

# “Finding Our Way to Salvation” by Pat Conover

October 25, 2020



## Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Being **in** this together has been a popular phrase for Seekers for many months. Contacting Ken and then repeating the commitment statement last week as a member or a steward is a signal to yourself and the rest of us that you feel you are inside Seekers or want to move inside Seekers.

Being inside Seekers is not like joining an organization. To be **inside** Seekers as a **community** is about growing into bonds of love and caring, of finding and taking on your callings within Seekers, of entering the ongoing transformational conversations in Seekers. Being inside is not static, is not a status. Being in community is about heart to heart openness and active involvement.

Because Seekers is not a doctrinal or credal church, right belief is not a ticket to being inside. Instead, seeking the truth together, speaking and otherwise imaging the truth together, supports growing into transformational active truth. It is my understanding that the referential key for getting to the inside of our transformational conversation is searching and responding to the inspiration of Jesus as **our** Savior, not just my personal Savior. We are saved in the shaping of our relationships with each other. Being saved in community is about being saved together.

The life of Jesus was a gift of God. Our lives are gifts from God. The saving **inspiration** of Jesus that guides us into community is available to us today because Jesus inspired a group of close followers to gather around him. I'm talking about his family members and friends, the people who accompanied him on a few years of itinerant preaching, the people who formed the first church of Jesus in Jerusalem. Some of the people named as apostles were among his close followers but so were others including Lazarus, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalen, and Joanna the mother of James and John. They discovered through grieving his death together, that the Divine Presence that inspired Jesus was inspiring them as well. They found the power, the words, the deeds, to become a salvation community.

The synoptic gospels contain enough stories about Jesus to give us glimpses of this community despite the efforts of the gospel authors to play down the spiritual authority of the Jewish followers of Jesus in favor of the Gentile leaders, such as Paul, who led the emergence of the Gentile religion of Christianity. In the synoptic gospels the Jewish referenced inspiration of Jesus was tailored to fit the languages of Greece and Rome and addressed the transformational questions of Gentile followers referenced to their heritage and questions. Now Seekers considers and cares about the inspiration of Jesus as it addresses our heritages and

questions, framed in the English language, with reference to Twenty-first century science, history, and cultures.

I have committed year after year to discerning and doing what is mine to do in Seekers. What is mine to do has declined dramatically in the last few years. I still repeat the commitments of stewards on Recommitment Sunday, with the **exception** of taking on responsibility to be a steward and to care for the life of Seekers Community, because I am doing far less to help sustain the spiritual and practical life of Seekers Community.

Half a dozen years ago, maybe longer, I made a list of forty-one things that I did downstairs on Sunday mornings to get our building ready. There were big things to do like setting all the chairs and making sure that Church School supplies were in good shape and walking up to CVS to buy common supplies that were lacking. There were small things to do like checking to see if the books in the Noah's Ark Room were on the properly labeled shelves, and like moving waste cans to their proper positions.

I told people I would no longer be responsible for doing those things and then I mostly stopped. Now I just do what I want to do, like picking up and sweeping the walnut balls on the parking lot ramp.

Sunday Mornings at Seekers did not collapse. My pulling back made space and provided prompts to others to step forward. Accepting responsibility then, and doing what I want to do now, feels like presenting a smile to people when they come to our Seekers building. Welcoming people still matters to me, even though I am doing less and less.

Nobody told me I had to do those things. None of the things I did were grounded in my core calling. I was part of the Koinonia Mission Group for awhile and I did the first version of mapping the kitchen so that outside users would know where

things should go, But Koinonia ended and I just kept on caring about Seekers and doing what was mine to do.

Being saved here and now is not about claiming a future status in a supposed Heaven. It is not about the imagination of having my name written down in a book of the saved so that when I rise to the gates of Heaven Saint Peter will let me in. If you are holding onto a hope of going to Heaven after you die, I point out that neither The Historic Christian Church, whatever you think that means, nor Seekers, nor any other Church, has any control or authority regarding going to Heaven. If you trust God with your precious here and now life, if you live into the good possibilities for your life even when life is hard, you can trust and hope that God will be good with whatever you think or image about your life after death.

