

Deborah Sokolove: Wiggling our Toes in the City of God

A Sermon for Seekers

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by Deborah Sokolove

Wiggling our Toes in the City of God

When I said I would preach today, I was thinking more about the date than about the scriptures, so it was with a sense of great delight and thanksgiving that I read the passages that the lectionary gives us for this week. During this season between Easter and Pentecost, the three lessons and the psalm have been deliberately chosen to fit together, to comment on one another. Today's scriptures help us to understand that we are but a small part of Christ's Body, and that the sign of those who follow Christ is love.

We have just heard the readings from Acts and from the Gospel according to John. There is one more reading from this week's lectionary. It is from the Book of Revelation, chapter 21, verses 1 through 6:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. The Holy One will dwell among them as their God; they will be God's peoples, and God's own self will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will no more; mourning and crying

and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." And, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then the One said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

In preparing for each Sunday's worship, Celebration Circle asks the preacher about the sermon topic, and whether he or she has any preference about hymns and the other music to be included in the service. When I said that I would be preaching on Revelation 21, Kate exclaimed "you really like that text, don't you? You've used it before." Agreeing that I do, indeed, think it is a beautiful passage, I mentally wondered "When did I ever preach about the Heavenly City?"

At home, later, I took out the folder containing all the sermons I have ever given at Seekers, looking for when I might have preached on this text. If I have, I couldn't find it. What I did find, reading backwards through what was surprisingly a thick stack, was the first sermon I ever preached from this pulpit. It was during Lent, in 1991. I had been baptized the previous Palm Sunday, and wanted to reflect back to Seekers some of the love and affirmation that had been given to me that day, and throughout the following year. The text I chose then was Psalm 137, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?... If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither." In that talk, I compared my discovery of Christian community with my first sight of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Comparing my search for God with my journey up through the Judean hills, into the modern Western city, and then down through the shuk to a sunlit plaza full of people at prayer at the foot of the Temple mount, I said:

"Slowly, hesitantly, but willingly and afoot, I entered the walled city of my own soul. There, beyond the marketplace,

beyond the churches and synagogues, lost and alone in the deepest, darkest center – there, Christ reached out to me with light and grace, and led me into the Holy Presence. And strangest of all – that place that I had thought was the darkest, the most inner, most private place – that place was full of people. It was holy ground, it was full of light, and it was full of the members of the Body of Christ. This for me is the continuing miracle of salvation – that am not alone, after all."

And perhaps this is what Kate was remembering when she said that I had used this scripture before, because it evokes the image of Jerusalem as the City of God.

The Book of Revelation is a difficult one, full of visions and prophecy. For some, what it seems to reveal is a map, or a timetable, forecasting the events at end of time, when Jesus will return in glory. For others, it recalls other apocalyptic writings, such as parts of the Book of Daniel, a coded wishful thinking, lurid imaginings of the vengeance that will one day befall the oppressors of a captive people. Many prefer not to read it at all, preferring to stay with the familiar – if not always comfortable – words of Jesus as found in the four Gospels. But the final vision of the final book of the Bible is no more pie in the sky than are the words of Jesus when he said that the reign of God is within and among those who follow him. It is a vision of peace and harmony and love, not only among Christians, but also among all peoples, when God will be present "to all who wish to drink from the water of life." [Rev 22:17]

Recently, I came upon another vision of the reign of God. Not too long ago, Rabbi Zalman Schachter addressed an ecumenical group about religious dance. A modern mystic, his vision of the end times is not really too different from that of John. At the end of his talk, he said,

Now you will be going back to your churches and temples where you will often find yourselves trapped in pews, or for psychological reasons unable to dance joyfully down the aisles during the hymns or sermons. But one thing you can do, even sitting in the pews, is...wiggle your toes. Go ahead – do it. Wiggling your toes, you begin smiling; and that is what will happen. You will be sitting in your pew smiling throughout the hymn and the sermon. Then the person sitting next to you will ask, "Why are you smiling?" And you will whisper to him, "I'm wiggling my toes." And soon he will begin wiggling his toes; and soon everyone will be wiggling their toes. And then they will throw out all the pews – and all will dance together! That day will be the Second Coming for you – the first for us!"

Tomorrow afternoon, I will graduate from Wesley Theological Seminary with the degree of Master of Theological Studies. Like me, many of my fellow graduates are preaching today. Unlike me, however, most of them will be saying good-bye to congregations that have nurtured them and held them in prayer as they pursued their studies. The majority of Wesley graduates will soon be ordained in their respective denominations, and then will follow their calls to be pastors of congregations where they are not yet known. There, they will always be somewhat set apart by their special title. As I think about these women and men who have become my friends over the last several years, I am aware of the enormous gift and privilege that I am given to remain here among you, a continuing member of this expression of the Body of Christ.

