

Pat Conover: Belonging

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Belonging

I think Mark's story of the feeding of the 5000 is a terrific Seeker's story. Mark chooses not to tell it as a miracle story. He doesn't say that Jesus magically increased the loaves. Mark doesn't share anything of the content of Jesus' teaching that day. Mark tells the story as an example of how Jesus taught his disciples something important.

The disciples were being thoughtful and concerned, they were shepherds worrying about feeding their flock. They bring the "how shall we feed them" question to Jesus, and Jesus says, "Do it yourselves." But they didn't do it. Instead they asked Jesus about going to buy bread. Jesus shows them what to do. They set an example by giving away their own food and loaves and behold there was enough sharing to go around. It's not totally surprising given the story line. The people walking around the lake to meet Jesus knew they were going a fair distance so they took stuff with them. The self-giving was a catalyst.

The disciples learned something that day, but everyone who shared in that moment belonged to the throng of Jesus that day. I notice in the story that the people were gathered in groups of 50. Maybe we can image Seekers as some folks who came out to hear Jesus and are learning how to share.

Seekers claims itself as a do-it-yourself church. We have plenty to learn, including learning about risky giving, but we all belong when we share with each other.

I love the Ephesians story. It deals with two things that are true at the same time but don't seem to fit together too well. Are you in favor of unity? Are you in favor of diversity? What if my diversity doesn't fit within your sense of unity? What if expanding your sense of unity to include my diversity makes other people uncomfortable?

Jesus was a Jew. His teaching makes sense relative to the Jewish teaching of the day. His closest followers were Jews. How could the precious truth Jesus taught and lived be preserved and transmitted without Judaism. The quarrels with the Pharisees were quarrels within the family about what the Torah really meant. And everybody knew that males had to be circumcised to be Jews. But Paul made room for the uncircumcised and, in the process, had to make room for some of our most precious theology, that we are saved by grace through faith.

If formula language turns you off, try it this way. You come to Seekers, you want to share in the love that is flowing, then you have to enter in and start giving and taking.

We have a lot of disciplines that operationalize the standards of our common life. But Elizabeth O'Connor summed it up pretty well in her metaphor about breathing in and out. The breathing in is spiritual growth, the breathing out is ministry. If you are not "con-spiring" with us, breathing with us, then you are moving away from us and it will be noticed.

Inner growth can be pretty tough. It has caused me, for example, to take my transgender issues seriously. That leads to vulnerability and the real possibilities of rejection. So what are your inner growth issues? Are you taking them seriously? Are you coasting?

Ministry is demanding. I'm not talking about a little volunteering once in awhile when there isn't something more interesting to do. I'm talking about taking your callings

seriously and giving your life to them. That can jerk your life around. It can make you affirm your continuity with Seekers by moving away to another life. It can make you poor. Are you giving your life energy to ministry?

The radical commitments to live a Christian life don't make much sense to the larger society around us. We have to learn about getting along without fitting in. We have to learn about being uncomfortable in situations where people think we fit in and we really don't.

The bottom line is that if we really take on the costs of discipleship, if we risk the cross, oh my goodness, how we need each other. We need each other even when we don't much like each other. We can carry our truths alone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught us about that. But, how sweet it is when what you are doing makes sense to someone else because they have taken similar risks, suffered similar pains, noticed with you the things that really matter. While we can choose to be alone, the choice to be together isn't exactly voluntary. It is not so much a matter of calling up heroic commitment as it is recognizing the ways we need each other, and a willingness to respond when the need comes around to you.

You want to belong to Seekers, then come on in. But if you are messing around, if you are only sampling, if you are testing the waters, if you want to know how it will work out before you take the next step, well then you don't quite belong. Seekers has some space at the margins. Some folks have stayed on the margins for years. But you get in by coming in, by growing, by ministering.

Now it seems to me that some folks want to cut a deal with Seekers. "If Seekers will just adjust to me in some way, then I'll come in." Well, I profoundly believe that this is not how it works.

I love Seekers a lot, but there are some things about Seekers

that I really don't like, including some things that I think are basic spiritual mistakes. I have fought with Seekers on the standard of tithing for example. I've made the case that it is not biblical and is not fair. I keep winning the arguments on this but the standard has never changed. I tithe. I'll try again. Maybe in another eleven years we will do better. But life always happens in the meantime.