Being saved is about recognizing how important it is to center your life on loving yourself and loving each other. Wholeheartedly embracing the Great Commandment, as clarified by Jesus to love your neighbor and yourself, opens you up to salvation understood as living in harmony with the guidance of the Divine Presence. The Creator has given us our lives. The greatest aspect of the gift of our lives is our capacity to live in harmony with the Divine Presence. Our good and bad experiences of life in community, when held in prayer, can prompt us into reflection and reconsideration of how to live into and out of our experiences of what matters and what matters most.

Living in harmony with the Divine Presence, as understood and presented by Jesus, gives us experienced memories that confirm **our** salvation. To love each other, we need to be in relationships with each other, to be in changing relationships with each other. Here and now salvation is always about **becoming** and not just being.

I am becoming less able to do things in Seekers, but I am

still doing what is mine to do, still following my central calling, and my other callings, as I understand them. Our commitment to be with each other for another year isn't an accomplishment. Having our names inscribed in the Seekers Book marks a commitment, not an achievement. Commitment is about starting and about leaving trail markers, about taking on the work of Seekers and about relinquishing positions and expectations in Seekers.

For those of you who are still discovering Seekers, I want you to know that you are needed, needed right now, needed before you feel fully ready. You have responded to Seekers welcoming smile. You have begun to notice our imperfections and shortcomings. You've begun to bump into the hard questions that can transform your lives and our lives. You may be noticing that to be inside doesn't necessarily mean being more happy or more comfortable.

We understand that it takes time to find out what is yours to do, that it takes time to feel like you are on the inside of what makes Seekers such a strong community. At the same time there is no time to waste. You are needed now.

For you who are newer within Seekers, and maybe for some long timers as well, the secret key to getting into the innermost space of Seekers, getting into our holy of holies, is openly and unreservedly embracing the **inspiration** of Jesus who lived about twenty five of my lifetimes ago. We who founded Seekers together found each other within the larger context of the Church of the **Savior**.

I said **inspiration** of Jesus, not revelation, not Jesus as God like the Creator is God, and not Jesus as God as the Divine Presence we can directly experience. We have no idea whether Jesus was short or tall, but we do know that Jesus made manifest what there was of God in himself and inspired his close followers to claim the Presence of God in their own lives and manifest it in diverse ways.

Jesus made manifest the potentials for becoming and being part of what generations after Jesus have called ***the Body of Christ***, the living communities in which the inspiration of Jesus is made manifest again and again. The goal is not to do what Jesus did. He took care of that already. The goal is to do, and be, and become, close followers as we work out what is ours to do as individuals who are bonded together by the hopes and challenges carried by Seekers community.

It is when we follow the inspiration of Jesus to fully live into and out of being in harmony with the Divine Presence that we make manifest the importance of loving one another and loving ourselves. I am involved in fewer and fewer activities and I believe each one matters. I am less and less significant as part of Seekers. Others are doing more and more of what I used to do and that is a very good thing.

One of the things I have continued to do is helping to lift up the importance of bringing our faith into the contexts of politics, responding to and helping to shape the governance and goals of the United States of America, and all its subdivisions, so that there is justice and not just law, so there is peace, so that there is Shalom, and not just order. Getting involved in politics is about loving our neighbors in the United States, is about guiding the United States into loving the whole world, so that democracy can spread, so that justice can spread, so that Shalom can spread.

Human experiences of God loving the world are claimed by people of diverse religious faiths, not just you and me, not just Christianity. Politics is for me about loving the world as Jesus helps me understand it. It is about Billy Amoss's project to support a terrific video about Palestine. It about Rosa Campos caring about people who call in to seek services and resources in this difficult time of Covid. What Billy is doing, what Rosa is doing, have political aspects and both embody the guidance of Jesus to love the world and not just those who are nearest and dearest to us.

When Jesus followed John the Baptist and challenged the concept of animal sacrifice in the temple to gain the forgiveness of God, he challenged the financial and spiritual grounding of temple authority, a very political demonstration. Jesus, in effect, was also attacking the corrupt relationship between elite Jews in Jerusalem and Roman authority, a political deal that was driving the rest of Judah and Israel into deep poverty.

