

Kate Cudlipp: Will We Go On?

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

October 16, 2005 (Recommitment Sunday)

Will We Go On?

I would like to read two sentences from the reflection paragraph in our bulletin. We have heard parts of it read each Sunday throughout this season of Recommitment, which began in September, but on this Sunday of Recommitment, I hope we will hear it anew.

We are to be pioneers, missionaries, evangelists, teachers and prophets – representatives of the new humanity. Your primary vocation is to be that new society into which others can be drawn.

What is this “new humanity,” this “new society” into which others can be drawn? What does it look like? If we aspire to be members of the Body of Christ, we look to Jesus’ teachings and to the line of prophets from which he sprang.

In preparing for this sermon, I encountered a speech that Joan Chittister made to the Sojourners community on their 20th anniversary. I want to share a part of her message concerning what it takes to be committed Christians in this age because I was seized by the truth-and the difficulty-of what she held up.

She described the times in which several Old Testament prophets proclaimed their messages and asked if the prophecies

resound in our time. Among those she noted were Amos, Hosea, and Micah.

She begins by saying that Amos preached in a time of Israel's prosperity, when the nation was generally quite satisfied with itself. "Amos had the effrontery to question where the power and prosperity of Israel had come from," she says.

Then she sounds a challenge, "But there is no Amos now. Now there is only you and I, sojourner, and the message of Amos to this satiated and satisfied society is yet unheard. So, you see, whatever the cost to sojourners everywhere, we have no choice. We must go on."

She then describe Hosea's time as "a period and a place where the priests of the temple themselves had become tamed and fattened on the spoils of the system. The temple had gone political. It was the word of the king, not the word of God, that mattered."

Again, her challenge: "But there is no Hosea now. There is only you and I, sojourner, and the message to a domesticated church is yet unheard and unjust wars go on being justified. So, whatever the cost to sojourners everywhere, we have no choice. We must go on."

There is also Micah, who "came from the territory designed as a first line of defense for Jerusalem and watched people being commandeered into forced labor camps to build the public works projects that served the rich. Micah blamed the sages and the elders for it because they did not take leadership on behalf of the poor. They prophesied for profit not for truth."

Again, her challenge: "The world is badly in need of Micah again. But Micah is not here now. There is only you and I, sojourner. And the message of the moral responsibility of public figures is apparently yet unheard in the boardrooms of the world where judgments are made that make the wealthy wealthy and keep the poor poor. So, whatever the cost to

sojourners everywhere, until the poor are heard as clearly as the rich, you and I, sojourner, have no choice. We will simply have to go on.”

Jesus says in the Gospel lesson for today that the new humanity will render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. This is one way of summing up what the prophets were saying: We fail in our commitment to help God usher in the new humanity when we confuse what belongs to the worldly powers with what belongs to God. The cost of that failure of commitment is huge, for us and for the world.

However, as our liturgy suggests, the cost of commitment is huge, too. As Chittister puts it, “Commitment demands getting accustomed to the pitfalls of the prophet. It demands being willing to be a stranger in our own land. Commitment demands growing always more ready to lose our lives.” The Epistle for this morning offers further testimony to the demands of commitment: “You, in turn, followed the example set by us and by Jesus-receiving the word **despite great trials.**”

Good heavens, is this what I signed up for when I signed the Seekers book? How can I possibly sign on to recommitment if this is what it means?

I cannot-alone.

I am not alone, although sometimes in my darker moments, I forget. I have never had God talk to me the way God talks to Moses in the Exodus passage we heard this morning. I have never had the direct promise of God to accompany me. However, I do believe God is present in the companions I have been given in every stage of my life.

One thing companions in the faith do for one another is hold up a vision of God's new society: a world without vast gaps between rich and poor; a world where humans live cooperatively not only with each other but also with the rest of creation; a world where riches are understood as far more than financial

wealth.

Moreover, our companions in the Body of Christ, whether traditional churchgoers or not, help us bring this kingdom vision into our daily lives, help us hold it as the destination toward which we aspire with every choice we make and action we take.

This is very important because as we see in the Gospel lesson, Jesus did not specify what belonged to Caesar and what was God's, much to the Pharisees and Herodians' dismay. Jesus refused to draw a blueprint for making choices not only because he wished to avoid their trap, but also because there is no list of do's and do not's for all people in every age. As Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, each of us must work out her or his salvation with fear and trembling.

One of the ways we help each other make faithful choices is to listen to each other's stories, the stories of what is happening in our lives. Against the backdrop of our aspirations for a new humanity, our stories take on a new dimension: We now ask ourselves and each other, "How is my story helping to create the new society into which others can be drawn?"

Therefore, I would like to tell you my FLOC story, the story of how it has been to chair the board of For Love of Children over the past few years.

In bare outline: Fred Taylor, the founding Executive Director of For Love of Children (and a founding co-pastor of Seekers Church) recruited me to the FLOC board in 1991. In 1999, I agreed to serve as board chair for an "interim" period. I felt that I had few qualifications for the job, as I am not well connected in important city circles, nor am I an effective fundraiser and I could not be described as an initiating or energetic personality. Nevertheless, at the time, because of Fred's leadership, the board had an easy job: supporting

Fred's vision and his ability to draw resources to new programs and offering advice and assistance where needed.

