

# Marjory Zoet Bankson: Beyond the Biological Family

June 19, 2005: Father's Day  
A Sermon for Seekers Church  
by Marjory Zoet Bankson

## Beyond the Biological Family

**Scripture:** *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Mt 10: XX-39)*

**What a text for Father's Day!** *I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, ...*

What could that possibly mean? I thought Jesus came to end war...to practice peace...and love...and justice for all. Nevertheless, this text sounds warlike, adversarial, oppositional. "Daughter against mother. Father against son." If we leave this fragment at the literal level, it sounds like

Jesus condones hatred and animosity toward our parents and children...and whoever does not do it is unworthy of God's love. Is that what it means? I wonder...and hope you will wonder with me this morning.

Jacqie has just become a member of Seekers and in joining, she promised to "seek the end of all war, public and private." However, in this lectionary text for today, Jesus says, *I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*. That sounds positively warlike. Bringing a sword does not sound like an invitation to end all wars, public and private!

As you know, I like the challenge of working with these lectionary texts. It is like picking apart a tangle of yarn, patiently teasing out the knots until we discover the thread.

**Let us begin with Jacqie's decision to join Seekers.** Last Monday, she read her spiritual autobiography to a small group from the Call Class, because that is the group in which she discovered her call to become a member of Seekers Church. (Would members of the Call Class who are here today in support of Jacqie's decision please stand?)

Jacqie's spiritual journey to this point is both unique...and common. Early on, she searched for the spirit, was attracted to magical, wonderful and mysterious things even though she grew up in the dangerous world of post-war Berlin. As she grew older, she learned that love and anger, deception and trust, good and evil filled her world. We each discover those things, one way or another.

On her journey toward membership at Seekers, Jacqie has used the sword of discrimination and consciousness to release family ties that would have kept her bound in grief and regret. Her journey gave me one clue to the meaning of today's text. Jesus said to his disciples, "*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.*" He might also have said, "*Whoever hangs on to the past will never taste the nearness of God.*"

Jacqie did not stay enmeshed with the world of her parents, even though she was shaped by them ...as we all are. She did not settle for the peace of unconscious acquiescence, of unquestioned repetition and roles or simple rebellion, which leaves the parental roles in place. Therefore, she has been able to leave the church of her childhood, discover her powers of conscious choice and clear intention and follow the path of her heart through the doorway to this community.

Therefore, we welcome you, Jacqie, as a fellow traveler in this particular band of Jesus' disciples.

## **Beyond Biology**

Jesus said *I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...* When we look at the context for these "fightin' words," it sheds a different light on his directive to separate from parents and children. Going back to verse 5, we see that Jesus is sending his disciples out on their first preaching mission. He is sending them into a **very** traditional society, where the **only** kind of security was family loyalty. He warns, "Brother will turn against brother" in the face of religious persecution. Although religious custom and Mosaic Law governed the marginal

existence of Jews under Roman rule, Jesus knew that family ties could be undermined by torture: *I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

When Jesus called his disciples away from their fishing nets, away from their homes and jobs, he was inviting them into a realm of spiritual consciousness, a world of individual choice and commitment. In order to claim belonging in the larger creative story of God's unfolding love, first the disciples and then their hearers would have to leave the static world of custom and tradition. *Those who find their life will lose it, he said, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.* Jung might have called that the *invitation to individuation*. The life we must lose is the cage of custom and unthinking obedience...the shoulds, oughts, and can'ts and "if onlys" that keep us tied to the past.

Jesus came to change all that...to invite us to a new world of fresh possibilities. It is a world of hope and change and creativity. It is a world of forgiveness and gratitude. It is a world where we are not afraid to be small, to try the impossible or to risk what the dominant culture says makes no sense. *Those who lose their life for my sake will find it,* Jesus said.

## **Father's Day**

Today is Father's Day, and most of the men in our community are on retreat. I hope they are sharing some stories of leaving their own fathers...and finding the spiritual mentors who could open the realm of God for them as Jesus did for his

disciples.

