

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Experiencing the Kin-Dom of God

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A Sermon for Seekers Church
by Marjory Zoet Bankson

Experiencing the Kin-Dom of God

Gospel Lesson: Mark 6:1-13

Jesus...came to his hometown...and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...? And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown and among their own kin and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there...

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out...

In the Gospel reading for today, there is a static situation and a creative response by Jesus. In the initial scenario, we see that people in Jesus' hometown were impressed with the authority of his preaching and the power of his healing hands, but they simply couldn't get beyond their religious and social prejudice to accept the notion that God could be present in a man they'd known from childhood. They had him typed, labeled and stuck in a role that didn't allow them to believe what they could plainly see. Their prejudice was so strong that they could not accept the evidence of their own experience. It's the downside of a traditional community. Unconscious roles make newness impossible. Mark says that "Jesus was amazed at their disbelief" but his prophetic work was not stopped.

Jesus sent his disciples out with a mission – to heal the sick and proclaim the kin-dom of God. He sent them out without any extra supplies so they would be **forced** to look for a welcome from strangers. That was apparently his answer to the closed system that he found in his hometown...to go out and **find** places where the future was open-where a different reality could be received.

The Situation

In Jesus' day, people were defined by their family, clan and tribe. The intermediate social structures between the individual and the state were, in fact, paramount. Jesus' prophetic ministry invited a fresh look at God's intention for humanity, especially for those at the margins of static social structures-"the lost, the least and the lonely" as Ron Arms says.

Today we live in a different setting. Intermediate associations are being shredded for economic efficiency. Parker Palmer points to the loss of public spaces as a sign of this community disintegration – loss of public libraries, public schools, local hospitals, local theater and music

groups, lodges, bowling leagues and small churches like ours – where we could learn how to love our neighbor as ourselves and see beyond the categories that keep us from truly knowing one another.

We are shaped toward extreme individualism and mass culture without the intimacy of local community because we make better consumers that way...anxious about where we belong and who will care for us in a time of need. We live in a culture of perpetual dissatisfaction, hooked into an economic treadmill of getting and spending. No wonder it's so difficult to develop genuine interdependence **and** stay open to prophets when they arise among us.

The trend among religious folk today is to emphasize the hard work of **loving ourselves** so that we can love others, we say. But I don't think we can learn to love ourselves in a vacuum. We need small groupings in which we see ourselves, warts and all. Family isn't enough because with children, we do not meet as peers. In local community, we learn about our needs, our capabilities, our hidden strengths and our dreams for healing the ills we can plainly see. Paul preached about becoming **the body of Christ** because it is impossible to practice loving alone. He knew that without community, we never learn the effort and intention needed to love ourselves or our neighbors!

When we make a choice to participate in a community like Seekers, we are committing ourselves to the annoying realities of real people instead of the pseudo-community of television, the shopping mall or video games. We are choosing **these people** as a school for the soul to learn something about the personal reflection and discipline needed to set aside habitual responses in order to hear a new voice. It takes being with people that we care about to practice confession and forgiveness when we hurt one another. But our very success at creating a community with roles and rites and rituals may block our recognition of prophetic voices here...just as it did

in Jesus' hometown.

I wonder if we limit miracles in our midst because we already have each other typed and labeled. Do we assume certain things about each other in a way that inhibits the Spirit from flowing freely in this place? In worship? In our mission groups? In our conversations? Do we have the capacity to name and bless new gifts when they arise in others? Isn't that what Robert Greenleaf meant when he said that "it is Seekers who call forth prophets by the quality of their listening?"

It's clear that our **intention** is to honor prophets among us even if we don't do it very well. So one question we might draw from the initial part of the Gospel reading for today is whether we can discern a prophet when one appears? Someone who is acting with a new kind of authority? A new level of freedom that we might call a healing?

Two examples come to mind and I know there are others. One is Cynthia Dahlin, whose work with the homeless women at the N Street Shelter resulted in a book of their poetry and a reading at the Potters House on July 24. The other is Margreta Silverstone, who has stepped into a new level of visibility with her [sermon on Guatemala](#) and hosting the [June classes](#) for those interested in Seekers' relationship with [PAVA](#) and the Potters House. Both Cynthia and Margreta have recently brought gifts that they exercise elsewhere to enrich our life together, to quicken our relationship with those at the margins of power.

At the 50th anniversary of Dayspring, Gordon Cosby called for **new wineskins** to hold the charism of this church. The orthodox containers for spiritual formation and outreach have been mission groups. I think we are seeing new wineskins in three important new examples of community outreach: the Washington Area Tualong Team, the Seekers Church Peace Witness and the Silver Spring Housing Coalition mentoring team. I see a fourth in the fact that 10 Seekers are going on the Guatemala

pilgrimage which was organized by [Faith@Work](#), not this church.

