

# “Listen Up!” by Peter Bankson

September 25, 2016



## Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

### INTRODUCTION

Annual recommitment is a key element in the life of Seekers Church, maintaining a tradition of the Church of the Saviour begun with the initial commitment of founding members in 1947. Each year we renew our commitment to Christ and to the Seekers Church in a conscious and intentional way. In Seekers, God’s call and our commitments are linked together. Every choice you make, every call you answer changes all of us! This year “Recommitment Sunday” will be October 16<sup>th</sup>, three weeks from today.

What are some of the signs of lament, or promise, on the path around me? In this year’s recommitment preparation handout we’ve suggested that each of us focus on some deeper questions that might help us look at our spiritual journey. This year, we’ve been asked to reflect on:

† What is God’s emerging call on Seekers Church as one small part of the Body of Christ?

† As you review the call of Seekers, what comes up fresh for you? Who might stand with you as you engage this freshness?

† **What are you called to in our life together?**

† **What do you need from and through this community in order to deepen your commitment to Christ?**

Each of those is an invitation to more than one Sunday morning's worth of reflection. I've been reflecting on them as I contemplate what it will mean for me to make my 36<sup>th</sup> annual commitment to be here, trying my best to be on the Way with Jesus.

Preparation for recommitment always leads me back to our basics: Call, our three-stranded spiritual journey, and seeking out the prophets among us. For me, reflection on recommitment is an invitation to "Listen Up!," to hear something fresh.

Each of us is invited, and expected, to acknowledge and accept God's call on us as individuals and as a community. We try to make it possible for each of us to grow, and help each other grow to deeper understanding and acceptance of God's call.

We also share a commitment to support all three strands of our spiritual journey:

- • The inner journey of prayer, reflection, retreat and study;
- • The outer journey of ministry and service for the greater good; and
- • The community journey, nurturing this family of faith so it can support and nurture us.

Each week we pray for "the commitment to grow together, sharing the gifts you give us with each other and in the wider world."

The story in Luke about the rich man pleading that someone return from the dead to warn his brothers is a strong reminder to me to "Listen Up!"

As I've pondered this week's scripture lessons, several other ideas

about our annual recommitment have emerged. The first is our focus on ministry in daily life.

## **MINISTRY IN DAILY LIFE**

We take our name from a commitment to search for, recognize and nurture prophetic voices among us in ways that make the reality of the Realm of God more evident to us, and to the world around us, the world God is calling us to care for. Here's an explanation of the name from our "Guide to Seekers Church."

In 1976, when we were thinking through what it meant for us to be a separate and distinct part of the Church of the Saviour, Robert Greenleaf was writing his book, *Servant Leadership*. In that book, he wrote about the connections between prophecy and servant leadership:

*I now embrace the theory of prophecy which holds that prophetic voices of great clarity, and with a quality of insight equal to that of any age, are speaking cogently all of the time. Men and women of a stature equal to the greatest of the past are with us now, addressing the problems of the day, and pointing to a better way ... to live fully and serenely in these times. The variable that marks some periods as barren and some as rich in prophetic vision is in the interest, the level of seeking, the responsiveness of the hearers. The variable is not in the presence or absence or the relative quality and force of the prophetic voices. Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. If their early attempts are ignored or spurned, their talent may wither away. It is seekers, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service.*

– Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, page 22

This passage spoke deeply to Fred Taylor and Sonya Dyer, the founding members of Seekers Church. They decided we should take

our name from it, because we are a people who are intentionally on the way and committed to bringing forth prophetic leadership from the gathered community. Early-on, Sonya identified art and advocacy as core elements of our charism. That is one of the roots of our commitment to being “creative, inclusive and working for peace and justice.”

This image of being a faith community that focuses on working to make the Realm of God alive and visible has spoken deeply to me since I arrived at Seekers Church in 1976. I was particularly drawn by the commitment to ministry in daily life. to walking the walk in the wider world. One of my enduring bedrock Bible verses is in Jeremiah 29, in the letter to the exiles from Jerusalem God tells them “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Ministry in daily life ... in exile, no less!

That image was important to me when I arrived at Seekers because at that time I was serving in a very small “think tank” in the Pentagon, in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. I felt called to work for peace and justice ... from the inside.

So what’s new for me this time around, a third of a century later? I’m still looking at ministry in daily life, but with a bit of fresh perspective.

### **HOLDING OUR LIFE TOGETHER – TOGETHER HOLDING OUR LIFE**

As I’ve worked with our lessons for this week, the question that rises up for more active reflection is the third one: “What are you called to in our life together?”

That’s an Interesting question. I continue to feel a strong sense of call to hold our life together by adding my energy to our worship, and to our ministry of place. I do wonder what difference it will make in my life when this room is a four minute walk from my front door. (Last Thursday it took an hour and a half to drive here from Alexandria.)

As I just said “feeling called to “hold our life together” there was

an amber “ego alert” blinking in my head. Do I believe, at some inner level, that I really AM called to hold together our life as a community? To be the one who brings out the epoxy glue to mend our relationships? To build the structures that will keep things moving?

As I’ve reflected on my place in our life together over the past couple of years, I can see where there have been shadows of that, particularly when something broke and I wasn’t able to fix it as well as I wished it could be fixed. I’ve felt responsible for situations that were beyond my authority, or capability. My current mantra might just be a bit of evidence of this deep sense of responsibility, responsibility for things beyond my control. When I feel stuck, I ponder the mantra: “Jesus Christ, show me the way.” But when it comes out “JESUS CHRIST! SHOW ME THE WAY!” I can probably see the ego alert if I look for it.