Leaving home and finding companions in the realm of God do not necessarily happen together. Sometimes we wander alone for many years, looking for guides to the holy land of our spiritual completion...looking for Jesus in right and wrong places. I was moved by Jesse's story last week of Bill Taber, the seasoned Quaker who became his spiritual father...and the privilege Jesse had of being a companion for Bill in his dying days.

As we consider those who have placed a sword of discernment and separation in our hands, I would like you to think of the spiritual fathers and mothers who have helped you separate from the kudzu vines of addiction or obligation that might be entangling you in the past. We will have a time after the sermon to name them into the circle.

As I wrestled with the meaning of Jesus' words about bringing *not peace but a sword*, the image of my father going away to war came back to me. As we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of World War II ending, I have been on a journey of discovery... to reclaim the lost years in my father's wartime story. He was gone for three years, between 1942 and 1945, starting when I was three years old. Peter's father was absent during those years too. Moreover, it has recently occurred to me that we *idealized our fathers* to make ourselves feel more secure.

Those war years gave my father a particular hold on my imagination that I have never looked at before. All I knew was my mother's deep rejection of war, her deep sense of

abandonment and betrayal...as though my father had volunteered instead of being drafted as he was. When my father came back from World War II, we put aside those war years and never talked about it. My dad got busy establishing his medical practice. They had a baby ... my youngest sister, Barbara, and he joked about "being hen-pecked" by all the women in our household.

My dad remained a distant figure in my imagination, even though we lived together in the same family. I now think he longed to be known and loved, but did not know how to initiate that. We missed the early years of physical bonding. Nevertheless, when I went off to college, my dad did an amazing thing. He began writing to me every third week...a two-page, single-spaced, typed letter. It was his version of a spiritual report, not family news. Moreover, when my two sisters left for college, he began writing to them too. So every week of the world, he wrote a letter out of the ordinary things of his life: his work, his reading, his observations of nature.

For 30 years, he continued to write every third week, whether I wrote back or not!

Did I save those letters? No. I did not even realize what a gift he was sharing until I got to Seekers and began writing spiritual reports to my spiritual director in Learners & Teachers. He actually prepared me for the disciplines we expect of our members here.

Part of my recent search to recover those lost years with my

father has been to ask my mother, who is still living, whether she saved his letters from those war years. "Yes, I think so," she said, "but I don't know where they are." My spiritual work right now is to hold the possibility of finding those letters very lightly and pursue the threads that I can know because I think it will help me let go of my idealized inner Father, help me embrace the reality of my life **now** as I let God's love take me beyond the immediate circle of biological family.

Even though our Gospel text is about turning away from our biological families, I want to honor the blessings that can come when we open our hearts within an extended family, whether here in this chosen family of faith or within our kinship circles.

On the altar today, is a baby quilt, which I have just completed for my nephew's first child. Each of my sisters has three children. Drew, the father of this child, lived with us for a time when he was in college, so we feel especially close to him. When [Anna Gilcher preached](#) on "bearing the beams of love," Drew happened to be visiting us and I spent five minutes gazing into his eyes, feeling the great tide of love flowing through me from a source that felt far greater than my own cramped heart. The force of that love surprised me!

Therefore, like my father's letters, I made this quilt to offer a blessing to Drew and Amy Cummings and their "little nubbin." For not only did Jesus tell his disciples that they would have to leave father and mother, son and daughter, but that they would find a greater source of love in the realm of God which was, after all, very near.

# Conclusion

We gather here this morning to be reminded of God's greater story of creation in and through us. As we share our confessions and sing of our faith, we are reminded repeatedly that we are meant for more than procreation. We are meant for more than family loyalty. We are meant for the KINGDOM of God!

Jesus calls us beyond the bonds of custom and duty, of comparison with our siblings, of unconscious habit and joyless obligation to claim the peace that does pass all understanding, all the conventional meanings of conflict avoidance. Sometimes Jesus will call us beyond the peace of no conflict, to unsheathe our swords and cut away the strings that keep us bound...so we can let the powerful force of love flow through us to others.

May God continue to call us beyond our biological families, to know that we are meant for more than that! Amen.

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