

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Living from Book to Book

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

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Living from Book to Book

Text:

Joel 2:28 I will pour out my spirit on all flesh – male & female; young & old; slave & free

[Luke 18:11-14](#): The Pharisee & tax collector came to pray

Intro:

- Today is the beginning of Thanksgiving season; last portion of Pentecost. The text from Joel is quoted by Peter in Acts 2 at Pentecost – an amazingly democratic vision of the Spirit being poured out on all sorts and conditions of humankind, regardless of station in society, regardless of sex or status.
- Today I want to celebrate the life of Elizabeth O'Connor, whose books introduced me to a new sense of the Spirit, a new vision for how to be church. (She died a week ago)
- Today we also have a troubling text from the NT. It's a story told by Jesus, about a self-righteous Pharisee, one of the inner circle ... And a miserable tax collector, outcast, presumably a "hired gun" by the Romans who raked money off the top for himself and was moved (by the Spirit) to seek mercy.

The Gospel Lesson is troublesome because Jesus clearly prefers the tax collector who come with empty hands ... begging. And if I'm honest, I probably come this morning in the shoes of the Pharisee – not knowingly smug about keeping the law, but I have some pride in my persona as a responsible, dutiful eldest daughter-type at home, at work and here, at Seekers. I generally try to do what I say I will do, keep my hands out of the collection plate and be somewhat disciplined about tending my spiritual life. So it troubles me that Jesus so clearly loves the tax collector better, because that means I need to look a where my self-sufficiency might be blocking my understanding of God's realm.

The whole picture of "begging for mercy" feels shameful to me. To be without the power to provide for myself makes me feel like a failure – and maybe that's the point here:

- We have to give up our self-sufficiency before God can really work in us!

Ron Arms loaned me a book by a Zen Buddhist, Bernie Glassman, called *Bearing Witness*. Glassman leads street retreats in New York City. He asks retreatants to prepare by asking friends to buy beads on a prayer bracelet. It's difficult for them because they are not used to asking for money. In addition, Glassman allows them to take no money with them. Like Buddhist monks in Asia, they must beg for money to eat or accept help from shelters. The retreatants meet twice a day for prayer and sleep together on streets or in a prearranged shelter, but essentially their experience is that of the tax collector, begging for mercy. Glassman describes begging as giving the retreatants an opportunity to learn about the abundance of the streets and giving donors an opportunity to practice generosity! The retreatants bear witness to places of injustice and need in the city, gathering for prayer with empty hands – like the tax collector.

When I tried to imagine myself on such a street retreat, my

hands and feet got cold. I could feel the fear of being without money on the streets of New York and I wondered how God could break through my shell of self-sufficiency. Then my mother called from a nursing home in Bellingham, Washington, 3,000 miles away from here. She had fallen and cracked her tailbone. She spent 24 hours in the hospital and then was moved to a nursing home, where because she wasn't in the hospital for three days. Medicare will not cover expenses. She sounded desperate and alone – because indeed she is. All three of her daughters live more than a thousand miles away. She has no advocate.

Since then, I've been talking with her every day, trying to get a good picture of how disabled she really is and how much of her discomfort is simply that she's used to being more self-sufficient. She's like an unwilling participant in Bernie Glassman's street retreat. Last night when we talked, she'd had a bad day. She rang for help and nobody came for 45 minutes. Understaffed (like most nursing homes), she felt helpless. She doesn't like feeling like a beggar, crying out for mercy. It's a situation we may all face, sooner or later.

As I listened to my mother, the Pharisee in me rose up and began problem solving. We talked about some of the things she could do and then I said, "If they don't agree to get your medication from your apartment, I'll call the desk tomorrow and see if I can put some pressure on them." She started to tell me a story about how "mouthy" I could be as a child, and then she stopped, saying "No, this time I need your assertiveness."

Suddenly the polarity of Pharisee and tax collector collapsed into a dialogue between my mother and me – two humans, trying to help each other in a system geared to legalism. I caught a glimpse of what Jesus was trying to teach the disciples and others who gathered around to hear this story of the tax collector and the Pharisee. It's not that he prefers one to the other, but that the tax collector is more open to seeing

his connection with God and with others than the self-righteous Pharisee was. Jesus is pointing to beyond the polarity to the Realm of God – the amazing vision of Joel – in which the Spirit is poured out on all people, giving them the power to love each other when social barriers would have kept them apart.

Elizabeth O'Connor was a spiritual guide for many of us on this journey toward interdependence as a people of God.

- I first learned of Church of the Saviour in 1963, when Elizabeth wrote an article in [*Faith at Work*](#) magazine titled, "*What the World Needs is Saints.*" In it she wrote *Saints are people who can give themselves in ways that seem fanatical to those who live by the usual ethical and moral terms. ...They have thrown the familiar "duty" maps away.* The idea that the church could be a place where we might throw "duty maps" away was new to me and I was intrigued. Her article ended with the words, *What is God calling you to do?* Nobody had ever suggested God might be calling me to something special before. I had never heard that identifying CALL might be the role of the church.
- In 1968, we were living in Hanover NH, working at Ram's Horn Coffeehouse (which was patterned after the Potters House), which gave us our first experience of a mission group. Our staff group studied Elizabeth's books, *Call to Commitment* and *Journey Inward/Journey Outward*. We patterned our life after the covenant community, which she described. A year after we left in 1970, the group abandoned the written covenant and within another year, the Ram's Horn closed because staffs had become too unreliable. It was a lesson for us.
- During the 1970s, we lived in Springfield VA & Leavenworth KA. I used the three books that Elizabeth wrote for the School of Christian Living: *Eighth Day of*

Creation, Search for Silence and *Our Many Selves*. I designed classes for all three and taught them at a local Presbyterian Church.

