

Marjory Zoet Bankson: LECH-LECHA: Go Forth

Seekers Sermon

June 30, 1996

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LECH-LECHA: Go Forth

OLD TESTAMENT READING: [Genesis 22 \(The Binding of Isaac\)](#)

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 10:40-42 *Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*

At the literal level, the gospel reading for today is fairly obvious: even a cup of cold water constitutes mission in the name of Jesus. And, in an age of quick rewards and tight schedules, maybe that's all we have time for! But the context of this reading from Matthew suggests a deeper theme – one that puts it squarely in the middle of Pentecost and what it means to live with the Holy Spirit.

Life in the Spirit

At the beginning of chapter 10, from which our Gospel lesson is taken, the disciples are given clear directions to avoid Gentiles and Samaritans, to preach "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" and to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons." This is no "cup of cold water" kind of ministry!

Recently I had a chance to hear Luke Timothy Johnson speak at Virginia Seminary. He's a New Testament scholar at Emory and

an outspoken critic of the Jesus Seminar. He says that extracting the historical Jesus from the Gospels and voting on which are his authentic sayings is asking the wrong question. Demythologizing Jesus may sell books and stir debate, but trying to "get the facts" without some interpretive lens is simply impossible. He starts with the whole Canon as the lens to work with. Read the entire book of Matthew as a narrative, Johnson suggested, paying attention to where things occur as well as the stylistic details and "plot development" because these are dramatic stories and not simply a record of Jesus' ministry. In fact, Luke Johnson maintains that the main character of these first century narratives is not Jesus, but the Holy Spirit! That was a new focus for me.

Thus Jesus and the disciples are portrayed by Matthew as having the power to cast out demons and raise the dead because this is a story about what the Holy Spirit is capable of doing and how it happens.

Our Gospel lesson suggests that the early church did not regard Jesus as the exclusive container of the Holy Spirit during his lifetime, although later doctrinal statements do. Our Gospel lesson clearly describes Jesus as giving powers of the Holy Spirit to his disciples before the crucifixion, so I can speak about that mysterious part of the Trinity as I wanted to.

Story Two weeks ago, I had a chance to spend several days with Meinrad Craighead, an artist and mystic who lives in Albuquerque. I went because I am trying to deepen my own connection with the Holy Spirit and her illustrations for M.T. Winters' 3-volume work on the biblical stories of women drew my interest. I have two of her prints and loaned one to Rachel and Diane as a prayer icon during Covey's gestation. Meinrad seemed to be someone who is exploring the full range of the Spirit without denying her Christian framework, and I found that to be true.

Meinrad's namesake is an 8th century monk with healing powers.

She grew up in a Catholic family and spent many years in a Benedictine monastery, called to the rhythms of painting and prayer in that Catholic community. A beloved old nun raised herself from her deathbed and said to Meinrad, "Get out! Get out!" At first, Meinrad was crushed, because she thought she was being ordered from this woman's bedside. Then she realized that it was a message to leave the monastery, so she did.

Now Meinrad lives a solitary religious life in deep communion with the earth and animal spirits. She has been "led by the Spirit" to reach back in time for images and stories of God as the Great Mother. Because she grew up with the Catholic tradition of praying to Mary, her biblical faith is simply another layer of spiritual geology on top of this basic strata. Every morning, we began with ritual prayers: baptism one day, journey prayers the next, invoking rain for the parched land the next and finally our journey into the "great below." Then we looked at slides of ancient, medieval and Renaissance art and she unpacked the symbolism with stories, a little like a short course in Joseph Campbell. Each afternoon, we did our own art work. At night, my dreams were full, complex and somewhat frightening. I felt like I was swimming in the Spirit without the familiar moorings of this community!

LECH-LECHA: GO FORTH!

While I was with Meinrad Craighead, I was working with the lectionary scriptures for this week. The Old Testament story about the Binding of Isaac appeared several times in slides that we saw and I worked with the stark images – father, son, absent mother, altar, God and sacrificial ram. In a book which Deborah used in her sermon 3 weeks ago, Jo Milgrom's Handmade Midrash, the author describes the Binding of Isaac as *Lech-lecha*, the command to "Go forth!" She notes that Abraham's story begins in Genesis 12 with God's command to "Go forth" from the land of Ur, leaving behind the land and customs of his own people. It ends in Genesis 22 with the potential

sacrifice of Isaac, which also begins with the words, *Lech-lecha*, "Go forth to the land of Moriah..."

