

# Pat Conover: Looking Ahead with Seekers

Sermon for Seekers Church

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I was moved by our communion service last Sunday for a variety of reasons.

I liked the [new service](#), its symbolism, its theology, and its cadence. I realize some of you liked it less. What is important to me for today is that we did it. Celebration Circle invested integrity, creativity, skill and caring. Our worship leaders rethought the purpose and meaning of communion as it relates to this community in this season of our lives. They worked with both ancient and recent church history and had the benefit of the most recent theological and ecclesiological studies relating to communion. They did all this without having anyone in the role and status of clergy and with the understanding that all the mission group members are ministers exercising their ministry and calling.

In the comments at the end of the service we talked about how we felt about the service and about what it evoked in us. The fact that we collectively took it for granted that we had the right and capacity to reframe our communion service shows how deeply we have centered ourselves in the Free Church tradition of Christianity. What is thrilling to me is not that we celebrated a Free Church style communion service. A lot of churches do that. It isn't even that we did it without the guidance of a clergy person. That's been done before as well. What thrills me is that we did it with a thoughtful shared

process that engaged the history and spectrum of Christian thought. That doesn't happen so often. For this sermon, what was important to me is that it was another bright mark about the way Seekers is preparing itself to make gifts to Christianity and the world as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

That's what this sermon is about, raising the question of what we have to give into transformative Christian dialogue that reaches beyond the boundaries of our individual lives and this single congregation. It is the exciting potential of Seekers in this area that so quickly drew me into Seekers 13 years ago and has kept me bonded so tightly ever since.

My [last sermon](#) was a pretty enthusiastic sermon. Someone even said I yelled. It was a sermon about radical thankfulness and I pointed out some things Seekers can be thankful about. I get so excited not just because Seekers is wealthy and vital, but because it is engaged. I'm not going to repeat my several kinds of thankfulness today. Instead, I'm going to look at the other side of this coin. I'm thinking of the parable of the talents. "Of those to whom much has been given, much is expected." To put the main point of the sermon bluntly, "We have been given an awful lot of gifts but we hold them only as stewards. What are we going to do with them?"

When I started working with the lectionary for today I found an abundance of riches and at least five sermons were saying to me, "Preach me. Preach me." It was hard to let them go so I just want to note some of them in passing.

[Psalm 115](#) begins with repeating a common Jewish theme of a transcendent God versus idol worship. It includes a clear warning that we may become blind and voiceless like our idols. I want to preach a sermon on how our consumerism and concerns for financial security can shut our eyes and take away our voices. This is serious business, but it will have to wait for another day.

Verse 17 of Psalm 115 repeats the common Jewish theme of no heaven. Only the living can praise God. Since I think the metaphor of heaven can be so destructive to justice and the inner journey I am sore tempted to follow this line into a sermon. It too will have to wait.

The [13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans](#) was especially hard for me to pass up. It is a crucial passage for those who are concerned about public policy and justice advocacy. It contains an unqualified affirmation of secular authority as divinely established. We are told that secular authorities are working for our good and that only criminals need to fear them. This is the kind of passage with which Presbyterians love to beat up on Lutherans and I was baptized a Presbyterian. I'd love to share with you how this perspective on government relates to my full-time job of public policy advocacy for the United Church of Christ, but this too must await another occasion.

It is the gospel message that most linked to my central concern, to share something of my vision and caring for the future of Seekers.

[Matthew 18:15-22](#) is Luke's embellishment of part of the rule of order for an early segment of the Christian community. Luke offers a simpler version of the underlying Q text. Matthew begins with guidance for conflict resolution within the community, guidance that is similar to the rules that guided the Essene Community that preserved the famous Dead Sea scrolls.

We are told first to try to resolve our conflicts in face-to-face private conversations. I'm pretty sensitive to this guidance because I've had a few indirect signals that some of you are not happy with the transgender dimension of my personal, social and spiritual journey. But people have not invited me into conversation on this subject. I might not like some of those conversations but I think the community is injured, and not just me, when such concerns are only part of

background conversations. Thankfully, I'm aware of lots of challenging one-on-one conversation in Seekers where real disagreements and real feelings have been aired and I consider it to be a mark of spiritual presence that we have been able to sustain some difficult conversations over several years.

