

Jeanne Marcus: Doubt and Dedication

Seekers Church

September 21, 2003

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Doubt and Dedication

I have chosen to preach on our liturgical theme for this recommitment season: "Doubt and Dedication." This theme has affected me like the "X" on a pirate's map: It makes me want to dig.

The phrase "doubt and dedication" grabs me because it does not link "doubt" and "faith" as expected. This new pairing of doubt and dedication is not concerned with what we believe, but with to what we are going to commit. The phrase intrigues me also because it seems to honor doubt as an important part of deciding how we will give ourselves to the world.

It seems to ask whether we can we see doubt as an indispensable part of dedication, as a gift, as something we do not want to entirely live without. I think this community feels comfortable with Capital D Doubt-doubt about the big things like the nature of God or the Resurrection. However, how comfortable are we with the lowly "little d" doubts of our lives that arise as we try to live in good faith? Are we willing to give them honor as well?

Looking into my self, I know I am someone who carries doubts, and struggles to try to connect them to dedication. There are parts of our life at Seekers that raise those issues for me. Since Seekers is a place where our stories overlap, perhaps it is possible to look at Seekers' life to explore the questions:

Is it true that struggling with doubts can connect directly with dedication? Moreover, if we do other parts of our spiritual work together, can we explore the gift of our doubts together in community?

To put a sharper edge on these questions, I will confess: one place where struggling with doubt happens for me is with issues around our building on Carroll Street.

Doubt seems to me to be more than being anxious, more than just worrying about past decisions or future eventualities. Nevertheless, it seems much less than condemnation, or withdrawal of support, or treason. Doubt can be wrapped up in emotions, like anger or fear, that can make it difficult to work with. Doubt can raise difficult emotions in others in ways that are not intended. Doubt seems connected to being able to give an account of your reasons, or at least to be able to communicate principled questions, and not simply passing on whatever briefly crosses your mind.

How do we think about and respond to doubt in this community? Are doubts okay? Are doubts relating to this community okay? If I have doubts, is this a character flaw? Should I try to get rid of them? Is doubt something like politics and religion, which polite people do not discuss at the table? Is doubt something you do in the privacy of your own home? Could there be good doubts? Holy doubts? How can we know?

These observations and questions about doubt came to me as I thought about why it was so difficult for me not to delete the sentence that confessed I have doubts connected to Carroll Street.

To confess doubts connected to Carroll Street does not mean I do not believe we made the right decision about buying it. It does not mean that I think things have gone fatally wrong. Nor have I withdrawn support from the project. I have not stopped believing that Seekers has everything it needs to make this

work. I do not think of myself as a negative personality because I hold doubts. Moreover, I am betting that it is not destructive to talk about them in public.

I want to touch briefly on two moments from our history around Carroll Street that seem important to revisit in considering doubt.

The first is when Jesse Palidofsky brought us his leading that Seekers needed a deeper period of discernment before we came to a final decision to purchase the Carroll Street building. Therefore, it came about that on Saturday, January 22, 2000, 3 1/2 years ago, most of us came together in a circle in which we each shared our own discernment about the decision. That day, we honored doubt: doubts were given ample space to come forth, be heard with respect, and be woven into the community's life.

The second was March 4, 2001, 2 1/2 years ago, when we thought that we would be beginning construction any day, and would be moving in just a few months. That day, the Community Links group sponsored a "Wall-breaking" at Carroll Street. First Celebration Circle led Seekers in worship and Communion, using our odd assortment of chairs. Then came a reception including the Takoma/Takoma Park community, with Sharon arranging food and drink for 100; Trish coordinating, Cynthia a wonderful emcee, we had flowers, plants, balloons, music, and a whimsical and a colorful wall-breaking ceremony, designed by Paul and Peter.

I mention the wall-breaking because it seems a time that recognized that our hearts had already begun moving to a new place of hope and new beginnings. We were ready to move toward a life of new promises. However, our arrival has been delayed an interminable time. Thinking about our responses to the delay, I wonder whether doubt can also be a natural response to hopes postponed. Members of Community Links, who had been writing letters and making visits to local leaders, now

doubted that these activities made sense. Every month, we still seemed the same number of months away from building completion. Maybe doubt is linked to a flickering of our sense of purpose.

