

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Seekers' Pentecostal Roots

Seekers Sermon

July 7, 1996

Marjory Zoet Bankson

Seekers' Pentecostal Roots

Scripture: (Mt 11:16-19, 25-30):

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

20 years ago this week, Peter and I came to this church for the first time. I remember because our household goods were delivered the day before the Nation's Bicentennial and we watched a few of the highest fireworks from our back porch the next day. Having read about Church of the Saviour in FAITH AT WORK magazine and taught from Elizabeth O'Connor's Eighth Day of Creation while we were in Kansas, we looked forward to being part of this creative community.

We arrived about 2 weeks after the original church moved into six little congregations, and the feeling of triage was heavy in the air. We attended the ecumenical service for about 6 months, trying to sort out the various congregations and what each one stood for and where we might find a "place at the table." In those days, the School of Christian Living was still sponsored by the ecumenical church, so we started a class in the Old Testament with Elizabeth Ann Campagna, Mary's sister, that fall. Although we all bought and read Bernhard

Anderson's thick text on Understanding the Old Testament, we also heard marvelous stories from E.A. about the early days of this church.

I particularly remember her story about Gordon as a young boy growing up in Lynchburg VA, where his pastor always greeted him with stories of the second coming. Reverend Gilmer would lean toward him and, pointing upward, might say "Maybe today..." and upon leaving, might say "See you on Sunday, unless He comes." That kind of "second coming" talk seemed strange to me in 1976, but Elizabeth Ann made it seem normal with her boisterous humor and her flair for the dramatic. Old Testament figures came alive in her class and we did not spend much time on "oughts" and "shoulds." Our primary focus was on the way that God called people who thought they were not worthy: Moses, Jeremiah, David.

During the class, I realized that the concept of CALL was a touchstone here. The little churches that were growing out of the former mission groups each had a special CALL. Individuals were CALLED to start new things, to pay close attention to God's voice and direction in their daily and weekly disciplines. That emphasis on God's call is primarily a Pentecostalist point-of-view! Since this is the season of Pentecost and mine is the last in a series called "Body of Christ: Mirror of God," I want to speak about the Pentecostal roots in Seekers!

ROOTS IN CALL

One Thursday night at the School, Gordon Cosby asked me about my call. I had just led my very first weekend retreat at a Presbyterian Church out in Lincoln NE through a Faith at Work connection. I stuttered a little and then blushed as I said "I think I'm being called to lead retreats."

"Oh. Another Aimee Semple McPherson," he said. I was stunned. All I remembered from my college course in American

intellectual history about McPherson was that she was a Pentecostal evangelist in the 30s, and that certainly wasn't an image I could identify with!

I forgot about that encounter until this week, when I was reading a book that Ron loaned me titled Fire from Heaven by Harvey Cox, which is about the rise of Pentecostal spirituality and reshaping religion in the 21st century. It has a chapter on McPherson, who turns out to be a woman evangelist with a distinct flair for drama and preaching. She died in 1944, but the Foursquare Gospel association that she founded is flourishing. Now I might have the courage to claim some of her gifts and charisma, but in 1976, that wasn't the image I had of myself at all.

Harvey Cox identifies Pentecostalism as PRIMAL SPIRITUALITY, based on direct experience of God. Most of us probably associate Pentecostalism with "speaking in tongues." When I was growing up, we called them "holy rollers" and I knew it wasn't something that Calvinists or Presbyterians did.

Cox describes three important characteristics of the Pentecostal movement as PRIMAL SPEECH (ecstatic utterance); PRIMAL PIETY (visions and dreams for the community); and PRIMAL HOPE (that Christ is coming soon).

PRIMAL SPEECH

Harvey Cox defines PRIMAL SPEECH as ecstatic utterance or speaking the language of the heart within the community. It's not some private inspiration, but rather improvised testimony, rhythm or sound for the purpose of "gathering up and binding the broken human family." He has a chapter called "Music Brought Me to Jesus," in which he describes the many commonalities between jazz and Pentecostalism.

Beside the common source among urban blacks at the turn of the century, he points to the improvisational character of jazz, riffs on a basic theme, the "call and response" modality,

sounds of longing and hope, the slow cadences of black funeral processions and roots in the spirituals that sustained generations of slaves – music that lifted slaves into the very presence of God and kept them sane and human in a dehumanizing system.

This past week, some of you may have visited the Folklife Festival on the mall. Peter and I stood all afternoon in a striped tent, swept up in the drama and passion, the call and response rhythms of a black gospel quartet and I felt the power of PRIMAL SPEECH in my bones. As we left, I said to Peter, "I was born the wrong color. This feels like home to me."

And what does this have to do with Seekers? We surely don't speak in tongues here and we like our Methodist hymnal with its staid and proper sounds... but we have welcomed clowns and drama, dance and kinetic art in worship. And our emphasis on CALL comes close to PRIMAL SPEECH. We have chosen to open our pulpit to whoever feels called to preach. Granted, Celebration Circle mission group puts some structure around it and we have to make sure that we don't run over the time for the next service, but we've made a radical commitment to the idea that the Spirit moves among all of us...and may call anyone to speak, to testify, to praise God from this pulpit. I'm afraid that our "improv jazz" may sound more like Guy Lombardo than John Coltrane, but our commitment is to listening for heartsounds instead of headtrips. We value personal stories linked to the pattern of the Gospel story; we expect direct experience with God and pray for miracles in our midst.

