

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Sonya Dyer – Completing a Call

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Marjory Zoet Bankson

Sonya Dyer: Completing a Call

Gospel: [Mark 4:35-41](#)

Let me begin with Sonya's version of the 23rd Psalm so you can hear her prayer language::

Holy God, you are our shepherd, we shall want for nothing that truly matters.

In green pastures you give us rest and beside deep, still waters you lead us.

You promised to be with us always, offering freedom from the frictions of hatred, anxiety; fear and pain. You give us living water to satisfy our thirst for peace.

Her words have circled in my heart since she said them during worship some months ago. Now we have them in the prayer book that Jackie helped her produce. Such a simple shift in language as "*we shall want for nothing that truly matters*" guides us toward the deeper meaning of Psalm 23 without her preaching or analysis. "Yes," I breathe. "Oh yes."

Sonya's prayer-language has quietly nourished God's presence in us and opened the doors of our hearts to the world. She has practiced the power of liturgy, holding the center of worship with her passion, her presence and her words.

Her sense of Spirit, moving in the silent spaces of worship, has given us time to find our own words with God.

Sonya's vision and call for **being church** has shaped our life together for nearly 25 years. Now we come to bid her "farewell" as she completes her call to the staff of Seekers Church and begins a new journey with Manning that will take them to North Carolina in the fall.

One of the most powerful things I have learned in this church is that good endings make for good beginnings. Closure makes space for newness. Just as Jesus shared a "last supper" with his disciples, we have learned to trust the end of missions and calls because God is in all of it, sustaining our life and our hope. Manning's choice of the recorded music for this morning is another way of affirming God's invitation to experience the direction of their departure as moving toward "Jubilee."

If we trust God for the larger purpose and direction of our lives, we can accept the endings and beginnings that form the stepping-stones. Sometimes these shifts feel life threatening. No ending is easy. Our culture says we can always find a way to buffer pain and avoid the reality of deaths, large and small, but our faith invites us to be conscious, to be fully present to whatever life brings – because that is where we will discover God-with-us.

The Gospel for today is a good example. The disciples pull away from shore as a storm brews. Jesus, exhausted from his preaching to the crowds, falls asleep. As the wind picks up and the rains come, Jesus snores – and the burly fisherman who are learning to be disciples measure their chances of getting to the other side. These men are not novices. To them a storm is just a storm, something to be bested – not a matter of faith or revelation. As seawater begins to break over the gunwales, anxiety spreads until somebody shouts at Jesus: "Wake up! Don't you care if we drown?"

Then (Mark says), Jesus stood up and commanded the storm to cease... and it did!

Then they were even more afraid!

"Who is this?" they said, "that even the seas obey?"

Sonya has lived her answer to that question out in the open, where we can all see and feel the depth of her faith and the freedom it brings. Through Sonya, we have experienced the power of loving one another as Christ loved us – which comes as close to a doctrinal statement as we have here. I know she has been a constant for me – an anchor, a guide and friend, always there for a laugh or a lunchtime conversation at the office. It is all of one piece.

When I imagine the creaky wooden boat filled with frightened disciples on a rough sea, I remember the flotilla that Liz Vail pictured on a banner for Elizabeth O'Connor to take with her on a trip to the Taize Community. In the early days, we thought of the six sister communities of Church of the Saviour as small boats being blown in the same direction by the wind of the Spirit. Sonya had her hand on the tiller of Seekers, setting our course through the waves. She kept the call of Seekers Church as her compass. You can read about the beginnings of Seekers in her prayer book, "[Growing Our Life Together](#)."

In those pages and in her conversation, Sonya goes back to four aspects of being church that distinguished Seekers' call from that of the other little boats. I want to use those four dimensions of call to describe something of her impact over the past 25 years.

First, Sonya names call in the workplace. (Pick up blue strip of cloth)

From the beginning, Seekers charted a different path from the other Church of

the Saviour churches because we did not require everyone to be involved in a common mission to the poor of this city. As a second-generation Church of the Saviour, Seekers drew people who already felt called to their work (as I do). In her [sermon last week](#), Deborah said, "Not all of us are engaged with the poor, but I know I have heard God's call to make art and offer it to others and I have answered, *Hi-na-ni – Here am I. Send me.*"

When Sonya and Fred presented the [call of Seekers](#) to the Church of the Saviour Council, there was some opposition to approving it because of this wider interpretation of call. *Nevertheless, other Council members trusted us, Sonya said, and so it went through.* Then they simply claimed the 9:30 service for the new Seekers Church to give us a home – to nourish the variety of calls they felt would surely develop.

Sonya practiced her own call in the workplace by teaming with Jackie McMakin to offer vocational discernment, first in the *Lay Ministry Lab* and then at *Working From the Heart*, a 9-month program that helped hundreds of people in the Washington DC area to find the spiritual dimension of their work.

Sonya has honored our workplace ministries and heard the urgency that takes us around the globe – often with a bit of Seekers money to invest in helping women and children. She remembers. She asks. Her attention helped us value the hard parts as well as the celebrations.

Next, Sonya names family and personal relationships as a place of call for Seekers. (Red cloth)

Not only does that reflect her experience as a wife and mother, but it speaks of her outgoing nature as well. Though Manning's energy is different from hers, he has honored her call and shared their home with his own call to hospitality.

Weaving a web of relationships has come naturally to Sonya and her sense of fun has lightened many of our dutiful deliberations. Children were always welcome and she looks for the good and the gifts in everyone – inviting, challenging, clarifying with her questions.

