

# Kevin L. Ogle: Working with Fear/Anger, Abiding in Love

5-25-03: Sixth Sunday of Easter

Kevin L. Ogle

Seekers Church

Gospel: [John 15: 9-17](#); Epistle: [1 John 5:1-6](#)

## Working with Fear/Anger, Abiding in Love

It has been four years last month since I last volunteered to prepare and present a [sermon at Seekers](#). Then I was a relatively recent member of the Spirit and Sexuality Mission Group, preaching in part to advertise and interpret that Mission Group's upcoming retreat for Seekers. I was surprised to learn how long ago that was when I checked the website sermon file to refresh my memory. Jeremiah was 1 and 1/2 then, and Nathaniel was not yet a kindergartner. Now that they are finishing kindergarten and third grade, Carol Ann and I sometimes share amazement at the seeming speed with which they are growing up. Two weeks ago, Marion Seat gave her own high school graduation sermon from behind this lectern; four years ago, she would have been finishing Middle School. Children and teenagers-becoming-adults help mark the passage of time in ways that otherwise can escape notice at mid-life.

However, then, more than our youth look very different from four years ago. Seekers Church this year is actually – and as Dave Barry would say, **I am not making this up!** – getting ready to take leave of this space at 2025 Mass. Ave. for the Takoma Park Carroll St. building. I know I have not fully grappled with this reality for myself.

That is not why I stand before you today, on the sixth Sunday

of Easter, on Memorial Day weekend. As a somewhat introverted pastoral counselor who is generally content to hear the rich diversity and deep quality of the sermons we Seekers enjoy, it took a rare instance of my deep personal dissatisfaction with what I heard one Sunday here to get me to volunteer. Responding to a desire to hear a different word on the Sunday in mid-March immediately after the war with Iraq had begun, I now find myself before you today, on the first available opening since then! Perhaps I should have kept my mouth shut. Perhaps not.

As I have struggled with what I have to say, it has been helpful to view it in the context of this church's heartening response to the larger events that have been shaping the discourse, worldview and political climate that have dominated and pre-occupied this nation's leaders and media since Sept. 11, 2001. Times of trauma severely test the capacity of individuals, communities and nations to maintain empathy and connection, as (another pastoral counselor and Imago therapist) Rebecca Sears helpfully noted in a [sermon here](#) a couple of months after 9/11's horrific events. As she helped make clear, fear and pain tend to bring disconnection and the need for safety and healing – even as experiences of fear and pain tend to cause reactive, instinctual responses that are not helpful for maintaining connection and safety, responses which prevent healing.

It seems to me that Seekers has continued to often be a place where people have helpfully named their fears and concerns and been held in loving concern and compassion. In a time of cultural trauma and reactivity, my experience of Seekers is that this church has been seeking to heed the good news and counsel contained in today's lectionary gospel text.

The context there is the long Farewell Discourse of Jesus in John's gospel. Having survived death by crucifixion, the post-resurrection Jesus is hanging out with his followers and giving them the instruction and encouragement they will need,

in a world that would not easily accept the counter-cultural values and way of life practiced by those seeking to abide in the love of God Jesus embodied. He had come that their joy might be complete, but the world that had rejected and reviled him would do the same to them. They should love one another, therefore, preparing to nonviolently give their lives if necessary, as had Jesus. Death and the fear of it were no longer controlling powers for the followers of Christ. Embodying the love of God with each other and to the larger world – abiding in Christ's love – became a call and reality that relativized and made manageable the considerable trials and suffering which confronted the early Christian communities. They were to put their faith in God and the Spirit of truth, which Christ would send to them once he had physically departed (15:26).

Last week, in her own [farewell sermon](#) to Seekers, Carolyn Shields shared that her story of personal transformation or bodily resurrection required that she be willing to confront and tell the truth of the dark side of her own early experience. I was hearing her do so with an invitation to this community to continue its willingness to engage the truth and speak the difficult things – call them confessions or lamentations, perhaps – that set the stage for healing and transformation.

I think that this community has been willing to confront together caringly the disturbing truths of this country's dominant culture in some very significant ways in the past year and one half. One of the more striking instances of that for me, in the month following 9/11, was Jeanne Marcus's [prophetic sermon](#) of Oct. 21, entitled "Darker Valleys." In it, she intuitively explored some of the cultural parallels of the biblical time of Jeremiah with the emerging path that the US had already embarked upon by then in response to 9/11. [David Lloyd](#) and [Deborah Sokolove](#) also spoke from the pulpit to Seekers of painful personal places in the weeks after 9/11,

where otherwise I imagine that each would have continued to feel isolated in Seekers.

