

Muriel Lipp: All Crew; No Passengers

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Muriel Lipp

All Crew; No Passengers

What wonderful Scriptures we have this week: We have the anointing of David, the 23rd Psalm, and Jesus healing the blind man. Uplifting verses, with little hint of the darkness and introspection that we expect of Lent. Moreover, all three of these have something to do with substances rubbed somewhere on the head – and of course anointing is much more than substances on the head. Young David, fresh from the fields, stands before his father, his older brothers and Samuel, while Samuel pours a horn of oil over his head. He is now God's anointed one, eventually to be king of Israel.

Consider the 23rd Psalm. If this same David wrote it – as most authorities say it was – how wise he was to know that God was the anointer, and Samuel the instrument. "You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over." Most certainly, when he wrote this he must have remembered his own anointing.

The Scriptures are full of anointings. In the New Testament, there is John the Baptist who anoints Jesus by immersing him in water, and we still use water as God's presence in baptism. There is also the woman who anoints Jesus with perfume, and Jesus sees this as her preparing him for his death. I like to think of our drinking grape juice in Communion as a kind of inner anointing, and on Maundy Thursday we wash one another's feet in memory of Jesus washing the disciples' feet.

In the New Testament Scripture for this week, we have something similar to an anointing. Jesus mixes his own spit with clay and puts this mixture on the blind man's eyes, telling him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. Think of the faith of this blind man! He probably walked with a cane, stumbled to the pool, did exactly what Jesus told him to do.

Then his sight was restored. The symbol of light runs throughout this story: sight is light, Jesus is the light of the world and the story presents the paradox of the Pharisees with sight being the blind ones.

How can we apply this story to ourselves, the Seekers Church? Are we the blind needing healing? Alternatively, going back to the David story, are we the newly anointed ready to start on a new mission in a new place, Carroll Street? In either case, we need the light that Jesus offers us, along with the light that our own history can throw on our path—as well as new light, new vision. I think we are both the blind needing healing and the newly anointed about to cross over into our New Land.

What are some of the good things in our Church of the Saviour history that we want to keep – light that we will need for our journey? We describe ourselves as being in the C. of the S. tradition. What do we mean by that? When I first came to the church as a young woman in 1954, total commitment was what intrigued me. In addition, I liked the people. I had been a church shopper before that and had worked for the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. on its magazine *Presbyterian Life*. I was very critical of churches I had tried. I felt they did not ask enough of their people. It did not matter if you came on Sundays or not. However, here was one that asked you, almost, to give your life – daily prayer, study, tithing, and of course it was understood you would be there every Sunday. Here was a preacher who said, "On this ship it is all crew, no passengers." Of course, there have always been passengers. Well, I was intrigued, ready to jump in. In spite of my eagerness, I had to wait almost two years while I got the five

courses I needed in the School of Christian Living, went through sponsorship, memorized the commitment statement, and wrote and read my spiritual autobiography. Though I complained about the time it was taking, I began to appreciate the school. It is one of those good traditions, offering education so that we will grow. Too many Christians do not know or care what they believe in. It is good to kick around the creeds you mouth before saying you believe them. This continues to stand out in our sister churches—most notably Wellspring and the Servant Leadership School, where education is their primary mission. In my opinion, our own Seekers school is topnotch.

Another C. of the S. tradition is keeping things small. However, this is a Catch-22, because we need a certain number of children of all ages to have a viable Sunday school. Can you believe that in 1955 we had eighty-four children in the Church of the Saviour Sunday school – and two services? This is the only time I know of that we had a paid coordinator. I quote from a 1955 newsletter: “Many persons comment that this building must have been designed for us by God, because it seems to fill the space needs that are constant with us. The many little rooms on the second and third floors and in the basement are just what we need in order to have many Sunday school classes with few children in each.” The reason we grew so large so fast in the ‘50s and ‘60s was that there was so much written about the church— articles in magazines and newspapers, and finally Elizabeth O’Connor’s books. Hungry Christians came from all over the U. S., some of them ministers who left their parishes.

The problem with success is that you often lose the very kernel that made you a success—and with the Church of the Saviour, the loss was smallness. Mission groups were proliferating; people were getting lost just as they often get lost in large conventional churches. Therefore, when we split into six churches, after much deliberation and prayer, I joined Seekers—partly because I had four children – Seekers

was the most interested in children – and partly because I was in a FLOC group and Fred Taylor of FLOC was one of our leaders. The transition was hard for our children. Many of their friends were now in other C. of the S. churches. This was particularly hard on our youngest child, who had no friends her own age in Sunday school; she often ended up babysitting on Sundays. It took us a while to make up for the deficit in children of all ages. We Seekers want to keep conscious this balance between smallness and our children's needs.