I realize some folks are unhappy because we have a distinction between participation and core membership. I've argued on this one too. Seekers has changed by recognizing commitments in our annual ceremonies that are not the full commitments of core membership. Undoubtedly we can do better.

The real challenge is that the distinction of core membership holds up the difference between belonging as an individual and taking responsibility for the ministry and growth of the whole.

Belonging is something you do as an individual. If you come in and start growing and ministering, then you're in. Welcome.

But Seekers is not just the church in general. We are a particular church and we think some particular things are important, things named in the disciplines and in our statement of calling as a church. We can change these things. I want us to change some of these things. But we do start from where WE are and not just from where you or I are.

If we are going to preserve the truth of who we are, and change it from time-to-time as we see fit, then we really have only two choices. We can have high entry standards with very little room at the margins. Some groups in the Church of the Savior tradition have taken this path. Or, we can let people in more easily, sustain a lot more room at the boundaries, and keep a distinct core membership that has the responsibility for giving basic guidance to the community. We don't have the options some other churches have who think doctrinal

affirmations are important or use the clergy to provide some screening or disciplines.

Core membership isn't based on being smarter, or more committed, or more personally spiritual, it is about being willing to be held accountable for all the disciplines and about being willing to take on the work of the whole.

Some people don't want to tithe to Seekers, for example, because they are giving their money to causes and ministries they personally care about. That's fine, but it isn't investment in Seekers. It isn't saying with your money that our common ministries are very important to you.

Ron's paper about belonging, as I understand it, gives priority to learning. Learning is one important part of the inner journey, of breathing in. Seekers currently holds that other things are also important. Ron belongs to Seekers. His concerns are taken seriously even though he isn't a core member. Everyone can contribute to the important conversations. I've learned from Ron and hope to learn a lot more. Perhaps you agree with Ron and me that some of the standards for membership are inappropriate or are unfairly defined. The challenge of entering core membership is the recognition that to fairly be part of the decision making process we have to start from where the community is starting, make our individual contributions, and live with the results.

Some Church of the Savior communities have required people to be moving toward core membership when one leaves the status of visitor and becomes a participant. Seekers has not defended this standard. We recognize that there are several faithful ways to belong within Seekers while staying outside core membership.

- You can be a **learner**.
- You can have a **ministry** that wont let you give the time and resources required to take on core membership.

- You can be a **doubter** and take responsibility for working through one or another problems.
- You can be **overwhelmed** and just trying to hang on as you cope with a life that is too much for you.
- You can be **mad or hurt** by Seekers imperfections, challenged by the demands of real forgiveness and humility and not ready to pretend that everything is okay.

But if the following things are true for you it might be time for you to challenge yourself more deeply and either change or move on.

- I like to taste the creativity and energy at Seekers but I'm not really willing to commit to deepening my spiritual life and taking up my ministry.
- I like the fellowship at Seekers, but I'm not willing to be vulnerable at the points that could really make a difference for me.
- I want to be a good person, but I just can't see any relevance to working my life out within a Christian path.
- I want to have an interesting place to worship, a place that doesn't kick up all my red flags from my personal background, but really I just want to do my own thing.
- I'm really only a friend of Seekers. I can see that you are doing good things, but it's not my thing.

To be simple about it, if you want to belong to Seekers, you've got to take Seekers seriously, not Seekers like you wish it would be, but Seekers as it is. There isn't any magic in Seekers. We are just gathering on the hill side and learning how to share. We have set up some guide lines that we have found to be helpful and you can work with each one as you find you are ready.

There are other good Christian churches around. A lot of folk have come to Seekers and then moved on. This used to bother

me. Now I feel that if we could share only one paragraph or one chapter of the Christian conversation together I give thanks for that much meeting. I've gained strength from other places that came with me to Seekers. I trust that Seekers has contributed to the life of the larger church in far away places we could never keep track of.

Seekers has taken some radical steps.

- We have said we wanted **trained leadership**, but not clergy as a separate status. So we better start learning
- We have said that we want a radically deepened and engaging **spiritual life**, so we better each clarify our spiritual agendas and take them on.
- We have said we could find our **ministries** by developing our gifts and callings. It is time for some more of that risky exploration.