Matthew's second guidance echoes the Book of Deuteronomy. It suggests that, if there is no satisfactory resolution from a face-to-face conversation, the second step should be a small group process that includes several witnesses or counselors. I think of how we do some of this kind of work in mission groups and occasionally in specially called clearance meetings.

The third conflict resolution step is to take the concern to the whole congregation. In Seekers this would mean taking it to Core Members Meeting. I think of the time when we were working through our ending with Fred Taylor as one such moment in our congregational life.

If the congregation cannot resolve the problem then Matthew suggests a terrible sanction for non-conformity, the sanction of shunning. The sanction is that the unrepentant should be treated as pagans or tax collectors. Shunning has meant exile and even death to many Christians down the centuries. In the Roman Catholic tradition it meant excommunication. But Matthew then modifies the pain of the sanction with a verse about forgiving not merely 7 times but 77 times. An additional modification, which we often practice in Seekers, is that we need to grip our sense of what is true with humility.

We can see that the shunning punishment does not reflect the words of Jesus in two easy ways. First of all it represents the structure of a well-formed community, which never existed during the lifetime of Jesus. Secondly, it is wholly out-of-keeping with the concern that Jesus expresses for tax collectors and sinners on other occasions, including three strong examples from earlier chapters in Matthew. But the passage as a whole is still valuable to us because it shows

the early church struggling with how to maintain its boundaries while sustaining transformative conversations among its members who, obviously, had their disagreements.

Seekers has closed its face to some who came to dwell with us. But we tend not to draw hard exclusionary lines. There are said and unsaid "no's" in Seekers, but we do not make our no our last word. Conversations can be restarted or take new turns. In the end we primarily count on the self-selection of those who find that Seekers is not the right community for them. Fortunately, Seekers knows that there are other Christian churches that can offer different, and positive, settings for working out one's faith journey.

While this section on conflict resolution has much to teach us, it seems most important to me as prologue for verses 19 and 20, verses about authority within the church. Verse 19 repeats a Jewish tradition that if two people agree on a request to God it will be granted. Maybe this is a pretty safe standard for a Jewish community where disagreement was common, as in "two Jews, three opinions." It might be a pretty safe standard for Seekers for the same reasons. But it is theologically presumptuous past all bearing to believe that mere agreement among people can bind God's action, unless you take the escape hatch and argue that all prayer is answered, but not always as expected.

Verse 20 is the famous passage, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name I will be among them." This theme is fundamental to Free Church ecclesiology. This was a common saying in the rabbinic community, so it would not have been distinctive for Jesus to say it. On the other hand, I suppose Jesus said a lot of non-distinctive things and it would have been in keeping with other parts of his message to say this sort of thing. Whether rabbinic or Essene or Christian or all three, it is distinctly not the voice of the Temple. It is the voice of Galilee and Samaria and John the Baptist. It is a voice that finds sacredness in the everyday and the present,

and not far away in some special place, a place set apart by architecture and priestly classes and so many rules. Those priestly rules remind me of Moses who didn't want the common people going up the mountain to find out what was really going on.

This famous passage closely follows verse 18 in which all who heard the message are given the authority to forbid things on earth with the expectation that they will also be forbidden in heaven. This verse is key to Christian ecclesiology in part because the monolithic power structure of the Roman Catholic Church is based in the claim of an unbroken line of authority passed down from Peter through the Popes as found in the 16th chapter. Here, the authority is given not to an individual but to the community. I'm wondering again if we are seeing the work of editors, here or earlier.

Edited or not, community based authority was not distinctive to Christianity. It was common for the congregations created by the Pharisees. Echoes are present in Jewish practice to this day. In treasuring this verse we need to remember that it is precious not only to the Free Church tradition but also serves as a significant stimulus for the development of political democracy.

Edited or not, distinctive or not, it matters a lot. If we believe in the priesthood of all believers, if we believe that we do not need clergy to hold a special intermediary position between everyday people and God, we have to trust each other to share in the authority of the church.

Which brings me to the beginning of the sermon.

Seekers created a new order for our sharing of communion and we got to try it out last Sunday. Many of us liked it but there may have been some for whom it was not good news. There is a loss of old tradition and practice and the discomfort of adjusting to what is new. Some may miss their memories of

taking communion in the context of the theology of atonement. That is how I learned about communion in the Presbyterian tradition. The body and blood of Jesus were presented as his sacrifice, which magically was supposed to have taken away the penalty for my sins so that I could continue in my salvation and go to heaven. Control of communion in Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran and other traditions was often felt as a great power to those who believed their only path to heaven was through this ritual practice controlled by the clergy.