Here at Seekers, we have a different understanding of what it means to be ordained, to be called to a life of love and service, to be intentional in our faith at every moment and in every place of our lives. We take seriously the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, not expecting any one or two people to have the burden of always leading us in prayer, in interpreting God's Word, in administrative duties, in pastoral

care, or in all of the other tasks and roles that fall to those in parish ministry. Rather, we believe that all have gifts and graces, and accord authority to each one at the point of her or his gift, as each is called by God to do what is needed. This concept is most conspicuously modeled in the open pulpit, in the understanding that anyone may be called to preach, to bring his or her experience of the Good News to the assembly of God's people. Mostly, we think we are doing what God wants us to do.

In the first reading this morning, we are told of Peter's vision, a graphic representation of God's instruction to him that "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Now this Peter is the same one who two weeks ago was falling (or jumping) out of the boat, and last week was protesting his brotherly love to the risen Christ. Today, he is intolerant of those who believe in Christ, but follow different customs. Once more, it takes him three times to get the message, but eventually Peter is able to explain to the other disciples that God was not merely the tribal, local God of the Israelite people, but that "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Peter discovered that God's love and forgiveness was, and is, available to all. All who sincerely hunger for God, no matter where or to whom they are born, no matter their previous history, are welcome to eat at God's table. And to wiggle their toes.

My struggle to be inclusive is not unlike Peter's. I so believe that our Seekers ways are right that I am often intolerant and impatient of the ways of more conventional churches. I know that it would be hard for me either to preach more often, or to listen to the same person's sermons week after week. I am critical of denominational – and other – hierarchies, which seem to me to model unhealthy power relationships and to stifle, rather than foster, the gifts and creativity of those on the lower rungs. I am dubious about the future congregations of those of my classmates who find sermon

preparation a terrible chore and church administration a bore; I worry also about those who are good preachers or administrators, but whose listening and counseling skills are rudimentary at best. A theological seminary, with its heavy academic demands, is not the best place for fostering spiritual growth or balanced living. How, I wonder, can anyone possess all the skills and talents, all the spiritual maturity, to be all that is required of those in full-time parish ministry? How much better, I think, is our Seekers way of "all crew and no passengers," of everyone being responsible for the good of the whole, of shared authority, of shared leadership.

And yet... Peter was given a vision. He heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat" these unclean beasts of prey, reptiles, and raptor birds. And Peter understood that although the ways of the gentiles differed from his Jewish customs, God's grace was equally available to all.

Although differing interpretations and understandings, almost from the beginning, divided Christ's Church, it was united in its faith in God's ultimate reign on earth. In John's vision of the holy city, God dwells among mortals. God is with all the peoples of the earth, giving water from the eternal spring to all those who are thirsty. Although Seekers' ways differ from those of other church bodies, we must not be self-righteous, but rather understand that what God has made clean, we must not call profane. As Peter said of the uncircumcised believers to those who criticized him, "If then God gave them the same gift that were given to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

I think that this is a hard message for many of us, especially those who have lived at first hand the abuses and narrow-mindedness of some who call themselves Christians. It is very easy, for those of us who have found in Seekers a haven, a spiritual home, to forget that other people have found comfort and nurture in other church bodies. It is easy, also, to make

an idol out of Seekers as intentional community, to forget it is in Christ that we are called together as part of God's chosen family.

I have been on the road a lot, this last month, driving up and down I95 to teach a short course on Ministry and Imagination at the Theological School at Drew University. And to fill the hours of driving, I have been listening to sermons given by Ken Fong, the pastor of the Baptist church that Glen's parents attend. Ken performed our wedding, and it was he that first told me about Church of the Saviour, suggesting that I might find in it the kind of church family I was looking for. I don't think that Ken knew about Seekers in particular, and I'm pretty sure that he and I have some substantial disagreements about certain theological points. But as I listened to his messages to the congregation at Evergreen, I grew ever more certain that we are just different parts of the same Body, seeing things from a different perspective, perhaps, and having a very different style of worship, but still vitally connected.

What I heard in Ken's sermons was that what I find myself hoping my classmates from Wesley will say and do in their churches. Ken does not offer pious platitudes or simple answers to complex questions. He teaches and models compassion, true humility, and openness to the complexities of life that would fit comfortably here at Seekers. Toward the end of one sermon, he invited the congregation to be silent for a moment, to think of a place in their lives where God does not seem to be acting on the timetable they would prefer. Ken then suggested that they gather in groups of three or four, tell one another about this difficult place in their lives, and pray for one another. The tape recorded a vigorous buzz of conversation, and after a few minutes, Ken suggested that people move towards prayer. There was no discernible change in the sound level. A few minutes later, Ken's voice again suggested that people move towards closing, but folks

kept right on talking. Eventually, the tape just ended, with the voices of the congregation still going strong. I think they were wiggling their toes. I know I was wiggling mine.

What Ken is inviting his congregation into at Evergreen, what Rabbi Schechter was suggesting to that ecumenical gathering, what John's vision of the end of time suggests, and what we are trying to do here at Seekers, is best summed up as Jesus summed up his teaching after he had washed the disciples feet. He said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." And wiggle your toes!