

Jeanne Marcus: Slouching Toward Incarnation

Seekers Church

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Second Sunday of Advent

Jeanne Marcus

Slouching Toward Incarnation

I was offered the chance to preach today as one way of making a visible beginning to my being on staff. As most of you know, the Stewards, at their November meeting, affirmed my sense of call to be part of the Seekers' staff team.

My coming onto the staff team happened differently than it has before at Seekers. In the past, the Stewards have taken the initiative, creating a written call and inviting interested individuals to respond. This time, I came forward outside this kind of process. For over a year, I had been working with the question of whether I was being called to this role, both in prayer and in spiritual direction. I felt a sufficient sense of inner surety to name it aloud, and to ask the Stewards to consider a discerning process for affirming that call. I think we all are still thinking about the implications of staff emerging this way: the working group that is already looking at possible changes to staffing as we move toward Carroll Street is likely to be work with this question at some point.

Naturally, part of my sense of being called had to do with the gifts and energy I was offering to the community. However, I believe that another important aspect of call is the sense of moving toward your "growing edge." This role felt like where I was meant to be in part because I knew that it would demand that I grow in it: that I deepen my faith life, and wrestle

with my own soul work.

As the [Guide to Seekers Church](#) puts it: "Seekers are not persons who have arrived, but persons who are intentionally on the way." So, too, newbie Seekers' staff: it is a journey that is very much a work-in-progress. To take on this role seemed likely to bring to light spirit work I still have to do: I think I can say, based on my first month, that I will not be disappointed. Since you will have occasion to be my teachers here, I ask in advance for your charity and forgiveness. Nevertheless, part of what I wanted moving into this role is to be held accountable for my part in Seekers in an intentional way.

Another aspect of what I bring to a staff role is the questions that I am asking in my own life now. I am at a time of wanting to get a new grounding and coherence to my life. I really want my everyday living to embody the deepest meanings that I affirm as true. I am not looking for a unified field where everything explicitly relates to a central concept. However, I am looking to be clear about where my decisions and actions might be coming from; and I am looking to ask questions about whether these uncovered sources are what I am interested in embodying in my life.

Clarifying the real sources of everyday actions would likely uncover a different set of factors for each of us. For me, it is clear that part of my basic personality is to care about ideas and concepts, how words carry meanings, intentions, worldviews. (This might be true of a fair number of us here.)

Here I am, living in 21st century Western civilization, a virtual "market-place of ideas"! At least at some point in our lives, most of us have shopped around, tried on one, then another; and over time, we have built up great stores of images, ideas, verbal resources that are interesting and exciting. However, we do not necessarily commit our lives to any particular set of them being true: instead, we assume that

most of them can live together in relative comfort, all useful or pleasing in their own way. I can be a supporter or critic of global free trade economically; money should go to social welfare programs. I will have ideas about the use of military power, and the American justice system; the social welfare system, the transportation system, the school system; post-Impressionism, post-modernism, post-colonialism. We do not pay much attention to how these ideas have developed, or what interests they serve, or whether there is real coherence in them. For the most part, we live a set of concepts patched together from here and there.

Much of what we use to shape our everyday lives does not even reach consciousness. We move in a culture that has become so "natural" to us that it is like air, we do not even really notice it is there. I was recently in a group thinking about advertising-one omni-present aspect of our cultural atmosphere. Everyone in the group said: "Even when I watch TV, I don't pay attention to the ads"; or "I don't even own a TV-I never watch it." Yet the mental world of every one of us has been shaped, not by individual ads, but by the deep cultural understandings advertising has created.

These unconscious cultural meanings include:

- First, that we, each of us, are not all right the way we are – that there is something missing in us or in the lives that we live. We are trained to be more aware of our sense of lacking than our sense of fullness.
- The second assumption is that we can be made all right by something outside us-we need to turn outward, not inward, to find the thing we are lacking.
- Third, this thing can be purchased: in its simpler version, it comes on a hanger or in a bottle or tube. In its more sophisticated version, it is available through an experience someone can provide us in exchange for money: whether a college education or a weekend therapy workshop.