When I was a Presbyterian we were warned against the Free Church tradition because it was subject to abuse and the excesses of enthusiasm. Clergy were needed to guard the tradition against error. As an ordained United Church of Christ minister, one of my few distinctive powers is the right to administer communion. But who wants administered communion anyway. It's sort of like administered poetry or administered lovemaking. But Presbyterian and others are right about the need to respect good scholarship as an important ingredient for truth-based and truth-seeking conversation. We Seekers also respect well-trained ministry and so we are in training. Think for a moment about how many theologically prepared people we have in this congregation.

It takes more than training to know and hold the truth. We are talking about living truth, about truth that isn't true if it is only believed intellectually, of truth that demands personal engagement and investment. As a community, such lived truth requires us to overcome our fears that truth may prove to be disruptive. As a community, we need to welcome the disruptions which truth brings because we trust that living into uncomfortable truths will lead us closer to God, and, in the end, closer to each other. Scholarship and leadership matter a lot, but, whatever our scholars and leaders tell us, we each have to share in the confirmation of truth that comes with living out the truth. Our emphasis on the inner life and

accountability to a Spirit Guide gives us a chance for such transformative engagement of the truth.

I'm tempted at this point to talk about sacramental theology. Deborah had enough to cover [last week](#) without giving an introduction to this branch of theology, a branch that hasn't been of much interest to Seekers. But, that sermon must also wait for another time, and, hopefully, another preacher. For the moment I will just remind the community of David's comment last week in the discussion time. He talked about communion as the mark of a community of those who are willing to take up the cross, to get into deep trouble because of Christian convictions. Communion is precious to those of us who know we need each others help and support, and to those who are empowered because we know we can rely on each other for counsel and for real practical help. Coming out to you as a transgender person, claiming myself as a woman in your presence, however clumsy and beginning such claiming is, was scary for me. I got to the point where I knew I could not walk an authentic journey with you without opening up this part of myself in your presence. Even though I know some of you are still uncomfortable with me as a woman, I have stood with you in the communion circle and felt the grace of God.

It is out of such real communion that Seekers has a future, a future that is so much more than our individual futures. Each time we celebrate communion the evangelistic question is present once again. Do we want to become part of a story of salvation that is greater then ourselves?

The world shifted when I [came out](#) of the closet and showed the woman side of myself to you. You got the question, "How should I respond?" I've had the question, "How can I grow from the interaction I have with you?" I've got a lot of growing to do because I haven't been able to explore in direct interaction what it means to engage the world from my woman-self until recently. You've got your own challenges because this society hasn't given you much experience with a person who claims a



self that is both man and woman. Some of you may still think it just isn't possible despite my life being lived out before your eyes.

There's a saying I learned from my work on Capitol Hill. I don't know its origin. It goes, "For any question, no matter how complex, there is a simple answer. And it's wrong." I think this applies to the challenge I bring to community now that I am choosing to more consistently present my woman-self to you. I'm trusting that Seekers can bear and sustain such a question. I'm trusting that there is healing and transformation hidden in this question. I believe we can authentically be in communion together.

It is because I believe that Seekers can sustain challenging questions and not just tolerate differences of opinion that I believe Seekers has a tremendous gift to offer Christianity and the world. We are living through our questions. We are incarnating the hopes and caring that comes from real love. We are accepting the risks of such incarnation: the risks of being misunderstood, the risks of rejection, the risks of hurt feelings and the stress of disagreement. Furthermore we are doing it as a whole community and not just as a highly committed small group.

We have a special gift to give to Christianity. We can show that transformative conversation can be sustained and that such conversation produces marvelous vitality. Everyday and ordinary people are doing marvelous things in our midst. We have so much to be thankful for. We have so much to do to live out this gift, to let our vitality flow, to engage the ministries to the world that will show forth our love and caring in action. I can hardly wait to see how our life together will develop over the next ten years.

I trust the future of Seekers because all three marks of church authority are alive among us: spirit-filled inner lives and conversations, serious biblical study, and a fresh

engagement of church tradition. We've got plenty of work to do, but I also think the author and editors of Matthew would be pleased with how far we have come.