

Pat Conover: Seeds of Hope

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Seeds of Hope

Once again, I cannot preach the sermon that led me to ask for this opportunity. I was planning to preach about the carrying and sharing of call between Seekers and me with regard to the writing of my book. It is a sermon that I wrote and it is a sermon that I feel good about, but it will have to have to find another time.

What do you think about coincidence? On the Sunday after Peter and I have officially shared our call to the new Seeds of Hope of Mission Group the lectionary passage that came up for me is the parable of the sower, the reference scripture for the name of our mission group. I think it is coincidence, but I still have to preach about our call and welcome you into prayer for us, and perhaps welcome someone in this room to come and explore with us. I am also hopeful that soon other Seekers will be issuing other calls to outward focused mission groups.

One of the basic slogans of the Church of the Savior is "If it isn't call, let it go." It is part of the valuable tradition that we carry. It was not easy for Mollie, Kevin, Kate Cudlipp and me to give up the Spirit and Sexuality Mission Group. The agenda is far from over and we commented on this in our final report to Seekers. Each of us still cares about the agenda and we have found comfort and support in being together. Kate has been my spiritual guide for 13 years and I am probably going to have to give her up since it is best to have your spiritual guide as part of your mission group. She has seen me through a lot. However, the call of the mission group, however

important, was no longer call for me. Writing my book was one of the major ways I worked on that call and the book is out. Neither was the mission group call the call for Mollie, Kevin and Kate. We spent time on our endings and we have come away with released energy for other calls. Kate is praying her way toward developing a call for a mission group that would foster new mission groups in Seekers.

Another example of "If it isn't call, let it go" is the decision of Jeanne Marcus not to join Peter and me in issuing the call for Seeds of Hope. Jeanne was very involved in the process of developing the call and is a foster parent for anything that is born from our work. Jeanne might join us for particular tasks but came to understand from her inner work that carrying this call was not her call.

As soon as I began releasing my commitment to the Spirit and Sexuality Mission Group, my released energy settled on a concern I have been carrying since coming to Seekers 16 years ago. Since High School, I have been interested in creative alternatives to the church model of feudal times that has morphed into the voluntary association form of bureaucracy in the United States. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, I was thinking about Koinonia Partners, the Austin Christian Faith and Life Community, the House Church movement and the Church of the Savior. I was part of creating house churches and mission groups while I was in college. I entered seminary at 21 and read all the bloom of radical transformation books of that era. I experienced how the Holy Spirit could be released in house churches across the lines of race, age, class and educational background. In graduate school, I created a coffee house modeled on Potters House, which grew into a powerful residential community. Several people from the coffee house followed me to Greensboro, NC where we bought land, built a common residence and started offering retreats based on the Wellspring model. As a professor of sociology in North Carolina, I had five years of grants to study alternative

social structures: free schools, free clinics, the underground press and the underground church.

All of this preparation allowed me a quick read of Seekers when I came to DC to take up my career as a public policy advocate for the United Church of Christ. I liked what I saw and quickly saw that the form of Seekers met the criteria I had identified for one of the two models that promised endurance for an alternate culture organization. The intentional Christian community I had called together in Greensboro was designed to the other model. I had an instant feeling of coming home, a feeling that pleased the Seekers of 1986 but was also disconcerting for some. I also knew instantly that Seekers was carrying something that was precious.

Seekers has changed since 1986, changed in ways that I heartily approve of, particularly the growing clarity that our leadership is from the whole and not dependent on clergy, or clergy-like, leaders.

Since 1986, I have wanted to share the good news that Seekers is carrying because I know in my bones how hungry others are for what we have been carrying. I am powerfully confirmed in my sense of the preciousness of the Seekers secrets as I have watched highly committed and highly competent friends try to make reform models work within the institutional church. They have done some very good work, but I do not see the release of energy, the scale of transformation, that I see in Seekers. I have watched the United Church of Christ claim a lot of the same language of faith we like to use, watched it become flat in effect.

