

Jackie McMakin: From Soul Thirst to Fruitfulness

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Good morning. Today's scriptures, as I see them, are about moving from soul thirst to fruitfulness. Soul thirst is mentioned by Isaiah: "come unto me all you who thirst". It is followed by a wonderful invitation to partake of soul nourishment: "pay attention; listen to me and your soul shall live". The strange story in the Gospel seems like a back handed but in-your-face call to live lives of fruitfulness. The withered fig tree is not particularly appealing. I have a friend who has a fig tree, which when summer comes, looks beautiful and bears delicious fruit. Therefore, I take this Scripture as an invitation to live beautiful lives that bear delicious fruit.

We all know we are moving. Many of the past sermons have mentioned it. I don't know if any of you have noticed. I have not been active in the move. Therefore, I was surprised when a vision and a gift came to me with a little tag that said, "Take us along to Carroll Street."

The **vision is for the church**, for all churches. It is this: that people could come in off the street and meet God.

How did this vision come to me? It happened to me when I was a youngster. In our home, there was a lot of tension. We lived next to Catholics who crossed themselves before diving off the board at the pool and who gave up things for Lent. They had faith. I wanted that and I went looking for it. After school one day, I entered North Avenue Presbyterian Church. Inside the beautiful sanctuary, a mysterious presence impressed me. What was it? There were papers in the pews and I thought they might explain things. The words “benediction”, and “invocation” popped out – what did these mean? I had no idea. In the foyer was a pamphlet rack. For a dime, you could select one. I took one home to read. This was interesting stuff. I went back and bought another, another and another, and that’s how I learned about what faith was all about and how it came to people.

Yes, I was soul thirsty and was fed in an anonymous way. Ever since I have had a vision that every church could have ways that people off the street could meet God without talking with anyone.

This brings me to the gift that wants to come along. Just before Christmas, Marjory and I were commiserating about how awful it is to be an out of print author. It is as if your children had died. We shared thoughts about wanting our books available in our new location, but this was impossible because they were not available. I told her that after Christmas I would work on seeing what could be done to get them back in print.

I was most grateful to learn that Sydney Johnson had established the Potter’s House book service to keep Elizabeth O’Connor’s book in print and that she was eager to publish my books because they also put forward the core teachings of the

[Church of the Saviour](#). Within this month, they will be available through Amazon, Ingram distributors, bookstores, and of course through the [Potter's House book service](#). And I am happy to tell you that Marjory's books have just been taken over by [Augsburg Press](#), so hers will also be available.

In discussing this publishing project with me, Peter said that if I had a vision about the books and their connection with Seekers I should communicate that in some way. That is why I am preaching today. An obvious question occurs: what is the relevance of these books to our new life in Takoma Park? My answer at this point is, **I do not know!** There is a spiritual principle that says be dedicated to your mission but detached from results. I feel dedicated to making the books available but detached about how they will be used.

However, I would like you to know how these books are connected to the Church of the Saviour and to Seekers. Therefore, I want to share the story of how they came to be written. It is a story of call. Then I would like to give you a peek at the content.

First the story:

In 1969, I joined the Church of the Saviour. Mary Cosby was my sponsor. On one retreat at [Dayspring](#), Mary, referring to the Suffering Servant song in Isaiah, "with his stripes we are healed", asked, "What are you called to heal?" My answer popped up instantly. Talking with Mary, I said, "I feel called to heal the split between Protestants and Catholics". In her usual encouraging manner, she said, "How wonderful! Go and do it!"

Where had that call come from? Back in New Rochelle as a high schooler, I had truly grown in faith at North Avenue Church, but had begun to wonder if I had made the right decision. I decided to investigate the Catholic Church. After a year of questions, I concluded that **I wanted to be a Both**. There were spiritual treasures in both traditions. Ever since then, I have been a Both – fed equally through Catholic and Protestant experiences of faith.

How to be a Both in an either/or church world? A Jesuit friend suggested that one way would be to complement my undergraduate degree in religion from a Protestant college with a graduate degree in theology from Catholic University. This I did. Another Jesuit suggested my thesis topic: “The Church of the Saviour for Catholic Readers”. My **conclusion** from that thesis work was that there were **two keys to the vitality** of the C of S’s deep spirituality, group life and mission: **training and retreat**. The experiential initiatory style of the [School of Christian Living](#) courses was transforming. Moreover, the big decisions of the church seemed to be made on silent retreat at Dayspring.

Wondering what to do with my shiny degree from Catholic University, I taught in two academic departments – at the Academy of the Holy Names in Kensington and at Trinity College. I loved this work, and the student response was excellent. Nevertheless, I received a slap in the face. I was fired from both those jobs. This was devastating. I had been fired from my first job in the United States in Boston. Is it any wonder that I became a vocational counselor? As I pondered what had happened, I realized that these positions felt like a shoe that did not fit. I wanted to share **life-transforming aspects of faith out of the base of a praying team**. This was not possible in these positions. It was then that a friend

gave me a book on Protestant Communities in Europe. There I learned about the [Taizé Community](#) in France for the first time. These were Catholic and Protestant celibate brothers dedicated to Christian unity. I thought, "That is it! I would like to do something like that here."

When my friend and Catholic neighbor Lois Donnelly heard this, while walking along Billy Goat Trail with our Brownies, she said, "I would like to work with you on that."