PRIMAL SPEECH. Pentecostal roots.

PRIMAL PIETY

The second characteristic of Pentecostalism, PRIMAL PIETY, is the emphasis on trance, visions, healing, dreams, dance and other archetypal religious expressions. Nontraditional forms

of worship. Creativity offered as praise – something I've appreciated here at Seekers. When I feel slightly embarrassed if we have guests here, I know that God is tugging me out of my own propriety into a bigger realm.

Last week, I spoke of my retreat time with Meinrad Craighead, who works with very untraditional images of God in a dreamlike context. Today I am reminded of Verna Dozier's book, The Dream of God, in which barriers of color, race, nationality and sex are broken down and we all stand together as people of God. That vision has been a strong motivation for social justice in this century and in this church.

I remember my dad making fun of the way our local Pentecostal mission answered the phone: "Praise the Lord. Lighthouse Mission." But I also remember taking boxes of clothes there and how he would stop on a Saturday to make a house call or talk with "Mrs. Mission" if things were particularly difficult for the family. As far as I know, it was the only church (except the Salvation Army) helping the down-and-outers directly. Then, it was something I wished our church could be doing. Now it is something that draws me to this church. PRIMAL PIETY. Caring community.

Our gospel lesson for the day reminds us that Jesus ate with sinners and was criticized as a "wine-bibber and a glutton." That God was revealed to the "little ones," not the wise and powerful. When we name our commitment to a more just and merciful society, we are practicing PRIMAL PIETY. When we claim our "ecumenical" roots, we affirm the dream of God to create a community that is more diverse, more inclusive than the segmented style of our culture.

In this section, Cox has a chapter called "Your Daughters Shall Prophecy." He talks about the prominence of women in Pentecostal churches, even those that cling tightly to the "headship" of men. In Asia and Latin America, where Pentecostal churches are flourishing, women point to the

mutuality of responsibility in Paul's admonitions: "wives obey your husbands; husbands love your wives." In a traditional macho society, it's a way to bring the husbands home again...sort of the "Promisekeepers" of the Pentecostal movement.

One of the reasons we were drawn to Seekers in 1976 was the commitment to having a man and a woman up front, at the communion table. We too were drawn to the mutuality here. Because I do believe that men and women are different and complementary, I value the tension and engagement that we have in this community. While our diversity remains pale, almost every week I bump up against someone who is genuinely different from me and I remind myself that this is truly God's intention.

PRIMAL PIETY. Pentecostal roots.

PRIMAL HOPE

Finally, Cox names PRIMAL HOPE as the eschatological outlook based on Christ's imminent return. The messianic age. The last days. "Swing low, sweet chariot. Coming for to carry me home." The "balm in Gilead." The "bosom of Abraham." MARANATHA: Come now, Lord Jesus. Those of us who are comfortable in this age don't spend much time wishing for another life, except as we approach the end of this one...or when the Spirit opens our eyes to the suffering of those around us.

In the last Administration, we had a fundamentalist Secretary who didn't see why we needed to pay attention to ecology because the End Times were coming soon. Cox brands that kind of thinking as Fundamentalism, one strand in the modern Pentecostal movement. According to Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, "Fundamentalists do not simply reaffirm the old doctrines; they subtly lift them from their original context, embellish and institutionalize them, and employ them as ideological weapons against a hostile world." Fundamentalists

in the Pentecostal camp will opt for ecstatic worship over social action, charismatic speech over community. Cox makes a connection between fundamentalism and modern scientific materialism: both are too literal, too tangible, too structured and formulaic.

Cox contrasts FUNDAMENTALISM with EXPERIENTIALISM, which he says, is a radically personal style of piety, in which we are constantly compiling our own collage of symbols and practices in a search for coherence in rapidly changing world. Experimentalism deals with PRIMAL HOPE as the Kingdom Coming now and not yet, moments of truth...and a belief that God intends peace and justice for all of creation, not just for a few.

As Seekers, I believe we have cast our lot with EXPERIENTIALISM in our Pentecostal style, because in the final analysis, it means an encounter with something real, something powerful beyond ourselves that can give us a grace and flexibility that we need to live in a changing world, to build an inclusive community here and now and be about the millennial work of God's Kingdom Coming, again and again.

After 20 years in the Seekers Church, I can see the PRIMAL SPIRITUALITY in our Pentecostal practice of PRIMAL SPEECH as attention to call, PRIMAL PIETY as attention to community and PRIMAL HOPE as advocacy for children, beginning at home and spreading to far corners of the world. We are moving to a new level as a community

- looking for a new location;
- examining our sense of call, decision-making, stewardship and belonging;
- claiming our direct experience of God as we go forth.

PRIMAL HOPE may be the hardest part to claim. We drink deeply of the cynicism and systems-thinking of our culture. We often fear that our small efforts are not enough and yet we know

that we are somehow connected, somehow part of something living, breathing, organic and whole. We are like cells in the body of God. Jesus shows us how to live and move and have our being together. The Spirit moves and calls us to life.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

That's PRIMAL HOPE. Our Pentecostal roots.