In short, I believe Seekers is carrying a very precious seed for Christianity. For Seekers to claim leadership from the whole, with no one in a privileged position, is to complete the implications of Gordon Cosby's core insights. It has taken Seekers a while to come to full recognition and claiming of

this logical step and we have been refining our understanding of what this means in countless ways. The recent work in the Team Needs Discernment Group, and then in Stewards, on what we want from our paid leadership is one more important step along this path.

However, the Seeds of Hope Mission Group is not merely about treasuring the models or processes of Seekers. Neither Peter nor I intend to turn Seekers into an idol, and the distance between model and idol could be very short. We think we have valuable models and processes to share with other creative and generative Christians and we will do that. Nevertheless, the most precious thing we carry is an abiding belief that the Spirit is fully active and alive today, manifest among us, and luring us toward ever more faithful service and ever deeper appreciation and celebration of the reality of love among us.

When I was talking with Samantha about the emerging call we were working on, I asked her what she thought was precious about Seekers. She answered immediately, "The love is so real. I can just feel it when I walk into the room."

The call statement of the Seeds of Hope Mission Group emphasizes that we believe God is ever active with other Christians, and with other people of faith, calling and luring them to transformative engagement and faithful service. We do not have to carry or plant seeds. God has already done that. What we hope is that we can notice the seeds and share some gardening tips. Do not plant your seeds in the road, even if it is accessible. Remember to do your weeding but wait until the root system has some strength. Moreover, remember that every seed is precious. The call is not merely about what Seekers has taught us. It is about what Seekers has prepared us for.

Our mission group hopes to help any individual, or group, or congregation to move toward deeper engagement and transformation so he or she can release the power that comes

from claiming gifts and following callings; that comes from realizing that scripture and prayer really can provide helpful guidance; that comes from investing in relationships that can love their way past the protections and trophies to the crying and smiling of shared hunger. We believe from our experience in Seekers that seeds grow best in a transformed and transforming congregation, a congregation that values all seeds and is hungry for the bread that everyone carries with them to the communion table. We come to the table as beggars telling each other where the next meal is to be found.

Our mission group is also a scouting expedition. I already know about many exciting things going on in other Christian contexts and I expect to learn about many more. We will be bringing back reports every so often. Some of our reports may help us develop a stronger sense of not being an isolated congregation, about being part of a spirit movement with many shapes and colors. Maybe we will come to think of ourselves as part of a network. If that happens, we will feel different about who we are.

Seeds of Hope is not a rescue mission for struggling or dissatisfied churches. Neither are we going to say that it is impossible to have a lively congregation that includes the contributions of a clergy person. We are not going out as warriors for the faith. We are not going out as motivational speakers and we will save our bag of tricks for the moments when they are relevant.

It is particularly important for me to say to you that Peter and I are calling a mission group that will take advantage of all the creative things happening in Seekers. When we have done our listening we are likely to say something like, "Oh yes, movement can be a very important way to help release the spirit. Maybe you would like to have a visit from Sue or Tiffany."

We are aware that other groups are busy interpreting their

understandings of the Church of the Savior tradition and we hope for friendly relationships with them. We appreciate many of the things that [Faith at Work](#) is about. We are thankful for fellowship with some of the groups related to Rolling Ridge. How much we will be working on our own and how much we will be working with others is still to emerge. How much we go out or invite others here, how much we work by phone calls and email, are issues that are still before us.

One of the most challenging things about offering a call in Seekers is that we have to hold onto our excitement and vision while at the same welcoming others in who have partial or overlapping, but not identical visions and concerns. The discipline in issuing a call is the intention to work thankfully with whoever comes toward us.

Whether we travel or welcome others to join activities at Carroll St., we are aware that we are intentionally going beyond the comfortable walls of Seekers. We do not expect to be welcomed or appreciated at every turn in the road. Nevertheless, we do believe there is a deep hunger for the hope we are carrying, a deep hunger for the vital presence of God. We do expect to find God at every turn in the road and in each of our companions and we plan to notice that and remember our own thankfulness that God provides enough for such journeys.

