on the other side.

The lectionary readings this morning are very rich, very suggestive, and I have found myself unable (or unwilling) to settle on a single one. This Sunday being one in the long string of Sundays of Ordinary Time between Pentecost and Advent, there is no attempt in the lectionary to harmonize these readings. Rather, each is part of a cycle of semi-continuous passages that encourage us to remember and to consider the great sweep of the biblical story, from Genesis to Revelation, over the course of three years.

So when, as today, the readings don't seem to have anything to do with one another, it can be helpful to remember that there is, in fact, an underlying plan to what may seem like simply random passages. Taken in these short, often unrelated, gulps, it takes a long time to read the Bible aloud in church, but it gives us time to reflect on its many nuances with integrity, and in harmony with a great many other church bodies around the world. And while faith in the salvific life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is what distinguishes us as Christians, that story doesn't make much sense apart from the larger story that leads up to it and flows out of it.

In the Hebrew Scripture reading we just heard, Jacob sends his family across the Jabok River, while he remains on the other side. In the night, he wrestles with someone who is variously identified as a man, an angel, and God's own self. This struggle leaves Jacob with a dislocated hip, and a new name.

Now, like many other married/divorced/remarried women, I have considerable experience with new names. It's a little disorienting. A name is an important part of one's identity, a primary way that we are known in the world. To change our name is to change who we are. Our names proclaim our family connections, our ethnic experiences, our collective history. When someone learns our name, they learn something about our story.

To become a Christian is also to take on a new name – it is to take on the name of Christ. We become a part of Christ's living, eternally risen Body. In this week's passage from the Letter to the Romans, which we did not read aloud but which I hope many of you have looked at during the week, Paul writes of his sorrow that many of his own people seem unable to acknowledge Jesus as the messiah for whom they yearn. Paul says that he would be willing to be cut off from Christ himself, if in that way his relatives might understand the truth as he sees it.

When I read this, I felt very close to Paul. It's not that I want to convert my family, but rather that I wish I could just talk to them at all about what I know and do and think. Since they don't understand, I hope that you, my family by adoption, will.

Paul, of course, had been called Saul before his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, his new name reflecting his new life in Christ. Like Paul, I, too, once was granted a vision of the risen Christ, shining in a blaze of glory, and it changed my life forever. This Christ Jesus, the human face of the eternal One who is also Three, did not ask me what I believed about substitutionary atonement, Trinitarian

theology, or any other doctrinal position. Rather, as he said to Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John at the shore of Galilee, to Matthew at his toll-booth and to many others in all the years since then, this Christ said simply, "Follow me."

So I followed, seeking a baptism I barely understood, in which I died to my old life and rose again in Christ. And, like Paul, I became estranged from my own people by taking on the name of "Christian." Over time, I have come to understand my baptism at an ever deeper level, both through formal study and through constant immersion in the life of the church. For me, baptism is not an empty ritual, a mere formality, but rather a potent symbol, overflowing with meaning, by which individuals of any age are transformed into members of the earthen vessel that is the grace-filled Body of Christ.

Baptism is one of the physical, tangible ways that we may participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. But dying to self and rising in Christ is not the only meaning of baptism. In baptism, we are washed clean of our sins. In baptism, we are born into the nurturing life of the Church, within which we become true heirs with Jesus, the sons and daughters of God. In the early church, places of baptism were adorned with scenes of Noah and the Flood, Jonah in the belly of the great fish, and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. All of these were understood as precursors of baptism, times in which individuals or groups passed through the dangerous, deep waters into a new life. Baptism is a time of transformation, and its sign is water. In baptism, we go down into the depths of the waters of Creation, and we rise as members of the resurrected Body of Christ.

As many of you may remember, I was baptized at Seekers, but it

was only a kind of accident of timing that I was not baptized at the church that Glen's parents attend in Southern California. This church is theologically and socially conservative, a congregation that we might think is far on the other side from where many, if not most, Seekers stand. Their rather casual, upbeat service consists of about fifteen minutes of praise music, an opening prayer, a sermon, an offering, more praise music, and a benediction. As you might guess, it is not exactly my taste in liturgy, but I go there whenever I can, because I'm always curious about what they are up to. After all, they have a fulltime staff member whose title is "Pastor of Worship Arts."

In many ways, this Baptist church is not very different from our own. What struck me most on entering their worship space last Sunday was how they had re-arranged things. Instead of the straight rows of chairs facing the front platform that I had become used to over the years, they had moved the chairs into a U-shape, so that members of the congregation could see one another across the center. Overhead, red and white cloth streamers reached upwards from the windows to the center of the ceiling, and several life-sized cut-outs of circus clowns, with holes where the faces should be, were placed strategically around the room. The church had become a Big Top, the theme of this year's Vacation Bible School. It looked a little like something we might have done here at Seekers. Ok, so I didn't really get the connection between the circus and faith, but it was clear that the people who attend regularly understood what was going on. It was also clear that there was an intentional connection between what the children were learning during the week and the service on Sunday morning.

What was missing in this church was any visible cross. When

the church was new, the only cross in the space was actually an absence, a cross-shaped opening in one wall through which light poured. Not bad symbolism, actually. But soon the needs of technology intervened, and the screen on which the words to the praise choruses are projected now hangs in front of that cross, obscuring it completely from view. After some time, a new cross, this time in the form of a large, well-designed banner, was installed at the back of the platform from which sermons were delivered. Like the cross of light, the banner is still in the room. But you can't see it very well, because the praise band's drum kit is in the way. I'm not sure that anyone notices much, since there is no question in anyone's mind that this is a Christian church.