The question of whether our assumptions can prevent miracles among us came up for the group going to Guatemala too. At Margreta's invitation, [Ron Arms](#) came to lead a class at the school in preparation for our pilgrimage. We began with some word associations around **rich** and **poor**, disease and **well-being**. We talked about how our preconceptions might keep us from experiencing the richness of human relationship with people just because we have made judgments about them...how we might block experiences of healing or learning with our labels of rich or poor, educated or not, just as those in Jesus' hometown did.

Jesus' Response

Turning back to the scripture, Jesus provides an example of how we can learn to listen for the Spirit when it is blocked by disbelief at home. He sent his disciples out in pairs with authority over unclean spirits. By directing his disciples to take no food, no bag, no extra cloak, Jesus made sure that they would **need** the hospitality of strangers. "And when they receive you," he said, "stay there and don't be moving to a better place if another offer comes along." That is, stay and develop a relationship. That kind of intimacy is the social fabric needed for the kin-dom of God here and now!

On Friday, ten of us will join 16 others from the Faith@Work network on a pilgrimage. We go with open hands and open hearts. To counteract some of the stereotypes of Norte Americanos that inevitably accompany media and government actions. To appreciate the richness of traditional Maya village life and to learn more about the systems that impoverish our souls. We go to deepen our practice of listening for the prophetic word when it comes among us. Unlike the disciples whom Jesus sent out with nothing but sandals and a staff, most of us have been worrying a lot about what to take and what to wear because we both want to be

comfortable and not burden our hosts there.

Ron spoke to us about skillful generosity as a two-way relationship that “does with” rather than “doing for.” He warned us against bringing too much stuff, urged interactions that would cultivate a smile of satisfaction rather than a glut of things that would have to be stored, used properly or gotten rid of. “Enough is a fine line drawn by example rather than edict,” he said with his usual care for an apt phrase, “Giving is most helpful when it enables the recipient to become an aware and generous participant.”

I thought of the glee among the young men of Chuatzite last year when they joined Peter in a nose-flute jamboree, and the delight of the little girls at being included in a soccer scrum. Mutual delight was obvious then. Among the adults, it was harder. When we first arrived, I felt shy and awkward among the men on the building project. Women of the village worked very hard, but they did not do “men’s work” dressed in pants. The 23 families of that village had already contacted PAVA and requested help in building a school. They had gotten half the money from the Mayor of their local municipality. They had already committed their own labor, even though it meant days away from tending their cash crop, the broccoli fields being grown for export. We were simply extra hands...and not very skillful ones at that.

But when we came back, day after day, the men in charge of handing out tools began to recognize where we were working and what we needed. Gradually a common language of gestures and smiles made the work go more smoothly. Margreta has shared her epiphany around collecting paper for a particular need during the concrete pour and all of us were touched by the fiesta and food which we shared on our last day there...communion to celebrate the gift of community that we had forged together.

At the Guatemala City dump, the traditional fabric of community was missing. Gladys and Edgar Valanco provide an

experience of community to all who participate at the Potters House, but it felt to me like an overwhelming situation. I was humbled by their faith and vision. They provided us with a way to give our time and energy, to make human contact with scavengers in the dump...however brief, but the need for local community was glaring.

Another place where we experienced conscious community was in the group that went. We came from all parts of the country in response to an invitation in F@W magazine. Each morning and evening, we gathered to reflect on our learnings and name our gratitude for small things. Each day we sat with different people on the bus as we rode to the work site. Each night we ate with different small groupings so as not to overwhelm a local restaurant with 26 of us. To enter this experience with open hands instead of fists clenched around our belongings made it possible to receive the gifts that came from being strangers in a strange land together.

This year, because we have a large group from Seekers, we will have a special responsibility to come without the “extra baggage” of prior experience, or Seekers jargon, or even the habitual “twoness” of being a married couple.

The Kin-dom of God

Jesus didn't send his disciples out alone because they needed each other to carry the truth of God's good news to the world: that closed systems which lock people into place forever could now be broken open. Today the situation is different but the message is the same. The basis of God's kin-dom is relationship... mutual need...shared gifts...skillful generosity. Each pair of disciples carried an experience of conscious community between them, but Jesus sent them out without extra supplies so they would be **forced** toward interdependence. Something in this fabric of mutual need and mutual gratitude seems to be essential for the kin-dom of God to take hold in the world. And each generation has to discover the **particular**

form of local community needed to thrive in the surrounding culture.

As Seekers, we do not have to go to Guatemala in order to experience God's kin-dom for ourselves. We can choose to be a hometown where prophets **are** recognized. And when we go on the road, sometimes we will walk in the sandals of the disciples, sent out without the usual protection of familiar roles and sometimes we will be the ones who make space for strangers in our homes. Either way, Jesus continues to challenge us to **stay awake** for the prophetic voice of God in our daily lives. Then we will know the Kin-dom of God here and now.

May God work many miracles in this place!

AMEN.