Several months ago, I was invited to begin coming to the early morning walk-throughs at Carroll Street. Once a week, a small group from the Building Development Team reviews work on the building, and makes necessary decisions. Keith, Peter, Deborah and Glen have been there through all stages of construction and all seasons of the year. When there was no roof, and it was wet, they met in the wet. In the winters, I am sure they met with flashlights in the first vague light of dawn. Coming to this process so recently, I have missed the long period of hardship duty: I am just as glad to get involved at a point where it was warmer and dryer.

I was around for the last couple of months that Providence Construction was directly leading the renovation. I confess that this was a time of some serious doubt for me. Recently, I have been there to experience the transition to having the construction work done directly by [Manna](#). And I, for one, thank God all the time for whatever circumstances conspired to have our work now done under Manna's direct supervision.

From the first day I met Manna's Nolan Smith and Bob Lynch, and watched them take on the details of our project, I have felt a new sense of hope. Now, every week, you can see and feel a big difference. It feels we are in reliable hands, with the full force of Manna's knowledge, skills and resources directly focused on our project.

If you were to go to Carroll Street today, you could now see the size and shape of all the rooms clearly; the insulation is in; we passed the "close-in" inspection; drywall is going up. The large skylight – that both allows in more light and incorporates the front of the Victorian house-has been installed, and it is quietly spectacular. The new windows are

up on the second floor, and on the first floor, the new doorway and window configuration has been framed in. Depending on how long it has been since you have been by the building, you might also be seeing for the first time the concrete that has been poured for the ramp in back, and the steps on the side and back. The huge mound of dirt in the back is gone. Soon, Seekers will have a regular monthly time to view the progress for ourselves.

While our estimated date of completion is still vague and probably still bound to be frustrating, it no longer feels as important. Now we have less need of a number because we have something better: evidence that these dry bones are living again.

There is a Biblical story about things taking an unexpectedly long time. This is, of course, the Exodus story, where the Israelites embarked on a journey that was expected to take 40 days, but ended up as 40 years of wandering in the desert. 40 years of wilderness wanderings must have been a **huge** surprise to the Israelites, just as the "40 months" of waiting has been for us.

The question has been raised of whether there is some larger reason or purpose to our having met with so much adversity in completing this renovation. That led me to look in the Hebrew Testament to remember why Israel was in the desert for 40 years, and when they knew it was time to come into the Promise. I had not remembered the story very accurately, so let me take time to lay it out here.

This part of the story is told in the 13th Chapter of the Book of Numbers, and it is all about doubt. After the Israelites had been camped at Sinai quite a while, Moses gave them the order to move out to the border of Canaan. When they arrive near the border, Moses chose one person from each of the twelve tribes to go spy out the land of Canaan. They are to look for whether the land is fertile or poor; whether the

people who dwell in it are strong or weak; and whether the cities are strongly fortified or merely camps.

40 days later, the men return. All of the 12 agree that the land they have seen is a land of abundance, flowing with milk and honey and bearing good fruit. However, 10 of the 12 go on to report that the people who dwell in the land are very large and strong, and that the cities they saw were heavily fortified. "This land will swallow up any who go to live in it," they report. "All the people we saw are men of gigantic size. We felt no bigger than grasshoppers; and that is how we looked to them."

Only two of the men, Caleb and Joshua, held another view. They believed that the Israelites were strong enough to conquer the land, and that with Yahweh's favor with them, they would be able to prevail.

The people as a whole came down on the side of the 10 who felt like grasshoppers, voicing impassioned objections to trying to enter Canaan. Yahweh, upset by Israel's continuing lack of trust, insists that no one who had been on the journey to that point, who had experienced the liberation from Egypt and the giving of the Law on Sinai, but had still held back at the border of Canaan, would come into the Promised Land. All of that generation had to die off: as it turned out, that took 40 years. Only Caleb and Joshua were allowed to live to enter the new land.

At first glance, this passage does not seem to make a persuasive case for the benefits of open doubting. However, I have had a good guide into a different way to look at the passage. Rabbi Shefa Gold, a gifted wise woman in the Jewish Renewal movement, invites us to think of the spy trip over the border as being similar to times in our own lives when we have been given a brief, but timeless, glimpse of the infinite, a sense of blessing and an ephemeral sense of what it would mean for us to be truly alive in the world. For many of us, our

sense of Call has been given in moments like this.

As Gold points out, what happens after that Glimpse of holiness depends on how our lives have prepared us to meet that moment. We respond either from a sense of being ready and already personally empowered to receive and integrate the blessing and invitation to newness. Alternatively, if we are not ready yet, we can feel completely terrorized by the impossibility and immensity of what we have seen. In that case, we know with certainty that we cannot yet live the newness that we were shown. It might take us the next 40 years of our life just to build a life strong enough to be capable of supporting the fullness, richness, beauty and mystery of that moment.

