

Marjory Zoet Bankson: Wanted: a Few Good Men

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A Father's Day Sermon for Seekers Church

by Marjory Zoet Bankson

Wanted: a Few Good Men

Seasonal Theme: [Fierce Love](#)

Scriptures

- **Gen 18:1-15**...Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore, Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?"
- **Matt 9:35-10:8**...As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.'

Let me begin by praising Fathers everywhere-good, bad and indifferent-because without them, we would not be here. Even if we are not fathers, we have all had one. It is built into the basic structure of the universe-that polarity of male and female.

Moreover, when I read the scriptures assigned for this Sunday, I had to smile at the selections. In the Hebrew Testament, we have Sarah laughing at God because she had just gotten the

word from three visiting angels that she would bear a child when, after all, "*it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women*" and Abraham was "*advanced in age.*" She seems to be chuckling over the impossibility of the whole thing.

Then, the New Testament lesson gives us a stark description of the Father's role in another kind of birth-that of shepherding the kingdom of heaven, here and now. At first I was a little put off by the listing of 12 disciples by name, and the clear mandate from Jesus about going out to "*proclaim the good news...cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.*" Women only appear indirectly in this passage, as householders who might welcome the disciples and give them a place to stay...or not. Like the angels in the first reading, women keep the hearth and men leave home to tend the sheep. Nevertheless, in both readings, we have a picture of partnership.

It no longer matters so much whether the shepherds are male or female, but the role is an important one as one part of the creative dynamic built into the natural order of things, but today I want to focus on the role of "fathering" as shepherding in the sense that Jesus presents in our Gospel lesson.

This week Doug Wy-Jo and Peter have been working hard on a grant proposal for Faith@Work. They will be asking Seekers to participate as one of the cohort churches to share what we know about functioning through "ministry teams" if they get the grant, but what caught my eye as I read it was a quote from Henri Nouwen which Doug uses as an introduction:

...when Jesus speaks about shepherding, he does not want us to think about a brave, lonely shepherd who takes care of a large flock of obedient sheep. In many ways, he makes it clear that ministry is a communal and mutual experience.

That's really what the New Testament reading speaks about – if the disciples are welcomed into a home, then they are to stay there as a center for ministry, with the assumption that when they moved on, that household would be the core of a worshipping congregation. That home would be an earthly sign of God's realm, a teaching and healing center in the midst of a city.

When I listen to Peter and Keith talking about the endless details that come up with our contractor for our new home at Carroll Street, I hear it through the filter of our scripture for today. They are shepherding that part of our life together, working with Amelia and her team on decorating; working with Muriel and her team on transition. Nobody is trying to do it alone.

Nouwen writes *I was educated in a seminary that made me believe that ministry was essentially an individual affair. I had to be well trained and well formed, and after six years of training and formation, I was considered well equipped to preach, administer the sacraments, counsel and run a parish. I was made to feel like a man sent on a long, long hike with a huge backpack containing all the things necessary to help the people I would meet on the road.*

It would be easy to see that picture in our New Testament

lesson for today-except for the lengthy detail about finding a home in which to plant the seeds of new birth. That is an image of shared ministry, not the heavily burdened hiker with a remedy for every ill.

Recently, the men of Seekers gathered on retreat to bless Doug as a new father as well as to strengthen their ties with each other. Out of my experience with women's retreat, I know how important that can be. None of us really got enough good fathering. That is just the reality of our human limitations. However, when we come together in a setting where we can share both our vulnerability and our strengths, a *spiritual synergy* occurs. There is enough good fathering present for everybody to get what he or she needs. Like manna, there is enough for each day.

That is what Jesus saw, when he sent his disciples out to preach the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. Indeed, it is here, now.

Can we see any evidence of the Spirit at work out of this household of faith? I believe that we can. Our call as a body of Christ says that we can experience the reality of God's spirit in the daily structures of our lives. When I think of Jesus' mandate to *cure the sick*, I think of Billy Amoss in his role as shepherd at the Rostropovich Foundation, bringing vaccines to the children of St Petersburg in Russia. When I think of *cleansing the lepers*, I think of Pat's advocacy role for the UCC on Capitol Hill as well as his work on behalf of transgendered folk in this country. When I think of *casting out demons*, Kevin Ogle's work as a counselor comes to mind.