That is how culture works in our lives: we are immersed in a set of overlapping assumptions as invisible as air and powerful enough to affect even what it is possible for us to see and hear. Add to this our family's values, maybe the most unconscious of all: the rules of living we began to learn before we could talk, even. Who we were to fear; who we were better than; whether we needed to battle others to make our way through life, and how; what could be spoken about, and what not; whether we had to earn love, and how that could be done; whether life was reliable.

Maybe all this is obvious. If so, I wanted to re-state the obvious because it is the background for my search to become clearer about my everyday life and what my life embodies. I suspect that my everyday living is really a suspect mixture of influences. American consumerist economics; old assumptions about what counts as success or security; middle class proclivities to personal comfort; and Christian gospel values – probably all swirl in an uneasy stew.

Yet I have also experienced God's presence in my life. I have known moments of great joy and peace when I have been open to really receiving God's grace. I have also experienced simple but profound moments of healing and transformation in this community. Some of these have come through worship: some have come through relationships. All told, these moments of spirit have been the most profound realities I have known. These are what I really hope to embody in my living: they are what I hope to make possible for others.

One tool that I hope will be helpful in flushing out the unconscious mess of my stew of assumptions is to articulate an alternative, a personal "working theology." A working theology consists of the deeply held beliefs that actually function to guide our personal and public lives. As I am using the concept, a working theology needs to be simple: a few statements, like mantras, readily available as touchstones or standards against which to test the choices of daily living.

If a working theology is really working, it ought to be being embedded and fleshed out, over time, in everything that you do. It ought to give you a chance to see where culture has captured you, unawares; and where your actual embodied life is not meshing with your deepest beliefs. In that way, it offers you clear choices: do it the same way as always, or risk something new.

Here is the first statement of my developing working theology: "Jesus was right about God." Actually, wrestling with the implications of that one statement could probably last most of a lifetime, so I might not need to move to a second one.

"Jesus was right about God."

Here is some of what this means to me. If God is the deepest truth about our lives, if God is the reality in which we live, move, and have our being, then to say that Jesus is right about God is to say that Jesus is right about everything that will make my own life work, or not work. If Jesus is right about God, Jesus is right about all the things that can ever bring me joy in my life, or lasting peace. Therefore, I want to pay very close attention: and, I will want to risk life choices that are oriented by what he showed us.

So, what did Jesus show us about who God is? Jesus spent his ministry pronouncing blessings on beggars; touching the untouchables; healing the incurables; inviting everyone to sit down to eat at his open table: prostitutes, tax collectors, paralytics, lepers, scrubby fishermen, beggars, losers, outcasts-all who didn't fit, and weren't wanted anywhere else. His life shows us that in the eyes of God, all of us are worthy of love, and no one is expendable. That starts with me: God is present with me, and finds me worthy of love. Moreover, it includes every other one of God's creatures.

His life shows us also that in the eyes of God, no human individual or institution has any right or authority to

exclude or reject those God loves.

As he acted, he taught: he used short sayings, cryptic stories, a whole range of everyday images, everything he could think of, to try to get us to see glimpses of the God he had experienced. There is one metaphor, as you know, that he turned to repeatedly: the kingdom of God, or as we translate it now, the empire of God or the realm of God.

This is the season of Advent: it is a time characterized by waiting, expecting, watching...for something new to be brought into being. It is a time of longing for what is not but what might be. The reading from Isaiah beautifully captures that sense of longing. Isaiah is a poet trying to find adequate images: what he longs for is a time when his community will finally find a way to organize its life together that will be about something more than dominion, corruption, greed and violence.

For Isaiah, the image that comes to his heart is of a king, of the holy line of David: someone who will be fair and compassionate, giving to each person, and particularly to the poor and marginalized, what he or she needs to live the kind of full lives that God wants for him or her. Isaiah longs for one who will help those too downtrodden to help themselves; he longs for one who can create a political order that finally allows those without power to live secure from the greed and violence of those who will never be satisfied with only their share. In Isaiah's vision, the wolf will live with the lamb; the calf and lion will graze together; and on the entire holy mountain, there is none who will hurt or destroy.