Soon others joined. Picture a room full of Kathryn Wysockey-Johnsons, one kid on the runway, another in the hangar, as the Air Force put it, with husbands in demanding work. Reading that "the disciples left everything and followed him", our response was "Huh?" If we were to follow him, we had to take everything along – toddlers, diaper bags, home care, family life, work.

One question consumed us: "How can we with commitments already made in marriage, children and work, be fully dedicated people of faith in our world today as the Taizé brothers are?" We began by sharing the practices and wisdom from each of our traditions that had worked for us. The Catholics brought experiences from Cursillo, Teams of Our Lady, the Christian Family Movement. The Protestants shared about [Faith at Work](#) and the Church of the Saviour. "Pay attention, listen to me and your soul will live." This is what happened. We paid attention to what worked, we listened to God and each other and our souls were enlivened so much that we wanted to share our discoveries. First, we went for training at the School of Christian Living and the Faith at Work Leadership Training Institutes. Then slowly we produced four courses like a School of Christian Living for the road, which we did take on the road in Protestant and Catholic churches in this area, around the country and eventually in Mexico. We named ourselves The Partners Community, which described the way we were with each

other and others – Catholics and Protestants exploring and sharing faith together. People asked us to publish the courses. This, Rhoda Nary, a Catholic Partner, and I did. They became known as **The Doorways Series**.

Now the content:

As you can imagine the books are full of treasures. Let me share one from each book that meant a lot to us as we worked on the books and that may be useful as we move to Takoma Park.

Encountering God in the Old Testament: The idea that we are co-creators with God is exhilarating. This means that as we move to Takoma we will be creating with the partners we find there fresh ways to bring new life to everything we touch. Being a co-creator also means that every day we have the opportunity to take a creative, rather than a reactive, stance toward what happens. Instead of griping about things that are not right, we think of interesting alternatives. My Mom was good at choosing the creative stance. People tossing litter from cars bugged her. Instead of complaining, she built a funny sign with a skull and cross bones, which said, **Do not litter!** If a person tossed litter out the window, she tooted the horn, zoomed by, held the sign up and smiled. That is taking a creative stance.

Meeting Jesus in the New Testament: Currently this country is preoccupied with *The Passion of Christ*. However, what gripped us as we studied the New Testament was the series of archetypal experiences that Jesus and the disciples went through and that we go through as well: commitment to call, crucifixion when things fail like when you are fired from a job you love, resurrection when hope sneaks in, and then

Pentecost when you feel empowered to live your call in a way you might not have expected but which is more powerful than what you had thought about at first. As we move to Takoma Park, we as a group and as individuals will experience commitment – we are already committed, we know we will be there. Nevertheless, crucifixion will come too when things fall apart and we are feeling abandoned by our dream. Hope will sneak in repeatedly. Moreover, we will be empowered to express call in ways we cannot now imagine. We can bet on this.

Journeying with the Spirit presents tools for spiritual deepening. When our son Tom was in high school, his friend Barry came to me and said, “I feel called to be a spiritual person. I have gone to a *sangha*, where they teach you to meditate. Buddhists are good on the ‘how-to’s’.” I was happy that Barry had found something, but I was sad that, although exposed to the church, the wonderfully useful how to’s in our faith had completely passed him by. This was one motivation in the writing of this book. We chose six wonderfully useful tools for growth to include. One is that the chief living/learning lab that God uses to help us grow is our own lives. This is revolutionary. Of course, we know that here. If you join another church, you are treated to courses on what it means to be a this or a that. However, if we become a steward in Seekers, we are invited to write and read our autobiography, the story of our lives. If our lives are our lab, this means that everything that happens can, if seen through spiritual eyes, help us grow in love and wisdom. Everything – the good things, successes, and the hard things, illnesses, losses can help us grow in love and wisdom.

Finally, **Discovering Your Gifts, Vision, and Call**. Remember when Elizabeth O’Connor challenged us to be patrons for each

other, as Pope Julius was for Michelangelo? We Partners discovered that being a patron, calling forth, naming the gifts and callings of our kids, work colleagues and each other is one of the most enjoyable and productive things we ever do. It is free, takes only a minute, and can be tucked into whatever else we are doing. I hope that as we move into our new life we can re-dedicate ourselves to being patrons of each other's gifts and callings. It is a wonderful way to live.

After experiencing the excitement of expressing gifts, vision and call, people asked for more. They wanted help with manifesting call in daily work. It was then that Sonya and I joined to pursue another question, **"How do people get clear and are launched into meaningful work?"** Our inspiration was AA, which offers 12 steps which if practiced daily move us from addiction to freedom. Sonya and I ended up with eight easily learned steps which when used throughout life do move us into truly valuable work. These are put forward in *Working from the Heart*, designed as a spiritual book but not specifically Christian, so it can be used in the office. A key learning from this work: help is available as we move ahead with our vocational dreams. In our Labs, anyone could stand up, speak about their dream and ask for assistance. No matter how unusual or even bizarre the dream, hands would always shoot up. In our new life at Takoma Park, we will find the help needed to do what we feel called to do.

As we move, I will be bringing the vision that people can walk in off the street and meet God in our new space. In addition, I want to give a stack of these books to Seekers to use as we see fit. They are my gift and blessing of our new life together at Carroll Street. It will be fun to see the visions and the gifts that we all bring, and I look forward to see the wonderful stew that we will make as we put them all together.

Amen.