You will notice that I left out *raising the dead* because if we take that literally, it is a power that set Jesus apart from other healers of his day. Nevertheless, we all know people who are dead in spirit-or who are consigned to death by our society. Roy Barber and his catalytic work with street kids in South Africa comes to mind, but closer to home I think we can see that element in Keith's mediation work, Peter's work with Communities-in-Schools and David's efforts in the field of preventing child abuse among military families.

I have barely scratched the surface in naming the "good shepherds" that go out from this household into the world of snarling wolves and stealthy enemies about which Jesus warned us. Always a realist, Jesus nevertheless sent them out without defense beyond their faith. When I look around at this tiny congregation, I see a room full of "good fathers" who are reaching beyond their own children – to protect, guide, and serve the lost, the least and the lonely in our society... and I give thanks.

Another image from the Gospel lesson is the admonition to "shake off the dust" where you are not welcomed. Nothing in this text says do battle with your enemies. The picture is one of "living lightly"-take no bag or cloak or extra sandals. Stay where you are welcomed and leave if you are not. Know that you will be living in the face of danger, of prison or flogging or worse, but do not spend your time worrying about that. It is an interesting image of what "kingdom living" is all about.

This past Wednesday, a few of us met with another good shepherd from this congregation. Ron Arms spent the evening with the DC contingent of a [Faith@Work](#) mission trip to

Guatemala this summer, in July. Margreta, Peter and I will be going and the Wysockey-Johnsons would have joined us but their pregnancy intervened. Doug will be staying home to be with Kathryn and their first child when it is born instead of flying to Central America with us.

Ron goes regularly to Guatemala in his position with the Inter-American Foundation and he came with books, information and stories to help us imagine what we might encounter. We will be going to help build a school in a village about an hour outside of Antigua, but from my experience with the Seekers trip to El Salvador, I know that is only the surface reason we are going. We will also find evidence of God's spirit at work in the people there.

Ron did not minimize the dangers. Contaminated water, starvation and violence stalk the countryside there and yet he travels out to grassroots development projects regularly. He has made his peace with living into the unknown...and I felt his "good fathering" for us as we prepare for this trip. The reason I need to leave the supposed safety of my suburban life is to be an alien and a stranger among others. I need to be humbled by their hospitality, and I need to feel their hostility too. I am not kidding myself that we will be of much benefit for the Mayas in that village beyond being human beings together. I believe it will be enough.

Closer to home, I had a similar experience a couple of weeks ago, when I led a retreat for the staff and volunteers at Christ House. It was a gorgeous cool sunny day out at Wellspring and I had brought my potter's wheel to share the image of remaking a clay pot when the first one failed. I gave them clay at the beginning, which, by the end of my

presentation, had become hard and crumbly. At the end, I asked them to take a fresh piece of soft clay from my just-completed pot and go out into the field with both pieces to listen for what God was saying to them.

When we came back in, we took awhile to hear what people had to say about this time of listening. One man said *the soft clay is like me now. I grew up thinking I just had one chance and by the time I was 8 years old, I had blown it. I lived on the streets and fought all the time. But, when I came to Christ House, I was just overcome by love. Everybody just loved me until I could believe in forgiveness. Now I am a counselor at Kairos, helping other guys heal from addictions. God said to me that I've got to "stay soft."*

Later, his softness touched me to tears. I had told them that I learned how to work with clay when Peter was sent to Vietnam. At lunch, this same man asked me quietly "Did your husband come back ok from Vietnam?"

When I said, "Yes, he had," my tablemate simply said, "Well, I didn't. But I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that, so in a funny way, I'm grateful." We continued breaking bread together over the most ordinary-and numinous-table conversation.

Jesus said, "*As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'*" *Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.*" I saw it happening with my own eyes.

Amen.