Fred retired at the end of 2001. When his retirement plans became clear, the board did an extensive search and hired a successor for whom we were optimistic. Within eight months, we learned we had chosen poorly, that the new ED was not up to what we were coming to understand was a truly daunting job. We found ourselves describing the circumstances at FLOC as the "perfect storm." Charitable giving was down for almost all social service organizations. The city kept delaying negotiating a new contract for foster care, and our old contract as not paying the full costs for the care we were providing. The cost of operating the Thurgood Marshall Center, FLOC's new home, kept rising, and FLOC was responsible for covering all that cost.

Suddenly, the board and its chairperson found ourselves having to get intimately involved if the organization was to have a chance of surviving. We were graced-and I do believe it was grace-to have the second-in-command at FLOC agree to take over as ED in December of 2003.

Linda had the confidence of a staff that was on the verge of bailing out. She had tremendous organizational skills and a finance background. She was a person of faith and committed to the children FLOC served.

The twenty-one months since December 2003 have been a roller coaster ride. There was the month we were not going to make payroll, and then a donor wrote a check for \$200,000.

There was the legally and emotionally complicated relationship between FLOC and the Thurgood Marshall Center Trust, which was very difficult for me, as I served on both boards and cared about the missions of both organizations. Again, we found people to help us move forward, and now we are on the verge of a final agreement to go our separate ways.

The decision to close the Learning Center, which could no longer be sustained given the level of the city's support, was necessary, but that did not soften the incredulity of the director of the school when Linda and I met with her. What she saw was that the school had become the most trusted refuge for several of its students, and now she would have to tell them that they could not come back in the fall.

The wrenching decision to begin to put Hope and a Home housing on the open market in order to get cash for mortgage payments and other FLOC needs felt like a betrayal of what I knew was a program that gave families a fresh start in life. Then a diverse coalition of folks from across the area-including Seekers Jackie McMakin and Cynthia Dahlin-came together to save the housing, provide FLOC with needed cash, and establish Hope and a Home as an independent entity.

Finally, there was the painful decision to try to find a new home for FLOC's foster care program (called the Family Intervention Program or FIP). FIP was recognized as a model of innovative practices in the city, but because of its relatively small size was not sustainable over the long term unless it could become part of a larger organization devoted solely to foster care.

At this point, I need to tell you of the extremely painful-and important-meeting I had with the FIP staff to try to explain the basis for the board's decision. I was the only board member in the room with fifteen FIP staff and Linda. To put things in perspective, FLOC was created in 1965 to provide foster care for children who had been "warehoused" at the District of Columbia's Junior Village. Over the years, FLOC has become known by the city child welfare agency, the courts and other providers, for the quality and integrity of its program. The staff was proud to be known as FLOC staff. Now I was telling them that foster care was no longer in FLOC's future.

There was anger, even rage, on the part of many. They said to me, "The board sits up in a room and decides to end this program. You do not know **anything** about what we do, and you make that decision. You have not sat in a courtroom with a child who throws up on you because there is no one else around, and he is scared. What will become of the children? Will they be abandoned one more time?"

I listened, and I knew I was convicted-not for the decision to find a new home for FIP but for my ignorance and distance from the daily reality of those children and that staff. This recognition sits with me today. It is one of the gifts of the past couple of years, but it is a gift that I could squander easily if I make no changes in my life.

(Let me say as a footnote, that FIP has been transferred intact-staff, foster parents and children-to a great foster care organization that is delighted to have them and learn from the FIP model.)

As I look back over the past couple of years, I see that, for me, it has been a time of stretching and waking up. I signed up to chair the FLOC board with one set of expectations. It was not a primary commitment in my life, but it became that. At no time did I have the sense of freely choosing to participate in what was going on. I felt I had no choice, as there seemed to be no one else with the time and willingness to step into my role, however inadequate I felt about the job I was doing. I am grateful now for what felt like pressure to stick around. Because it is one of my default behaviors to want to escape when I'm not sure I'm up to a challenge, the FLOC experience was invaluable, as it taught me "the wisdom of no escape" (the title of a book by an American Buddhist nun). It taught me to expect that others will appear if I am willing to stay put.

The FLOC experience has also made more visible the yawning chasm between where I am today and where Jesus and the

prophets long for me to be. Am I really willing to commit to Christ's new humanity if it means, in Chittister's words, "growing always more ready to lose my life"?

Are you?

Committing or recommitting to Seekers Church is a step in our commitment to bring about the new humanity. Dave Lloyd holds up for us the importance of understanding that we are called, primarily, to commit to the Christ-vision of a new world. In one sense, commitment to Seekers Church is a means to that end.

If Seekers Church is to be a faithful expression of the Body of Christ, we must listen to each other, serve each other, and confront each other-in other words, love each other-not only as an end in itself but also as training for our loving and serving the world beyond ourselves. I hear with some frequency the slightly exasperated overstatement: "My life is all Seekers, all the time." That is a statement we must assure does not become true, but how to assure that is a topic for another day.

Today there is no Amos or Hosea or Isaiah or Micah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel. There is only you and I, Seeker. Knowing the cost, we do have a choice. Will we go on?