I would like to make another comment about smallness. Though I believe in it deeply because it is the core of intimacy, we always want to welcome those who want to come in. If people see light in us, we want them. However, I see problems with size in our stewards. A group of 23 is hard to manage business-wise, and if we should grow to 30 or 40, which would be good news, how would we handle such a group trying to conduct business? We are experimenting with a way to deepen our sharing in stewards. Yet will we sometime have to break down to a smaller group—perhaps a council that is representative of mission groups, both stewards and members?

I like mission groups, where people of similar calls can meet regularly to be accountable for their missions. However, it is not easy to start a new mission group, and I imagine there are some of you in this room feeling called to certain ministries and not knowing how to follow through on such calls. Sometimes we get so cozy in our groups we do not hear the stirrings of new calls, and when others are called to our groups we are too large to admit them. In Seekers, we have encouraged groups of people with individual missions. Two groups, the Artists and the Ministry Support Group, are such groups. Although the original church did have groups of artists, missions to ones daily work did not exist. Most of the C. of the S. mission groups had, and have, something to do with education, helping the poor or sick—with Gordon's word

coming from the pulpit regularly that this is where Jesus was and wants us to be. When we first split from one into six churches, we had trouble with the Ecumenical Council on this. The new churches were expected to commit to "corporate mission as understood historically." On this point, we separated from the parent and sister churches. There were other points of contention. Three of the five new churches—Potter's House, Jubilee and Eighth Day—had their churches and missions in Adam's Morgan. These people saw one another daily. We were out of the loop. Some of us felt we were not welcomed into that loop. Others said we Seekers were too independent—too much to ourselves. My own feeling is there was enough sin to go around.

The independence we have always felt—our light—helped us to be the first of the six churches to challenge the Christian church's use of archaic language. Thanks to Sonya Dyer, Celebration Circle and a group of feminists, we adopted inclusive language, getting rid of "his," "men," and "him" as generics even before we found hymnals to do the job for us. We have always been open to people of any sexual orientation.

I like the idea of renewing our commitment once a year. Are these words true for me? If not, why am I saying them? We do not want to be mouthing words that have no meaning. Creeds are important—but only as important as the life we put into them.

I like tithing our money and being generous and responsible in what we give away. I especially like our being willing to give of our own money for the new building, so we can continue our regular giving.

My favorite gift from the Church of the Saviour is its emphasis on prayer and retreat. I would like to have Carol Wilkenson of the Dayspring retreat center occupy this pulpit sometime. She has so much wisdom to share. When I first came to the C. of the S., there was a great emphasis on reading and learning from the mystics. Elizabeth O'Connor was a leader in

this. She introduced us to the Evelyn Underhill books, to Meister Eckhardt, and Simone Weil—and of course, Thomas Merton, whose books we have studied in Seekers. The Christian anthropologist Teilhard de Chardin was also very popular. These gleanings formed the impetus for our retreat movement. The mystics taught us that if you could go deeply enough inward, the outward journey would spring forth as a result—not the other way around. I hear stirrings within Seekers that as we look forward to Carroll Street some of us are ready to go deeper. Maybe we will have our own retreat center there.

I recently read a biography of Simone Weil, a brilliant young saint who died around the time of World War II. She was of a well-to-do Jewish family, and when she began to have mystical experiences of a Christian nature, she gave her life to living and working with the poor. Today we would call her anorexic because she rarely ate, and her body was so wasted away that she died in her thirties of TB and starvation. Her biographer said she was so taken by the idea of Christ giving his life for others that she herself desired this. Nevertheless, her spirit was alive and well, in spite of constant migraines, that she left many writings in several languages telling of her love for poor farm and factory workers. In her book *Gravity and Grace*, she says the world is brought down by gravity and raised only by grace. She prayed the Lord's Prayer within her constantly, and said "Christ came to live with me." Why do I mention Simone Weil? Do I want us to be like her, stop eating, and die for Christ? I do not hear that as our call. Nevertheless, it does help me to know what some people are willing to do and be for their faith. It puts meat on the words, and in some strange way, gives life to my own faith.

Many of us are involved individually in some way with the poor, but since the demise of Hope and a Home, we have no mission group whose call is to the poor or the sick. I am hoping that with our move to Carroll Street some groups will emerge. I would like to see us befriend other churches in our

new neighborhood, offer them our friendship and be open to occasional pulpit exchanges. However, mission should come after the call, not before it, and before call comes the Presence within. We have a silent retreat coming up April 19. This would be a good time to sit in the silence and listen to the still, small voice.

We Seekers – descendants of the Church of the Saviour, and part of a long line from those first followers of Jesus, through Paul and the growth of churches, through the early heresies and martyrdoms, the proliferation of creeds, the growth of hierarchies – where are we being led? This is a historic time for us. We know our lives will change markedly after we move. Some of us will not like this New New Land and will choose to leave, just as people left the first New Land after the split. Others will embrace it fully, and new missions will be born. Some of us will die there, and new babies will be born there (already two are on the way that I know of). Our young teens will grow up and leave us. New people will join us. Where is the light leading us as we embrace both our need for healing and our anointing?

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