Jesus paid the same death price as John and suffered a far more agonizing and shaming death than John. His close followers gathered in Jerusalem had the courage to return to the temple gathering area and continue sharing the inspiration and messages of Jesus, the same political and spiritual challenges that made them vulnerable to the wrath of temple authorities. Do we have the same courage if Trump wins the election? Loving Creator God, and living in harmony with the Divine Presence, doesn't promise an easy life, just a meaningful life.

The close followers of Jesus did not fit their religion into their busy lives. They reexamined their lives and claimed what was theirs to do because they loved God and each other, loved all the people who didn't know what they were missing; loved with all their thinking, feeling, hoping, caring, trusting, and doing. They did all the little things we will never know about. They did the unrecognized things, the unappreciated things.

Can we face up to the spiritual inspiration and thus the authority of Jesus? Can we be and become close followers of Jesus like Mary and Martha, like Lazarus and Zacchaeus ?

It is the concept of inspiration that makes salvation sense of the two thousand years of credal controversy that Dave Lloyd has helped us unpack in his class on Christian history.

For my fellow class members, you can think of this sermon as

unpacking a crucial ambiguity in the Neoplatonism of Plotinus that grounded the transition from the Jewish religion of Jesus to the Greek and Latin hellenization of Christian theological orthodoxy. I'm talking about the ambiguities of understanding the relationship between Jesus and God that were used to justify centuries of councils, declarations, burning of supposed heretics, and religious wars of conquest. Right belief, as approved by religious or state authorities, doesn't hold a candle to the transformative light of the inspiration of Jesus to live with courage and humility so that law is loved into justice, so that order is loved into peace.

We don't become fully functioning spiritual human beings by ourselves. We are dependent on others from birth, dependent for our language and mathematics as gifts from parents and teachers. The pandemic has vividly reminded us of our dependence on each other, has clarified that the disruption of the economic, health, and political aspects of the United States matters a lot, and that the election that is underway matters a lot.

A human longing to be part of something great and important can lead us to follow an Adolph Hitler, a Joe McCarthy, a J. Edgar Hoover, down deeply dark paths to Hell on Earth. Following the inspiration of Jesus to live in harmony with the Divine Presence can lead us up brightly lit paths to experiences of Heaven on Earth. Abraham Lincoln is the most inspiring of Presidents for me because he was deeply saddened by the awfulness of the United States he lived in and yet was able to rise up to deliver the immortal words of his Second Inauguration speech.

Lincoln appealed for the healing of the nation that killed two or three percent of the people in the United, mostly young men who would never till a field, or build a house, or love a child again. More people died in the Civil War than in all the other wars the United States has fought before or since. Lincoln loved and wanted to make whole once again the United



States of America.

*With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.*

I believe Lincoln was channeling the Divine Presence that Jesus embodied and made visible. This leads me to my hope for our present circumstances. I hope that however named, the political grounding of Jesus to love one another, will not only fill Seekers to overflowing, and will guide us into healing activities, such as the Friday vigils, that will lift up our willingness to forgive each other and seek understanding and caring not only with our families and friends, not only within our treasured Seekers Community, but also with our neighbors, our opponents, and even our would be oppressors.

I am confident that this election will eliminate the scourge of Trump, and know I could be wrong. I am also clear that the Democrats I have worked to elect will fall far short of the transformative vision of Jesus. This election will not end all our problems. Maybe, just maybe, we will become able to better form a vision of justice and peace that can transform the static perspective of law and order.

The traditional Jewish rendition of the Great Commandment, found in Deuteronomy 6, verses 4 and 5, was to love God with all you are, with all you've got: heart, soul, and mind. For contemporary Christians these three ways of loving God can neatly be addressed as heart: with all your emotion, as soul: with your appreciation of what matters most, as Mind: with your conscious thinking and intentions. Restated, we can think

of Mind for relating to God as Creator; as Soul for relating to God as Holy Spirit, as Divine Presence: and as Heart for relating to Jesus as one of his close followers.