Relationships permeate her theology too. Notice her embodied prayer-book images. Sonya's sexual energy threads through her language of God. She lives the incarnation. She loves in a juicy, fulsome way. She does not demure from naming sexuality as the "glue of community," even as she helps us see the dangerous edges and destructive elements. She has shared her body-energy in a positive, life-affirming style that rejoins body and spirit, inviting all of us to do the same.

When Seekers began, Fred and Sonya embodied the whole image of God, male and female, at the altar. The partnering that we take for granted now was radical in 1976 – when the Episcopal Church was divided about ordaining women and the Presbyterians had just taken that step two years earlier.

As a woman, Sonya was an encourager for many who felt marginalized by old power structures in the church. I often found myself weeping at communion, aware for the first time of the hunger I had felt for mutuality and partnership in leading worship. Sonya empowered my call to Faith@Work just by being herself.

Third, Sonya names citizenship as the challenge to reach out beyond Seekers and address issues of justice in our society. (Green cloth)

In many ways, Seekers Church was born out of this dimension of call. Fred and Sonya had both been involved with FLOC – [For Love of Children](#). She writes in "Growing Our Life Together," "*We started with single apartments and*

individual families." Moreover, after 30 years she writes, "We are always creating opportunities to share what works so that others in the city might use some of our methods and fit them to their situation perhaps on a larger scale

Citizenship as the cradle of call puts us squarely in the tradition of Church of the Saviour. Over the years, Sonya has been on FLOC's executive board, the management board, a staff person and volunteer member of Hope and a Home. She has been a link between FLOC and Seekers Church in many different ways – particularly by inviting others to participate. Her interest in social change has helped us claim the institutional dimension of call when we would rather keep it private and personal.

Citizenship and public action is a call for each person, a responsibility each one of us has. She has encouraged those individual passions, making them visible to others in Seekers – supporting our calls to social issues by planting trees, writing to corporations about just labor practices, walking for the homeless and taking the Seekers banner to the gay-lesbian march.

Birthing new mission groups has long been a concern of Sonya's, but she has been willing to let the Spirit move among us, calling us to smaller functional groupings that pool our energies more temporarily. I believe that Sonya's broader definition of call has encouraged our collective efforts and blessed servant ministries that we have not needed to name as our own. As citizens concerned about the structures of our public life, many Seekers have claimed spots of public service that will never be honored by others.

Finally, Sonya identifies "special ministries within the church" as call.
(Gold cloth)

Her own involvement with Celebration Circle is a good example. She loves to dance with scripture, listen for lusty language that will engage our hearts in the whole of worship. When Seekers began, Sonya and Mary Carol wrote new liturgies every Sunday. Then, as Fred opened the pulpit to women in the early 80s, Celebration Circle formed to create fresh liturgies for each lectionary season. As we moved to an open pulpit, Sonya's role as the female liturgist (whenever a man is preaching) has provided continuity for our worship.

The language of Sonya's prayer life has undergirded the inward journey of Seekers for so many years that most of us are hardly conscious of it. Week after week, she and Peter expand our understanding of God with the images they use:

Eternal creator;

Transforming mystery;

Spirit of wisdom;

Graceful soaring spirit...sweeping across the bounds of time and space;

Holy breath of love;

Divine imagination;

Sophia—energizer, comforter, flower of hope;

Always available artist of glory;

Grace-filled holy Other.

Her words pour out of a rich inner life and lead us to the still waters of divine love.

Week after week, she holds the silence while we gather our thoughts and listen for the Spirit's whisper to speak what we have held inside – as confession, praise or intercession. I feel the depth of her trust – and can

give myself to the unfathomable mystery of God's presence with us. I sense the range of Sonya's journey – and know I can take the next step on my own.

Week after week, she stretches the range of our caring to include those we might overlook—the hungry, the homeless and the hopeless. Her involvement with the city has been a beacon for our souls to stretch beyond the family cares that crowd our lives and keep our calls too small.

Week after week, she has been a steady presence in the congregation even when she is not leading prayers, offering a word, a touch, a smile, a question, to bless other ministries in the church with her interest and intent – weaving the fabric of this community on God's loom of life. With her passion, her presence and her prayer life, Sonya has held our call to be church.

Now Sonya is ready to lay down her call as the founding pastor of Seekers. As the month of June ends, she will no longer be a member of our paid staff. Peter and Kate will continue in that capacity and we will not immediately look for others to fill her place because of the changes we anticipate in moving to Carroll Street.

Sonya will not be a constant presence in leading worship as she begins to release her role as female liturgist in Celebration Circle. The mission group will decide how to handle that part of Sonya's call to quicken the worship life of Seekers.

As we come to this point in the service, I go back to the Gospel lesson for today – for courage and reassurance in this storm of change. I feel the blast of wind at our backs and taste the seawater spilling over the edge of the boat, sloshing around my feet and yours. I am tempted to shout at God, "Don't you care if we drown?"

But I know deep down that the storm is not going to swamp the boat – that others have been called to Sonya's vision for shared leadership – that she has completed her work here and that we have plenty of gifted leaders who understand what it means to live out of a disciplined spiritual life.

Therefore, as you begin to take your hand off the tiller of this little boat, I want to say "Thank you for your faithfulness, Sonya, to the call you received so long ago."

Because of you and your courage to embody Christ as you have, we know ourselves to be a fragile earthen vessel and a grace-filled body of Christ, ready for the challenges that lie ahead.

May God bless you and Manning in your new call – and keep us as part of your family. Amen.