So, when the amber ego warning light blinks, I’m learning to “Let go and let God.” And I thank you for your patience as I keep learning. That learning is a little, personal example of what I’m seeing as I reflect on recommitment, a holy whisper to “Listen up!”

No, my emerging sense of call to help “hold our life together” feels more like helping to hold it gently as we all keep moving along the Way. A good image of that kind of holding is a memory of 20 or 30 Guatemalans carrying a huge statue of Mary, the mother of Jesus, around the central square in Antigua on a Sunday afternoon. Everyone adding what they can ... people replacing each other as they get tired ... moving smoothly over the rough cobblestones. There is a sense of community there that I glimpse here during worship every now and then. It gives me hope, and I feel called to keep doing my part – gently.

In some ways, Seekers Church is a lifelong learning lab for servant leadership. We’re all in this together, and everyone has the opportunity to learn and grow and change.

## **WARRIOR VALUES**

This week I’ve felt God’s call expressed as an invitation to see holding the community somewhat differently. On our way to Matinicus in

early August, I stumbled across *So Far From Home*, written by Margaret Wheatley in 2012. She wrote: "This book describes how we can do our good work with dedication, energy, discipline and joy by consciously choosing a new role for ourselves, that of warriors for the human spirit." (back cover.) It seemed written particularly for those like me, called to ministry in daily life.

She observes that in these dark times it is virtually impossible to return to the rosy days of yesteryear:

*History records the fate of those who forgo reason, deliberation, reflection, when they choose to fight for self-protection rather than work together for a reasonable decision. People focused on self-defense, who choose fear over reason, invite in demagogues. Leaders find it easy to convince people who no longer use their intelligence. Too many good and reasonable people have been manipulated by demagogues to support destructive and disastrous actions.*

(Wheatley, p. 99)

Sound familiar? (Pause)

Margaret Wheatley's understanding of a "warrior" resonates with the ideals that I understood when I accepted a commission in our Army in 1961, and pledged to "protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic." It's an ideal that is sorely challenged in these angry, frightened, violent times. I was trained to fight, but that was the last thing I ever wanted to do. For me, being a warrior seemed to be a lot like being a firefighter.

Meg Wheatley's warriors are inspired by the Buddhist Shambhala tradition. "Their 'weapons' are powerful: compassion and insight. " (She says.) "Well trained in their use, they go into the corridors of power to dismantle the beliefs and behaviors that are destroying life."

(Wheatley, p. xi)

She emphasizes the importance for warriors to shift the focus from winning to "right action," from judging our success by how much we control to guiding ourselves by how well we behave. At the end of the

book, the "Path for Warriors" has some important guidelines:

- • We are grateful to discover right work and happy to be engaged in it.
- • We embody values and practices that offer us meaningful lives now. We let go of needing to impact the future.
- • We refrain from adding to the aggression, fear and confusion of this time.
- • We welcome every opportunity to practice our skills of compassion and insight,, even very challenging ones.
- • We resist seeking the illusory comfort of certainty and stability.
- • We delight when our work achieves good results yet let go of needing others to adopt our successes.
- • We know that problems have complex causes. We do not place blame on any one person or cause, including ourselves or colleagues.
- • We re vigilant with our relationships, mindful to counteract the polarizing dynamics of this time.
- • Our actions embody our confidence that humans can get through anything as long as we're together.
- • We sty present top the world as it is with open minds and hearts, knowing this cultivates our gentleness, decency, and bravery.
- • We care for ourselves aas tenderly as we care for others, taking time for rest, reflection and renewal.
- • We are richly blessed with moments of delight, humor, grace, and joy. We are grateful for these.

This seems like a useful way for me to help us as we look ahead here at Seekers Church in Washington DC.

As I read our Epistle lesson for this week I was very much aware of the values of Shambhala Warriors. In First Timothy 6 Paul writes:

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we

will be content with these.

But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

**But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.**

It seems to me that there's a call in here, and the path of Meg Wheatley's warriors might shine a light on the Way.

## **CONCLUSION**

So, in this season of recommitment I'm looking at call from a fresh perspective. Those questions in the recommitment preparation handout seem helpful:

- † **What is God's emerging call on Seekers Church as one small part of the Body of Christ?**
- † **As you review the call of Seekers, what comes up fresh for you? Who might stand with you as you engage this freshness?**
- † **What are you called to in our life together?**
- † **What do you need from and through this community in order to deepen your commitment to Christ?**

Standing at the intersection of the guidance from First Timothy and the path of Shambhala Warriors offers some fresh suggestions for my continuing sense of God's call on my life as part of this family of faith. The details aren't all clear, but I'm learning to expect that. I pray that I'll be open to some fresh insight.



Our psalm for this week offers a good place to end, with a Word of hope:

Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

(Psalm 91:14-16)

This morning Larry closed the Word for the children with a special prayer, a community version of John Wesley's Rule of Life. It's another example of the Gospel guidance, or the Warrior's Path:

In this church –

- • We do all the good we can
- • By all the means we can
- • In all the ways we can
- • In all the places we can
- • At all the times we can
- • To all the people we can
- • As long as ever ... we can!

I'll close with the reminders I was given to offer for our reflection today, beginning with my current reflection mantra:

- • Jesus Christ, show me the way.
- • Let go and let God.
- • Listen Up!

Amen!