In case you are wondering, we plan to be a “by the book” [mission group](#). Every one who approaches should know that we expect not only an engagement of the call we have sounded but also intentionality about ongoing inner growth through the traditional Seekers disciplines and accountability. The call is only open to those who have completed at least two classes in the School of Christian Living. We plan to meet on Tuesdays at 5:30 and end in time to allow participation in the School of Christian Living activities. Our first date for coming together will be July 23rd.

With all of this in mind, let us look at the gardening book, the Parable of the Sower. It is a parable found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Thomas in a constant form; which suggests it is a faithful rendering of the oral tradition of the words of Jesus. Today, I want to think a little bit about the birds that ate up the seeds that were sown in the path. The birds are in every expression of this parable. If you are a farmer sowing seeds, birds are not your friends. It is a point that we often forget in another gardening parable – the one about the mustard seed. In that parable the mustard plants get big enough to become homes for birds.

Exactly which plant the word "mustard" references is not entirely clear, but there was a biblical plant called mustard that was a weed, but a weed that was valued for the healing properties of its leaves. Among other things, it could make you throw up. The mustard seed parable is about the spreading of weeds and birds, an ungainly movement and one not likely to be appreciated by the proper farmers of the day. So I am thinking about the birds flying away from their homes in the mustard plants and going to eat the seeds on the path that will not get to grow up into wheat crop. Such seeds are not entirely wasted because they are feeding part of God's creation, maybe a valued part of God's creation. The birds also remind farmers where the seed should be sown.

However, why would a proper farmer be sowing seeds on a path anyhow, or in rocky ground, or among thistles. Maybe we should call this the parable of the stupid sower.

On the other hand, maybe the sower cannot control where the seeds fall. Alternatively, maybe the seeds were intended for the good ground but were blown around by the wind, blown around by the *Ruah*, the breath of God, so they would fall everywhere. After all, wild plants like mustard are living out of abundance and casting their seeds everywhere. In addition, there are some seeds, like poison ivy, that are moved around by birds that eat them; not only are they moved but they are

also deposited with manure to feed them. Birds are good sowers for some seeds but an enemy of others.

Do you have the point yet?

The birds are not really enemies of the farmer in this parable because they only eat the seeds on the path where they would not have grown anyway. We have to value the wildness and wastefulness of the spirit – spreading passion and love to people who are clearly not deserving and before they even ask for it. An earlier name for our mission group was the Wild Church Mission Group. Therefore, you can see that one of the purposes of our mission group is to have some fun.

On the other hand, we are clearly called to be smarter than the sower in this parable and to try to prepare our seedbeds and plant our seeds with care.

Matthew was concerned that the hearers of the parable would not get the point that he thought was important. In verses 15 and 16 he writes, “For this people’s minds have become dull; they have stopped their ears and shut their eyes. Otherwise their eyes might see and their ears might hear and then they would turn to God and be healed.” This sounds like the parable of the stupid sower and the stupid interpretation. (We can find the good news in Matthew’s interpretation by considering the theology of secrets in Matthew and Thomas, but that is clearly not the work of this sermon.)

The birds, Matthew tells us, are the evil one. The evil one comes along and carries off the good words that have been sown in people’s hearts. Matthew has no room for my playfulness. That is okay, I am not too happy about the fact that Matthew could not let the parable stand on its own. The whole point of speaking in parables is to stretch the mind of the hearers into more creative reflection.

Wild and tame, what seed is growing into you? Is your seedbed ready? Was your seed blown around so that you have to nurture

it in rocky soil because that is where you landed? Can you find a little guano to nurture the seed, maybe a little guano from this sermon?

Are you willing to blossom and spread your seeds? Are you willing to let your seeds be crushed into bread for the communion feast? Can you give your precious gifts away and let your life be spent out into meaning?

Are you willing to pray for this stupid preacher, and for Peter, and for whoever may come to join us, so that we might get this sermon right and come back to explain it to you, or just shut up at crucial points so that there is a moment for hearing God.

[Silence.]

Seeds and birds: What we know and cannot know. What we carry and what we give away. Just some beggars telling each other where to find the next meal.