

“God is in the Chaos” by Brenda Seat

16 September 2012

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Good morning!

Today is the second Sunday in our Recommitment Season. This season is not part of the wider church's liturgical calendar, but is something we follow as part of our legacy and grounding from the Church of the Saviour. Recommitment Season culminates on October 21 when those who want to be committed to this church for another year will stand up and make their commitment statements. In the meantime, as part of our preparation, we offer some reflection statements for you to think about as you prepare for Recommitment Sunday.

Why do we do this?

The founder of the Church of the Saviour, Gordon Cosby, believed that membership in a church needed to really mean something. After his experiences in WWII as a chaplain, he dreamed of a church where “the members would be committed to Christ and committed to each other in unlimited liability.” He dreamed of a commitment that would be life-changing.

As Seekers grew up and out of the Church of the Saviour a second understanding of what it meant to be church emerged: “a place where all who come can be welcomed, nourished and empowered to live and celebrate God's call on their lives.”

For many years now we have lived in the tension between these two statements: the one statement is a radical vision of commitment and the other is a radical vision of inclusion.

And, although they seem to be on opposite ends of the commitment spectrum, we have found that holding the tension between these two ideas has been both provocative and enlightening. ¹

Everyone is welcome here, but we want you to be serious about it. We want you to think about what you are doing.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus asks his disciples who people think he is. The disciples give him various answers – John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. Jesus then asks them, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter answers, You are the Messiah. And in response to this answer Jesus warns them not to tell anyone else about him.

I find this exchange interesting. Surely Jesus knew or thought he knew who he was and what he was doing. I have always heard from other sermons on this passage that his question to his disciples was a test: “So, you’ve been around me for awhile now. Do you get what’s going on here?” But more recently I have wondered if Jesus was asking this question because HE needed the answer. Haven’t we all been in that place – we have been following a certain path, a career, or a call and it seems like the right path but suddenly we have doubts. Suddenly, it doesn’t seem like it’s going the right way, and we ask someone, “Am I still on the right path?”

Every Sunday when the liturgists introduce the person bringing the Word they say something like this: “We believe that everyone can hear God’s Word, and some are called to share it on Sunday morning, which is why every Sunday we have someone different giving us the Word.”

But this idea that we all hear God’s word is not just for Sunday morning. This theological principle is the ground of our being in Seekers and I think it was part of Jesus’ understanding as well. He chose disciples, people who were eager and committed enough to leave their life behind, who

were open to hearing God's word. When he asked that question he needed affirmation that he was still on the right path. He needed to hear God's word spoken to him by someone who was on the journey with him.

And we need the same. We need people who are committed to a walk with Christ to be with us on this journey. We need to know that God's word is present and heard among us and we need to listen to it, especially when we think we might have lost our way.

The commitment that we make allows us to trust in each other, know that we are here for each other, and recognize that we are each doing those things that make us more open to – and hear more deeply – that small voice of God that comes to each one of us. So when we are struggling, when we can't hear God's voice through the all the background noise of life we can turn to someone here in this room and say "Who do you say that I am?"

Later in our Gospel lesson Jesus says, "If anyone wants to come with me, they must forget themselves, carry their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their own life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."

I have to confess that this is one of the hard passages of scripture for me. I think part of it is because when I was younger I sat through many a "Meet-a-Missionary" Sunday here in the U.S. when my family was on furlough from Japan where this passage was used by the minister to extol the virtues of missionary life by talking about all the things missionaries give up, what a sacrifice being a missionary was, and how we were living out this passage. I just never got the sacrifice thing... It was my life...a joyful, interesting, wonderful life...not a sacrifice...and so I struggle with this... What does it mean to lose your life? How can that lead to saving your life?

I don't know if you ever watch the reality TV show "What Not to Wear," but it is one of my not so secret addictions! It's a show where two stylists confront a candidate who has been nominated by friends and family on how they dress. The show starts with a brief overview of the horrendous way the candidate is dressing and some brief interviews with their family and friends about why they nominated this person for the show. Then they surprise and confront the candidates in front of their family and friends and get them to come on the show. There have been many interesting people on the show, as you can imagine. One that stands out was a young mother who was in the military, who during her off duty hours wore tight skimpy clothing that she bought at stores that catered to strippers. Another was a woman who wore Goth style clothing all the time, even to parent teacher conferences; her young son's friends didn't want to come over to their home because she was too scary. Another woman was so enamored with her role as a bar wench at the Renaissance festival that she began incorporating these costume pieces into her everyday wardrobe.

What happens to these people on this journey is quite amazing.

Inevitably during the week long period during which the show's hosts and the person interact, the person has to confront the question of whether or not their clothing choices are holding them back from the life they envision for themselves. As they begin to get in touch with the disconnect between how they think of themselves and what is actually being presented and received, they begin to come to grips with who they really are and why they have chosen what they wear – and the deeper underlying issues that are holding them back from what they want to be.

What happens here at Seekers is the spiritual version of this process. What we ask ourselves and each other is, "What is it that is holding you back in your spiritual life from the life that God has envisioned for you? We do this in many ways,

starting with our worship service and the liturgies that Celebration Circle carefully crafts. We listen to each other as we give the Word, and we hear the prayers and confessions that are spoken each Sunday. We attend classes in the School of Christian Living, and those who are in mission groups listen to each other as we share our lives. In writing spiritual reports and being in spiritual direction relationships we open ourselves up to explore those places in our lives that are holding us back from all that God intended us to be.