Looking to Jesus bonded with his close followers, is broken open when Jesus announces the guidance of Leviticus 19, verse 18, to love your neighbor as yourself, as if it was equally important guidance unsurprisingly bonded to the traditional Great Commandment. The lawyer who serves as audience in the story of the Samaritan who helped a Jew doesn't object to this unusual claim. Maybe Hillel or others had already made the connection popular.

In any case loving is not to be limited to those you can expect or hope to love you back. Love as exchange is not the same as risky loving those you don't know or don't trust. So the lawyer reasonably asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus follows the perspective of John the Baptist by making priest and Levite uncaring and then points to a Samaritan. The narrative Samaritan who helped a Jew made clear that salvation was not about right belief and is rather about heartfelt caring for one another.

Samaritans were not just some vague unliked foreigner. They were heretics from the point of view of Temple Judaism, an economic and spiritual threat because they had priests who conducted sacrifices on the altars of the once Northern Kingdom. Jesus from Galilee was from the once Northern Kingdom. The Samaritans shared the same religious grounding as Jews in following the guidance of Torah, the fundamental five books of the Law. They rejected the books of Jewish history which told the history of conflict between the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom from the point of view of the Southern Kingdom.

When the scattered Jewish tribes got together and fought their way across the Jordan and captured the land, they remained loosely affiliated under the political negotiations of the

Judges. Each tribe was a *polis*, a patriarchal political entity claiming control of a defined geographic area. The twelve tribe loose unity didn't hold and two tribes gathered spiritually and politically as Judah with the military protection of the Jerusalem fortress. The ten Northern tribes gathered spiritually around altars in Bethel and elsewhere. Both claimed the founding tradition of Moses and the resulting creed of the Ten Commandments and other rules. While it would be a finger in the eye of Temple Politics, the story of a Samaritan who helped a Jew would not be so shocking to Galileans and other remnants of the Northern Kingdom.

It would be fair for you to challenge my historical synopsis, but at least it raises the kinds of questions that point to today's Christian politics. Once there was a Democrat who had a flat tire. Two rich Democrats driving to a vacation in Miami passed him by. But a redneck Republican stopped to help and, when they couldn't fix the car, drove the Democrat to the nearest car repair place to get assistance.

Are we to remain stuck in old enmities in the United States? Jesus says no. Abraham Lincoln says no. Let's look for opportunities to be kind to one another, to go a second mile for one another.

Creating and enjoying strong loving bonds within Seekers as a caring community following Jesus provides great comfort. I feel like I am sharing and contributing to a great treasure with my heart. Trish and I share financially with Seekers to turn vague caring into practical and financial caring for one another and for the wider world that has little or no understanding of who we are.

The key to appreciating the Great Commandment as critically expanded by Jesus is that we can't keep all our caring to ourselves and defend our boundaries against all enemies both foreign and domestic. Furthermore, we must do what we can to transform our big polis, the United States, the whole world,

so that the love of God can bind us all together and we won't have to defend ourselves against oppressors.

The United States still has huge work to do in establishing law as justice, in establishing order as peace, between rural, suburban, and urban people, between men and women, between Native Americans, Blacks, Whites, Asians, Latinos, and people who don't fit any of these definitions. We have come a long way and we clearly have plenty of work to do in 2021.

You don't have to be a Seeker to be a really good Christian. If you do want to thrive as a Seeker please understand that we have some high expectations for each other. Accountability of many kinds has led to a lot of bruised feelings in Seekers. Forgiveness has to be our daily bread. Just this week I had to remember that I had failed to forgive a former member of Seekers and that failure probably had results that I now regret and can do nothing about.

The Golden Rule to do unto others as you would have them do unto you is only a good rule if you want to be loved, and too many people resist the desire to love and be loved because it makes us so vulnerable. The Golden Rule suggests transactional living. I will love you if you will love me.

Jesus takes the guidance of the Golden Rule a step further and encourages us to love our enemies, to go the second mile, without the assumption that they will respond in kind. Jesus gives us a here and now version of the Great Commandment that guides us to take the initiative. Love now. Paul gives us a vision of the results of loving now in Romans 5:38.

*Neither life nor death, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.*