Another encouraging development for me in Seekers since 9/11 has been the emergence of the Seeker Church Peace Witness. That group began to coalesce in September 2002 as President Bush used the anniversary of 9/11 to press his case for a pre-emptive war with Iraq. The formation of such a group, loosely organized around shared opposition to the proposed U.S. War with Iraq, has been for me a sign of hope and solace in a time when the old American love affair with the myth of redemptive violence has been both ascendant and profoundly discouraging.

A significant portion of this community has been willing to engage and oppose that myth of redemptive violence from a place of prayer and faith-based engagement, re-examining Seeker's own annual [recommitment affirmation](#), inherited from the Church of the Savior, to work to end all war, public and private. Last Advent, over 20 Seekers each week attended the School of Christian Living class on that pledge-to-end-war commitment to explore and begin to claim what it means to individual Seekers today.

Prior to that, the [peaceprayer.org](#) website was established at Pat C's instigation and with the aid of Sherri Alms and Kris Herbst to facilitate a prayer vigil in early December. Gordon Cosby preached a prophetic sermon (his first sermon to Seekers in many years) in which he suggested the troubling connections between the Roman Empire of Jesus day and the domestic and foreign policy of our own country. Colman McCarthy filled the pulpit at Seekers to preach on non-violence and peace making. A coordinating team of six of us stepped forward to try to help hold and guide some of the considerable energy apparent in the community for the peace witness agenda. Seekers participation in peace marches and coordination with Church-of-the-Savior sister congregation peace witness efforts were engaged. Monthly Pizza Peace-Luck's on the second Sunday were established as a way for Seekers to work with these issues in

Christian community with each other. David Hilfiker preached and resourced a peace-luck in early February on his trip to Iraq. Trish Nemore undertook a weekly e-mail of resources to the SCPW list. Others continued to resource the entire church list-serve on an "as-inspired" basis. These concerns were carried, and are carried, in Seekers liturgy and prayers on a weekly basis.

In our School of Christian Living for the Spring Semester [Pat Conover offered a class](#) in Christian Peacemaking, which invited participants into reflection upon several key strands of Christian tradition with respect to issues of peace and war as well as social justice. That six-session class drew enough interest and engagement to be extended beyond the original length. More recently Pat has offered a thoughtful reflective essay for a Peace-Luck and to the SCPW list on "Claiming a Christian Grounding for Active Peacemaking." I would commend Pat's paper to any Seeker with interest in discerning a path forward grounded in (Christian) faith and the Reign of God rather than secular liberal or radical political thought.

So, as the Bush Administration ignored massive global and significant domestic opposition to its war plans in Iraq, to me Seekers church felt like a refuge and sanctuary from the war mongering and polarization of the larger U.S. culture. Kate and Billy Amoss proposed the 11th-Hour Bells for Peace initiative to encourage local congregations to ring their bells or blow their shofarot as a witness for peace, and the SCPW embraced and circulated that. Many of us continued to hope against hope that the UN could help avert what we considered a pre-mature and overly violent way to wage a war that did not seem to be what it was portrayed as....

The upshot of all this for me personally was that when I came to worship on March 16, the 2nd Sunday of Lent and the first after the war began, I was in my initial grief and sadness that a more creative solution had not been found, and that the US was defying the UN Security Council and our traditional

allies to begin a war with Iraq. I was also carrying my own motivating fear about how the unfolding scenario seemed to play into the vision of a War of Civilizations that Osama bin Laden had hoped to provoke with the 9/11 jet plane hi-jack bombings. Personally, I continue to fear that suicide bombings in our own malls are a likely outcome of the foreign policy path of this nation. So, it wasn't Good News for me that particular morning, to hear [David Lloyd working](#) with the quite understandable issue of dealing with the fear of death which had come up for him in having to draw up official terrorism contingency plans for his civil family services unit at the Pentagon. It made sense to me that this was his truth, at the time.

But with the Administration playing upon public fear of terrorism by offering as its primary justification for war the goal of disarming Iraq of WMD, for me this felt too much like surrendering to the manipulation and fear mongering I saw in the Administration's orchestrated rhetoric and rationalization for war. I could see that David was naming something real and important to be confronted and discussed. However, I was not in a place to receive that well, that morning. Instead, I scribbled some notes in response, and signed up to preach.

