

# Marjory Zoet Bankson: The Inward Journey

Seekers Sermon

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Marjory Zoet Bankson

**OT:** [Proverbs 1:20-33](#)

**NT:** [Mark 8:27-38](#)

## The Inward Journey

When I was a teenager, I went to camp every summer until I was 16 and could get a "real job."

At camp, it was ok to be on the "inward journey" – to love morning prayers and starry nights with singing by a campfire. The mysterious presence of God seemed close and real then. It would have been a perfect time to read some of the desert fathers and mothers of the early church, but no one at St James Presbyterian Church talked about the mystics in our tradition.

Another teenage theophany developed in the mortuary where I practiced the pipe organ...because the church was unheated and the local mortuary was warm. "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and "Did God create evil too?" As a teenager, I had a lively sense of Spirit and could have learned to listen for Wisdom at the gate if someone had thought to take my inward journey seriously..

Do you remember the starting point for your conscious spiritual journey?

The time and place when you "woke up" to God?

That's the entry point for you to share the INWARD JOURNEY which sustains Seekers today. Becoming conscious of how each one of us contributes to the spiritual life of this community will help create the HABITS of faithfulness that keep us rooted in God's unfolding purpose.

Last week, David spoke about the core beliefs that we share. This week, I will speak of the CORE PRACTICES – what it takes to "grow our souls" toward maturity and support the radical notion that sets Seekers apart from many other churches, namely that God's Spirit speaks through many mouths instead of one seasoned leader.

## **The first discipline: silence and listening**

Among Christians, the discipline of regularly paying attention to the Spirit's leading in daily life has been carried into modern times by the monastic orders of the Catholic Church and by Quakers. I remember being stunned that most people in this congregation had studied Thomas Merton when we arrived in 1976, as though we could all aspire to the level of discipline and discernment which he had as a Trappist monk who lived in silence and presumably had plenty of time for listening for God. The next thing I noticed was that people regularly went on silent retreat at Dayspring and they came back not only refreshed but somehow loving each other better. It was a signal for me that something more was going on here than just being a creative and caring congregation.

Most Protestant churches leave precious little time for silence in their worship and few make room for ordinary people to tell their "theophany" stories. Instead, we learned to sit still and listen while one person told us what Jesus said and what the Bible meant. We listened to the preacher instead of listening for God. At first, I was uncomfortable with the amount of silence we practice during worship, not because it's

too much but because it's too short for me to find my own words. Finally I just relaxed and let the tide of communal prayer carry me into a deeper place. I learned that I didn't have to speak in order to be fully present and participate in the soul-work of this community.

The Hebrew scripture for this morning speaks of Wisdom "crying in the street," calling out to us from the pages of Proverbs for a deeper kind of knowledge than literal truth. Personified as Sophia, this feminine aspect of God threads through the Old and New Testament now that I have eyes to see her. The wisdom literature of the Bible sustained and nourished the people of God in exile and in bondage, in plenty and in want. "Give heed to my reproof," she says. Sophia speaks of hidden knowledge beyond the simple and obvious. Most of us have not been exposed to the "wisdom writings" of the Bible. As a result, we are not equipped to recognize Jesus as a Wisdom teacher who invites his followers (and us) to experience another kind of reality – a spiritual realm which Jesus called "the Kingdom of God."

The Gospel lesson for today is a good example of Wisdom teaching. First, Jesus asks Peter who others say that he is. Then he asks, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

"You are the Messiah," Peter says. The long-awaited fulfillment of prophecy for the people of God. Wisdom personified. The veil separating Spirit and Matter had been lifted just for an instant and Peter's "theophany" rings through the pages of history. "You are the Christ."

In the early days of this church, Elizabeth O'Connor collected the writings of modern Wisdom teachers in her book, The Search for Silence. Silence and listening for the unseen dimension of reality is the first practice it will take to sustain Seekers into the future.

## **The second practice undergirding life at Seekers is attention to CALL.**

The Gospel lesson is also instructive about the nature of CALL. Peter has a moment of revelation, but immediately his vision is clouded again. He's heard the call, but doesn't know how to live out of that call.

Wisdom speaks her word of reproof through Jesus: "Get behind me Satan," he says, "for you are setting your mind not on divine things but human things." It's a call to awareness and self-correction. It's a **Call to Commitment**, the title of Elizabeth O'Connor's first book about life in this community. That means we trust God to speak in the silence of our listening.

Not only have we learned to listen for God's call in the silence, but we have learned to watch for the footprints of God in each other's lives. Not only is it important to write your spiritual autobiography, but it's important to hear one another. We believe the Bible is not the only record of God's presence in the world, but we trust the Spirit is at work in us today.

We hear that promise in the Hebrew text for today, "I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you." Sounds like a Pentecost text from Acts, doesn't it? Sophia's call is the Spirit's call stirring in our souls, creating a divine discomfort with the way things are. Attention to call is the second practice that it takes to sustain Seekers.