When the Israelite scouts saw the Promised Land, they all experienced it as blessing, abundance and newness. Nevertheless, the land was filled with Canaanites. This is how the Promise always comes – with major obstacles that need to be overcome. Moreover, Canaanites always seem pretty darn impressive. Most of the Israelites understood that they as a community were not yet strong enough to overcome the obstacles and claim the blessing. They return to their wilderness lives to build up their souls, and their institutions and the patterns of living that will be able to support their lives when they ultimately are strong enough to live into the newness.

So, were they wrong to doubt? Were they wrong to discuss their doubts together, and to make their decision to wait? The medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides believed that sending the spies, who were after all bound to come back feeling like grasshoppers, was God's clever ruse to cause the Israelites to choose the desert until their souls became courageous. Maybe this can be put another way: it gave them so much more time to talk to each other, to learn to work with their doubts in community in open and constructive ways.

Crossing the Jordan River into Canaan, when they finally did so, was the most radical transformation that the Israelites had ever undergone. It required that they learn another way of being. Their life could no longer be only about prayer, worship and being; now it also had to be about deciding, taking care of and doing.

I am told that it has possibly been 10 years since Seekers decided to become owners of its own building. We, who have been a "tent people" for so long, have chosen to become "a Temple people." Like the Israelites finally crossing the Jordan into Canaan, it is going to make all the difference. The Promised Land is always rosier in the vagueness of the initial dreaming: once we get closer, it starts to become a lot of plain hard work.

I have doubts about whether we Seekers have yet caught up with the implications that our owning a building will have for us as a community. Prior to purchasing this building, we were accustomed to working with every important aspect of our life together, as part of a circle. Will that continue to be true? On the other hand, will we differentiate ourselves into those who want to hold the doing and deciding, and those who feel more at home in prayer and being? If that happens, how will this change the structures of our community? Will we have enough time and enough desire to listen to each other? Alternatively, will we feel the need to conserve our time for taking care of business? Will relationships simply take too much time? Will our structures begin to feel hierarchical? Will there begin to be differences in the information that various people have that shape our sense of being in community together in ways we do not intend?

These issues are already showing up, particularly in Stewards. However, I doubt that we fully understand their source and their significance. Nevertheless, we need to, if we are consciously going to shape our new life, rather than drifting into it.

I have wondered: after the Israelites saw how scary the Canaanites were, why didn't they simply resign themselves to a permanent desert lifestyle. After all, it was not so bad: there was manna provided free from above, and quail showing up to meet their protein needs. Stones burst forth with water if you work with them right. Moreover, life across the Jordan was going to be a lot more work.

Of course, it was because of the vision that they had been given: of a new way of being in the world, a new sense of themselves as God's people, a promise made. Moreover, they had had enough of a glimpse of the richness and fullness and newness of the promise that they could never be the same.

What was it that led us Seekers to decide to move? Was it nothing more than wanting to be pro-active about the possibility of having to move from 2025? Was it only the economic calculation that within a certain number of years we would begin saving money if we owned our own building rather than rented? On the other hand, was it also that we were given a vision of making ourselves available to the world in new ways? When we decided to buy this building, did our hearts not fill with a desire to have Seekers Church connected to the community in which we found ourselves? When we decided to give over one million dollars towards the renovation, didn't we say that we didn't want to spend that much money only on ourselves-that it made sense to us only because we could make this building a resource for others as well as ourselves?

I believe that the practical and economic reasons we might have for moving to Carroll Street are too small to sustain us in struggling through the doubts and the frustration we have and will encounter. The changes to our identity as we become landowners are too significant and the questions before us are too big to be justified by the merely practical. Pragmatic answers to what we are about are not big enough to assuage my doubts. It is only if we are still claiming a bigger vision, about opening ourselves up to the larger community, about

making our resources and ourselves available in new ways, that I can gain motivation for doing the hard work of creating new containers to hold our life together.

It is the doubts and questions and the sense of things feeling too messy that leads me to need to recall how and why we came to this particular situation in the first place. It is an important way that doubt connects to dedication. Doubts make clearer what the choices are. At the point of doubt, our choice is to back away because the difficulties of the situation do not seem worth the effort. On the other hand, we can remember why this movement to newness promised to be so rich and full in the first place. Then we can re-choose dedication. It is good work, and work that we can, and should, do together.