Isn't this what we as God's people are always longing for? As we come to deeply know God's love in our individual lives, don't we come to find in our hearts a growing longing for a way of living our public, political lives together that finally is not about destructive political power and economic injustice?

Here at Seekers, I think we have come to understand Jesus as teaching that the realm of God is always ready to be birthed into being, always waiting to break into the present. The yearning remains. We want what God wants: a world that is ordered so that all God's people, all God's creations, have everything they need to be fully alive, to thrive.

Jesus taught us that God's realm is not only about something God will do by Gods-self at some future time. Nor is it only about God sending a strongman or king to release us from the mess we have created. What Jesus showed us with his life and his words was that the Realm of God can and will be present wherever a Christian community, however small, is ready to try to take the leap to "make it so."

I have also been thinking a lot about Carroll Street. It is one of the things that I am longing for this Advent season – that by this time next year, our life will become established there and will be a blessing to ourselves and to others. There is an image that I have been playing with over these past weeks. It is a way that helps me to imagine how our life on Carroll Street might express the Realm of God. It is an image that is especially appropriate to a church in Washington, D.C. That is, I imagine Carroll Street as an embassy of the Empire of God.

This image of an embassy appeals to me for a number of reasons. First, it points to the discontinuities between American culture and the values that Jesus manifested in his life and ministry. The American church has not always been too clear about this, and has often mistaken the dominant political or nationalist values for Kingdom values. The image of Embassy is a concrete way of seeing what Jesus meant when he taught his disciples to be in the world but not of it.

An embassy building is geographically located in someone else's territory: but when you are on embassy grounds, you are considered to be under the auspices of that realm which the

embassy represents. If you are at the Argentine embassy in D.C., it is as if you were in Argentina: its Argentine law that controls, not American. So then with the Carroll Street embassy: when you are on embassy grounds, cultural values are turned inside out and upside down. Everything proceeds from a different ordering of priorities, and a different set of understandings.

Remember the scenes in movies or books where an individual, who is being persecuted or about to be destroyed by the powers-that-be, knows that, if she can get to the embassy, she can be safe? She focuses all her efforts to get to that space-and the last 100 yards, she has to make a mad dash-but the gate is open, the embassy personnel are urging her on. With no time to spare, she has made it, and now has safety and asylum. In a less dramatic way, Carroll Street could be like that: a place that the spiritually, emotionally, or physically hungry and desperate come to find safety and the resources they need to begin to thrive.

To proceed in a shared journey from the working theology that "Jesus was right about God" does not answer the question of whether there is to be an urban retreat center or a neighborhood vegetable and flower garden at the embassy: that is our decision. Nevertheless, if we believe that Jesus was right about God, it does mean that how we live in community together will have a certain feel to it. The God Jesus knew was above all a God of love. Jesus' life showed God's love to be so transformative, that those who truly gave themselves openly to receive it were all themselves led to acts of love towards others. It seems that you cannot experience God's love apart from acting out of that reality in your relations with others.

It is profoundly humbling to put into words even this much of what I mean by claiming that "Jesus was right about God" as my working theology or as the key to discerning what our community life at Carroll Street needs to embody. It does help

sort out the murky mixture of my working assumptions. However, once I see that, I am also immediately aware of how invested I am in keeping certain aspects of my life just the way they are, no matter what Jesus said! At the Carroll Street embassy, I will likely be tempted to keep dual citizenship for quite a while. This, too, is my growing edge, and part of what I hope you will help hold me accountable.

So all of this is some of what I bring to staff team: some of the stuff that does not fit too well into a job description. I am still very much the newbie: I would really welcome any one of you who wants to talk about staff, or the process, or what you want to see in the future to talk with me. If you have visions, hopes, ideas, images, personal calls, I very much want to hear them and work with them. May the God of Jesus keep us all wrapped in love and grace, as we move toward incarnation-of what we really want to be.