## **The third dimension of inward**

# **journey undergirding our common life is the awareness of gifts in community.**

Our gifts for the community may derive from our skills, but they are not synonymous with skills. In fact, skill may get in the way of the Spirit's connection. You may have seen the quote that says "Every meeting of persons is an exchange of gifts." We carry our skills from place to place, but gifts come from God. It's not that one person gives and the other receives. Instead both are blessed when that mysterious connection happens. We can't make it happen, but we can do much to prepare for it. That's the inward journey at work.

When I am preaching, I pray for Spirit's presence – not only in my preparation but in our hearing, that the whole experience of worship will take us deeper. Much depends on how we come and how we enter worship with our prayers, our singing, and our souls. Gifts emerge in community, in the moment. Over time, our sharing of these gifts builds a community of grace.

Gifts have a shadow side too. Sometimes we assume that what has been a gift in one setting will be a gift in another. We don't know how to wait, to listen for the Spirit's prompting before we speak. Envy or well-intentioned idealization can also block the flow of gifts. In the interchange between Peter and Jesus in the Gospel lesson, well-intentioned care by Peter gets nailed by Jesus. It's an uncomfortable exchange of gifts.

One of the important disciplines of this community is giving our time and energy – an offering of inestimable value. This morning we saw a number of adults and children leave for a hands-on experience of the creation story that will be going on for the next six weeks. We can be sure that many gifts will be shared as they work together. I dream of the day when that

will be the way we all "do the sermon" in different forms.

Another way that we share our gifts is through regular financial giving – whether we're here or not. It's a way of staying conscious of Seekers in the web of getting and spending. Every Sunday, we pass an offering plate around the congregation, inviting us to make a financial gift. This is not an entry fee or payment for services, it's another way to confront Satan's power of fear and isolation which makes us want to stay in control. By giving beyond our comfort level, we claim the power to trust in deeper things. Jesus talked about money more than any other thing except the Realm of God. I think that's because money is the nearest rival to God, the closest substitute for trusting the unseen realm of Spirit, of Sophia.

When Peter and I came to this community, I was a potter and my income was extremely irregular and small. It was a major spiritual discipline to do my books each month and figure out what 3% of my little income was. At the same time, Peter and I were keeping track of our expenses as a step toward regular giving from his government paycheck which we used as family income together. Beginning a pattern of regular giving gave us both a chance to talk about our commitment to Seekers and gradually move toward a 10% tithe of our gross income.

The original Church of the Saviour membership statement speaks of "proportional giving, beginning with a tithe." Seekers makes no mention of the level of giving in our core member's commitment although we expect people to grow in our capacity to give money as a way to wrestle with the demon of control which money represents in our society. Some people need to give more than a tithe to experience the joy of giving. Others may need to give less because of major commitments like college education for their children or care of elderly parents. Others may need to question what they are spending their money on and make some different choices. Right now, I am going through a time with no outside source of income and

the question of my financial giving to Seekers is real and fresh again.

The questions which you see in the bulletin insert today are meant to be questions for your prayerful reflection as we enter the season of recommitment which gives all of us a chance to reflect on our commitment to this community. To read more about the importance of gifts as an underpinning of Seekers, read Elizabeth O'Connor's book, [Eighth Day of Creation](#). And listen for Wisdom's call as you work with these questions about the gifts and giving you want to do through Seekers.

**The final practice which undergirds life at Seekers is SERVICE, the impulse to give ourselves for something larger and more lasting than ourselves.**

Conventionally, people serve the next generation by having children and living sacrificially so that our children will have opportunities we may not have had ourselves. But Jesus calls us to do more than that. It's clear that some of his disciples had family responsibilities...and he called them to move beyond family in their commitment to seeking God. It's also clear that he was critical of people who dedicated their wealth to God as a way of denying their family responsibilities. Like any good Wisdom teacher, Jesus did not give simple rules for every occasion.

Instead Jesus gave his disciples the example of his own life and he cautioned them to wait TOGETHER for the empowering Spirit before they embarked on the particular missions each would undertake. We too must deepen the inward journey to sustain the outward journey of mission and ministry in a

hurting world, otherwise our service will smack of duty or guilt and we will soon resent the receivers of our good intentions. Mother Theresa gave us a living example of someone who had done her inner work to such a deep level that she could experience the presence of Christ as gift in her work.

The Seekers Church has embarked on a radical journey of trusting God's Spirit to speak from many lives. We come out of the tradition of singular leadership and committed followership at Church of the Saviour, but we have chosen a more difficult path (I believe) because we dare to take the Pentecost story seriously. We dare to believe that Spirit speaks through all of us but that doesn't mean everything anybody says is equally wise. Discernment is necessary. Confession and forgiveness essential. The inward journey is a lifelong path for individuals and for the community as a whole. We will not long sustain our life together unless we take Wisdom's call as an invitation to deeper things.

In our daily and weekly practice, we must learn to listen first for Wisdom instead of brilliance, power or seniority. We must feel God's Spirit move in our own hearts. We must discover the gifts we are in community by giving ourselves. And we must find a place of service where we can be part of God's realm of justice and mercy for all. That's what spiritual disciplines are for. That's why the inward journey is essential to sustain our life together. AMEN.