On the TV show it is always interesting to see what it is that a person holds on to for dear life. It is always something that seems so insignificant to those who are watching from the outside. Maybe it is the addiction to wearing things that have frogs on them, like one 30-year-old mother of three.

Maybe it is the weave in their hair that, even though it no longer hangs straight and is all knotted up, still has the power to cause upset and tears as it is removed with scissors.

Almost without exception the words that are used by these individuals who go through this process is that they are losing themselves. That changing their hair color, getting rid of their t-shirts, or cutting their hair is like losing a piece of who they are and they are lost. They look in the mirror and say "I don't know who that is."

Now we can be all smug and say that is just silly... But what about our spiritual lives? Are you still holding on to that coat of "not good enough" that you got from your family of origin? Or what about the jacket of "shame" that we can't let go of? What about those shoes of "what would people think" that keep us from moving forward? What about the need to be "in charge" or "visible" that drives us to find ways to take control and be seen? What about the "they certainly aren't doing it right, so I think I will sit on the sidelines until someone does get it right before I make any move at all" attitude? What about the fear that keeps us from opening up

or letting ourselves be known. In this spiritual version of "What Not to Wear," we can see that we are not so different from those people on that reality show. Are these things holding us back from being the person God intended us to be?

Yes, without a doubt! But it isn't so easy to get rid of them is it? How do we know what is a healthy dose of fear and what isn't? How do we know whether it is our sense of "not good enough" that keeps sabotaging our choices and our life?

It's not easy to see those things in ourselves, is it?

Interestingly enough, just after Peter tells Jesus that he is the Messiah he also puts his foot in his mouth when he rebukes Jesus for talking about the death and destruction that Jesus foresees for himself. Jesus hears Peter's words as the seductive voice that says, "Oh I'm sure it can't be that bad...surely we can find another way so that giving your life isn't so painful," and stops him cold.

The spiritual journey makes us confront our lives in ways that are uncomfortable. But we can't do it alone. We need a mirror and that mirror is community – a committed community who holds up for us the version of ourselves that God sees and helps us shed the things that keep getting in the way of that version of ourselves. We lose those pieces of ourselves one by one, shedding the armor that we have created to protect ourselves so that we can emerge as the people God intended us to be. As we work together we see things in each other that we recognize as holding that person back and they see the same things in us. We also ignore or run away from the hard truths that someone speaks, but there is usually someone there who stops us cold and makes us listen to the words we need to hear. The committed community helps us remain committed to our path to know God and ourselves.

Lately, I have realized that I have control issues. I'm sure this comes as no surprise to any of you, but it was rather a surprising revelation to me. Sure I knew that I like to plan and plan the plan and follow the plan, but I just thought that

was good management. In my work life it is essential that we have a plan, that everyone knows the plan and that everyone follows the plan. It's the way we maintain quality control!

I hate being in situations where the plan keeps getting revised and changed and adjusted and reevaluated. To me that is a sign of bad vision, poor planning, poor management and just utter chaos which needs to be avoided at all costs. And it is this avoidance of chaos that is my issue. Often if I can just stick with it long enough, out of the chaos comes something un-thought of, un-planned for, and utterly right.

Something that couldn't have been planned for, even if we could have thought of it. I am reminded again and again in working here in Seekers that if we leave a little leeway, allow a little room, keep a back door open, that often the Holy Spirit takes residence in that space; what emerges is something that was just what was needed, even though it was not envisioned or planned for. I am trying to let go of my need to control and trying to embrace chaos. I feel like I am losing a huge part of who I am...being stripped of what defines me and trying to embrace something that I have avoided all my life.

When I was 4 years old, my parents and I moved into a house on the side of a large hill in Nagano, Japan. From our living room window we could see the city and the large river valley beneath us stretching out until it reached the Japan Alps with their high peaks and snow covered tops. Now in Japan it is unusual to have thunderstorms with lightning. Of course there are plenty of storms and typhoons and lots of rain. But thunderstorms are unusual and there are all kinds of folklore about them – that there are demons fighting in the clouds and the lightening is the flash of their swords clashing. Little children are told that if they don't cover their tummy buttons the demons will come and snatch them away. I remember the first thunder and lightning storm I heard in that house. I must have reacted very strongly, because I remember that my Dad took a break from his work and took me into our living

room, sat down cross-legged on the floor in front of those big windows and held me while we watched the storm play out over the Japan Alps and the valley below. I was sitting on his legs and his arms were around me and I felt protected enough to be able to watch the chaos of that dark sky and the lightning and thunder that flashed and roared across the valley and mountain peaks. As he held me, he talked about God's creation, how storms are made and how it was like a safety valve that releases energy that builds up in the sky. And ever since then I have always loved watching storms.

Like my Dad, you, this community, this gathered body of Christ, broken and whole all at once, lets me face into the things that I don't want to look at. You hold me and point out the places where God is working through others or through me in both planned and unplanned ways. You help me face my fears and let me know that God is there, especially in the chaos.

During this recommitment season I encourage you to think about your relationship and commitment to Christ and to Seekers Church. How does Seekers enable you to follow Christ more deeply and authentically? How does your commitment to Christ and this community help our community hear God's voice more clearly and more deeply in the chaos of our lives?

Let me read our reflection piece as we close:

Whenever Jesus says come and follow him, he is saying: I'd like to invite you to join my community. I'd like you to pick up your life, to pack up your bags and come share your life with us. Come join us, come experience the new kind of security that we have found by trusting God together.

(Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion: Why Faith is Always Personal but Never Private*, 1981, p.66)

Thank goodness we are all in this together!

Amen

1 See, "Belonging to Seekers Church", Revised version 5.3
(6/24/2001)