- When we arrived here on July 4, 1976, we expected to slip in a class at the School and move toward membership. However, we arrived just one month after Church of the Saviour broke into six little churches and it was not clear where we could belong. In those days, the School was still part of the ecumenical service. As newcomers and outsiders, with Peter still in the Army, we felt more like the tax collector than like the Pharisee! Not long after we arrived, I was asked to teach a class on *The Eighth Day of Creation* and I can say now that I found my CALL!
- Shortly after we came, Elizabeth wrote *Letters to the Scattered Churches*, which gave us the disciplines which we would need to keep the tradition of Church of the Saviour as we moved into separate missions. She wrote out questions for a money autobiography, which I have used to design *Faith at Work* retreats and classes for the Seekers' School of Christian Living. Like the tax collector, money has been a mirror for my greed and my neediness. It has brought me to my knees and perhaps that's why I so often speak about money from this pulpit. Elizabeth helped to open the door on money as a spiritual discipline. .
- As we settled in to Seekers, we got to know Joan and Doug Dodge about the time *The New Community* came out ... which begins with the story of their daughter Jennie, who died when she was just three years old and whose tiny sprig has grown into a towering tree out at Dayspring. In those days, I was a potter, with more time and flexibility in my schedule, and Joan gave me the gift of being able to walk with her during her own cancer treatments. At the end of *The New Community*,

Elizabeth listed the marks of a transforming community – which I still use as a guide and a measure for us at Seekers.

- Then there was a long hiatus, during which Elizabeth O'Connor wrestled with her own call. You can read the story in *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*. She was very ill and sought all kinds of medical help until she said "Yes" to another call, this time to focus on housing for the elderly in the city. It resulted in Sarah's Circle, where Emmy Lou Daly now lives. I hope you will ask Emmy Lou, who works with the L'Arche Community for retarded adults, for some of the details of how Sarah's Circle came into being.
- EOC's last book is just a little pamphlet, but in many ways it is the most powerful. Called *Our Rag-bone Hearts*, it begins this way...

The life of a twin brother informs my mind and heart as I ponder why it is that the mentally ill pile up on our streets and the streets of the world. Richard was a freshman at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, beginning his study of the one hundred great books, when he was drafted into the army and sent to the battlefields of World War II. I was never to see him well again.

I have lived with madness. ... From this brother of mine I have learned what it is to wait through countless days and months and years for the return of someone held dear – so slow was I to know that he would never come back again.

This brother has taught me everything profound that I know about prayer. He taught me liberation theology before there were words for it, making it a part of my blood and heartbeat. From him I know that Christianity is not Christianity unless it has a large and radical

incarnational dimension.

It is the cry of the tax collector, begging for mercy –. But it goes far beyond the tax collector, who can at least speak for himself! In *Rag-bone Hearts*, EOC speaks for those who have no voice and no visibility. She calls us to "wake up," to let ourselves see the mentally ill on our streets and not discard them from our minds. In this little book, she shows me the "path with heart," the way of Jesus.

If we look at the text from Joel, does that mean God's Spirit will be poured out onto Richard as well as Elizabeth? Onto the despised and forsaken of society as well as the rich and powerful? On young and old? Slave and free? I believe it does.

In fact, I don't associate the "pouring out of God's Spirit" with any special gifts at the time of Pentecost. Over the years, I have come to believe that God's Spirit is alive in all of us, already.

But just as our bodies have sleeping and waking times, our souls do too. My hope is that Seekers can be a place to encourage awareness, keep waking us up!

- As Teilhard de Chardin said, *We are not humans learning how to be divine,
We are already divine, learning how to be human.*

That's what Jesus came to teach – God's intention for human life. That's the "gospel way" which Jesus points to with his story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. We must let go of our self-sufficiency and our smug cultural answers. Jesus invites us to come empty-handed, aware of our shortcomings and our deceptions, and open to the mystery and possibility of relationship with God.

Conclusions:

- I'm grateful that each time I thought I'd gotten the answer right, Elizabeth O'Connor came out with another book, which prodded and poked my religious imagination into new places.
- Just when I need help to understand the Pharisee and tax collector in me, in us, the teacher comes. This time it was my mother, in a nursing home, 3,000 miles away.
- Just when I read about going on a street retreat, I realize that I have a ready-made chance to beg even more publicly – to give you a chance to experience your own generosity by inviting you to give freely when the collection plate is passed and to use the Season of Thanksgiving as a time to make your proposals for international giving. I've prepared a display of our current giving upstairs on the bulletin board and hope that we can do a better job of keeping you linked with the places where our money goes in 1999. From Elizabeth, we all learned to see money as mirror of our true selves – to notice the level of trust and the level of freedom that we have.

Elizabeth O'Connor's dying process has been a lesson for me in learning more about trusting God to provide what is truly nourishing. At the same time, she taught me about courage in the face of pain and uncertainty. Her dying taught me more about crying out against injustice and doing the hard work of raising money to create a model for housing senior citizens in the inner city. In her last letter to the wider community, she wrote these words from Theodore Roethke:

*I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow,
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear;
I learn by going where I have to go.*

May we do the same.

Amen.