What was present was a large baptismal font, right up in front. It isn't very lovely, so, except when it is actually in use, a graceful shoji screen stands in front of it. But everyone knows it is there and what it means. I often wonder what it would have been like to be baptized there. And I often find myself wishing that we had such a clear reminder of baptism.

What I learn from this is that different parts of Christ's Church use symbols in different ways at different times. In the earliest years of the church, the symbol that Christians used to identify themselves to one another was not the cross, but the fish. The fish is still used to identify Christians, a visual pun on the Greek word for fish, ICTHUS, and the acronym for Jesus Christ, Son of God.

Other commonly-used symbols were the tree of life, the phoenix, and the axe, each with metaphoric meaning connected to death and resurrection. As far as anyone has been able to

discover, the image of the cross was not regularly used in Christian iconography until some time in the 4th century, after Constantine made Christianity the state religion. Even then, Christ is not portrayed as dying on the cross, but rather in majesty, in front of the cross, with hands upraised in blessing and praise.

This is not to say that the crucifixion and resurrection were not important to early Christians – they are mentioned in some of the earliest writings and recorded sermons – but rather that other images captured their visual imaginations. Where Christ is pictured, it is often as the Good Shepherd, the one who carries the lost sheep to safety on his shoulders. One of the most frequently seen images in early Christian art is that of people at table, usually with representations of bread and fish, and sometimes wine. This scene, found largely in the catacombs and other burial sites, represents Communion, but is connected less with the last supper that Jesus had with his disciples than with stories like this week's Gospel lesson. It is an image of resurrection.

Today, we read that when Jesus heard about the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, he went off to find a quiet place to think and pray, but the crowds followed him. In compassion for their great need, Jesus healed those who were sick, and miraculously provided food for thousands of hungry people. Amazingly, five loaves of bread and two fish became so much food that there were twelve baskets of leftovers.

There is no way to know, nearly two thousand years later, what really happened that day. Some say that Jesus made more than enough food miraculously appear, just the as the story tells us, because, after all, he was the Son of God. Others say that

there actually was a lot of food in a number of people's pockets, and the real miracle was that Jesus got them to cooperate and share, so that everyone could eat. Still others say it's just a story, which it didn't really happen at all.

I don't know who is right in that argument, because I have no need to know. What I do know is that, whatever the historical fact, the inner truth of the story is that Jesus had compassion on the people who followed him, who trusted him, who risked everything to be near him. The story is an image of a feast in the reign of God, a great Communion where there is enough love and healing and cooperation and, yes, food, for everyone who comes, with twelve baskets left over after everyone is satisfied.

Another word for Communion is Eucharist, which means, simply, "thanksgiving." Most of us are accustomed to giving thanks at meals, but how many make a connection between our table graces and the prayer of thanksgiving and dedication which is part of our Communion ritual? In the early church, Communion was celebrated whenever Christians gathered. It was weekly, even daily food for the soul, and people felt starved without it.

For a lot of historical reasons, some good and others questionable, over time ordinary Christians received Communion less and less often. Our received tradition is to celebrate it on the first Sunday of each month. But many Protestant churches with the same received tradition, both progressive and conservative, have begun to include it as part of their weekly routine. For them, as for our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, frequent Communion serves as a regular, physical connection with the ongoing life, death, and resurrection of Christ. They have learned to feast on Christ constantly. Instead of starvation rations – mere crumbs of heavenly food

served grudgingly twelve times a year – their baskets overflow with the bread of heaven, broken for the healing of the world.

When we celebrate Communion here at Seekers, we say, "This is the table of the heavenly feast…." And I find myself wondering what it would be like to begin each meal at the School of Christian Living with bread that is broken for each of us, proclaiming "the Body of Christ"; and a cup that is shared: "the Blood of Christ, poured out for the healing of the world." What would we learn about embracing the mystery of the cross if every Sunday we received what we already are, the Body of Christ?

When my teachers at Drew spoke of what is needed in a place of Christian worship, they began with the people, the gathered congregation. The congregation, they said, is the primary symbol of Christ's real presence. We are the Body of Christ. Wherever two or three are gathered, there Christ is, among us and within us and around us.

Then, they said, we need a place to proclaim the Word. Whether it is called a lectern, podium, ambo or pulpit doesn't really matter. In fact, it doesn't really matter where one stands, or sits, or moves. What matters is that in this place, in this gathering, the Good News is proclaimed, Scripture is read and interpreted, the gathered congregation shares the received Word of God.

And, my teachers insisted, a place of Christian worship should have a place to gather regularly around the holy meal. This beautiful table in the center of our life together is both an altar of sacrifice, and the table of the heavenly feast. Feed on Christ in your hearts with thanksgiving.

Finally, they taught, there should be a place for baptism, with water deep enough to be dangerous. . Even when no one is being baptized, the water serves as a reminder of our new life in Christ. The story is told that when Martin Luther felt himself beset by demons, he would put his hand on top of his head and say to himself, “Nevertheless, I am baptized.” And this reminder of his own dying to self and rising in Christ would bring him peace.

But here at Seekers, we have no font, no basin, no fountain, no living, flowing water at all to remind us of our baptism or to be a place of entry for new members of the Body of Christ. The only physical, visual reference to water is Marjory’s abstract representation of the waters of Creation on our offering plate and communion set.

That image, created in clay at the beginning of Seekers life as a community, has now been adapted into the mosaic of broken crockery which has become our public symbol. Fragile earthen vessels re-formed into grace-filled beauty, it beckons from the front and back of our building like a perpetual standing wave, an invitation to dive in. Perhaps this watery symbol is enough, after all, to help us to remember our baptism, and be glad.