Since then, of course, Iraq has fallen to the US. No significant evidence of WMD has been found – despite our leaders denying UN weapon's inspectors access to look for them after the war! I understand 145 U.S. soldiers have given their lives, as well as a smattering of journalists. Moreover, thousands of Iraqi lives have been added to the carnage and death toll inflicted on 9/11 (and in Afghanistan). While it cannot be denied that another sadistic and evil regime has been deposed, and that defeating that regime is surely a positive by-product of this war that presents an opportunity for the good, Saddam Hussein now joins bin Laden in remaining un-apprehended. Six weeks after the conquest of Iraq, the US military struggles to keep order, provide humanitarian

assistance, and set the stage for reconstruction while tens of thousands of Iraqi's have marched in protest of an occupation that will surely continue for the foreseeable future. In Thursday's Post Republican Senate Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee Richard Lugar predicts that a minimum of 5 years and perhaps \$100 billion will be needed to rebuild Iraq. Perhaps the best we can do at this point is pray for a positive, good faith attempt at nation building on the part of the US, and more openness to UN and NGO relief and reconstruction assistance in the process.

Suicide bombings against Americans in Saudi Arabia and Morocco have caused the new Homeland Security Department Secretary to declare once again an Orange Terror Alert Level across the US just in time for the Memorial Day weekend. The Administration presses ahead with plans to develop "mini" nuclear bombs to supplement the apparently-not-big-enough conventional Mother-Of-All-Bombs recently deployed. (See today's Washington Post, Outlook, B-1, "We Keep Building Nukes"). According to Senator Byrd quoted in yesterday's Post Style section, U.S. military spending was up 15% last year after a 10% increase the previous year, and another 15 billion dollars is requested for the next fiscal year; we spend more on defense than all of NATO and the eight other rogue nations in the world combined.

I am not reassured by any of this; and I am certainly not reassured by the President's rhetoric that this Iraq war was just another battle in the ongoing War on Terrorism. Today's Post has a front page story which suggests that the Bush Administration is now interested in destabilizing the government of Iran, the third "Axis of Evil" country identified by President Bush in his January, 2002 State of the Union address. To put my feelings on the table – as I affirm it is helpful and important to do – I fear for the blowback of this ongoing War on Terror, and I fear its threat of the eventual ill-advised use of WMD by my country's military. I fear the Roadmap to Peace is not a real roadmap, but rather a

condition insisted upon by Tony Blair for backing the Iraq war, and that it will be perceived in the Arab and Moslem world as vehicle for furthering the Sharon government's agenda, not one that can bring a secure, just peace for both Palestinians and Israelis. I hope that I am wrong about my fear, but as a father and citizen, I am sad and still unsettled that my country has been led in the manner it has to this.

That said, and despite my sense of injustice and dismay in response to the huge new round of tax-cuts that the Administration has pushed through Congress this past week, I must confess that my faith calls me to move beyond fear and anger in my response as a citizen to these developments. In addition, it requires that I do more than confess my political perspective and lament that my voice and others who share this perspective are so marginalized in this country's current political discourse. It requires better of me than demonizing those whose agenda I oppose or with whom I disagree. Nevertheless, it also requires more of me than resignation and defeated acquiescence. It requires ongoing engagement.

One way the SCPW is offering to help those of us who are trying to figure out how to constructively work with our fears and engage for the long-haul around the call to peace and justice-making in our lives will be the Sunday evening Pizza Peace Luck in two weeks. There, David Lloyd will offer a process similar to the one he led for the final Christian Peacemaking class. My understanding is that it will allow consideration of areas of possible individual and group commitment, including these five: (1) awareness/knowledge; (2) political action; (3) mediation/reconciliation; (4) economic justice, and (5) reflection/prayer.

Perhaps others of you have resources or opportunities for engagement to commend or share, as well, today. I hope we continue to share such resources and opportunities with each other.



The Gospel promises me that the only way to fulfill my calling as a Christian and find true joy is to respond to the gift of this vulnerable human life with a love born of receiving the love of Jesus through an embodied, called community of faith – his church. For it is through such mediated experiences of God's presence that I might learn to embody the same love in my life for others, regardless of their station and status in the eyes of the dominant culture of my time and place. For as the first epistle of John (4:18) so clearly says, it is love that overcomes fear.

Let us continue to name our fears and shadow struggles with each other, so that we might continue to find and experience the transforming love of Christ in our midst, who came that our joy might be complete. Amen.