Lech-lecha requires the kind of courage that I saw in Meinrad Craighead, letting go of her past and her future to be faithful to God's call. It's the same kind of faithfulness we saw in Gary Roberts when he took his paint box and headed west, alone, or in Jesse, as he preached about God as a homeless wanderer last week. Millgram suggests it is no narrative accident that Abraham returns home alone after Isaac is spared. Father and son are no longer bound together. She notes too that Sarah dies! Perhaps of a broken heart. A mother's faithfulness might be different from this father's. At least I think she would have raised her voice in protest against this kind of sacrificial obedience! By the time I returned from New Mexico, I could see the link between the lectionary scriptures for today. Both hinge on God's command, *Lech-lecha*, Go forth!

Lech-Lecha for Seekers

As Seekers, we are also hearing the word, "Go forth!" Church of the Saviour is drawing to a close with its Jubilee next year. This building will be sold. We will be homeless. For Seekers, both individually and collectively, our questions are how, where and when. How will we go? And where? And when?

Part of the reason I went on a "vision quest" to New Mexico was to find new hope for our future together. I have been living with disappointment that Seekers decided against a corporate mission in this place, against the Ecumenical Embassy that some of us dreamed of. I went, seeking healing for myself and a new sense of hope for us as a body. Because we have chosen collective leadership by mission groups instead of searching for a single leader, like Abraham with his vision, we will need to prepare ourselves like the disciples did for their *Lech-lecha*, even though Jesus was still

available. Now the Homemakers Mission Group is beginning to look for a new home, but we also have work to do. We must do the listeners work of deepening our prayer life and opening our hearts to their leadership. I found art work a wonderful way to prepare the ground for whatever seeds the Spirit will be planting in the next few months.

Four Specifics

As we face into our own *Lech-Lecha*, our own "going forth" as a community, I offer four questions to help us listen for God's call as a community.

1. In worship, let us listen for signs of the Spirit. Several weeks ago, during prayer time, I heard Gary speak of a healing miracle that we have all be a part of. The doctors have determined that there is no evidence of brain tumor in Marcus! How many of you heard that? Do you remember when Marcus was not expected to live? Do we dare to celebrate the power of the Spirit here? Week after week we name people and places that need God's healing. Do we believe it will do any good? Can we hear the evidence of prayer answered when it comes? What would it take to be more attentive to the inward life of prayer and presence of the Spirit? Do we need a retreat mission group which might expand the work of the prayer group on behalf of this community?
2. Second, are there ways to strengthen our practice of community life outside worship? Right now, the staff "encourages" volunteers. Members frequently discuss what we need, but everyone in that circle is already committed to a mission group where the work gets done. I am beginning to think that we need a Parish Life mission group – a place where people who now volunteer for periodic festivals (like Easter breakfast and Christmas dinner, family retreats and short courses in the school) could gather their energies.

3. Third, is there a way to claim our corporate mission as advocates for children? Last week, I was at Kanuga, an Episcopal retreat center in North Carolina. When people asked me about Seekers, its call and form, I told them that, although we have not claimed a single corporate mission, people cluster at Seekers because we care about children. "In the structures of our daily life and work," I said, "many Seekers are advocates for children. Fred Taylor and Sonya Dyer called this community into being out of their work with discarded children in the city and we put a lot of creative energy into parenting here. We have been shaped by our link with FLOC."

I am hoping that the intergenerational work camp in El Salvador will be a powerful impetus for an ongoing relationship with Dr. Guzman's work with children. Are there other ways we could claim advocacy as a call for Seekers? Might the Journeying with Children mission group become more visible and verbal on behalf of children? Is there another form that advocacy might take? Do we need some sense of corporate mission to inform our choice about where and what we need as a church?

4. Finally, what do we need to support emerging leadership out of call? Are there new structures? Different classes in the school? More or different mission groups? Stronger spiritual direction? As a member of the Learners and Teachers mission group, I want to encourage you to plan now for a class in the fall. Although I can't tell you what we will be offering, I can remind you that meeting for dinner and classes has long been a mainstay of calling forth leadership in Seekers.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward. (Mt 10:42)

New life with the Holy Spirit means that we will have to do the inner work of being a body of Christ, not just a collection of individuals as we hear *Lech-lecha*, Go forth!