

Peter Bankson: Belonging – to the Body of Christ

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

Peter Bankson

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Belonging – to the Body of Christ

Introduction

Before this week, I had never really noticed the verses just before our Gospel lesson. It seems to be an eyewitness description of the night when Jesus confirmed the call of the 12 Apostles, and gave them a mission that would change the world. Here is the rest of the story, from the Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 6:12-19)

"It happened about that time that he (Jesus) went out into the mountains to pray. He continued all night in prayer to God. And when the day dawned he called his disciples, and from them he selected twelve, whom also he called Apostles (missionaries). They were Simon, whom he had also called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon called the Zealot, Jude the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who was the traitor.

"With these he came down till he reached a level place, where there was a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed

of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

*"Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "**Blessed are you who are poor...**"*

Called by Jesus

Put yourself in that place ...

It was a clear, crisp morning, with the full moon and stars still bright in the early daylight. I had left home later than I had planned because I took time to pray and pick up the kitchen. The streets were already full of people leading donkeys to market, setting out their wares by the gate.

The clearing in the olive grove was up the hill a bit, a level spot where a crowd could gather at the base of the steep hills and narrow gullies that led to higher ground. Jesus often went there, and Mary had said that is where the disciples were gathering that night.

Mary – she is my guide ... my shepherd. She has been a disciple for months now, and has spent a lot more time with Jesus than I have. Sometimes she goes on the road with the disciples when Jesus journeys somewhere else. But she always has time to meet with me, to answer my questions and help me learn what this different discipleship is all about.

As I climbed up toward the olive grove, I was looking for Mary in the crowd. Even if I could not get close enough to Jesus to hear every word, I figure she would be able to answer most of my questions. I was looking forward to the day when I would have the courage to ask Jesus himself, but for now it great to have a faithful friend like Mary.

The crowd was bigger than usual today. There were many

unfamiliar faces on the path, and people who wanted to be healed were pushing to get as close as they could to the front.

I got to the clearing and caught sight of Mary on the other side near the base of the cliff, but there were too many people for me to move any closer. It was clear that I would have to hold my questions for later.

Just then I saw Simon and Andrew come out of one of the little clefts in the rock, followed by a few others, and then Jesus. Simon said something that I could not quite hear. There was ripple of turning heads as the news washed through us: "Jesus has picked 12 of us to carry the word to other communities.

It took me a minute to realize what I had heard: Simon and Andrew and those others – the ones sitting right around Jesus – had been specially picked to go out and take the word to other places. They had been called to be missionaries...

"Well," I thought, "good for them. But what about me?" I sat back in the crowd and watched them in a different light – a mixture of resentment and relief, seasoned with a dash of envy. The "missionaries," I thought. "I guess I'm not quite good enough. But they are no different from the rest of us disciples. Why did he ask them? Why did he not ask me? I was looking at Jesus, trying to hear what he was saying as the crowd pushed against him, and wondering how I'd feel if he caught my eye and motioned me to come, saying, 'Wait a minute! Here is the person I was looking for a minute ago! Are you ready?' How **would** I feel?"

Maybe he has something else in mind for me ... do I dare ask? Am I ready to risk it all to follow that call into something I have never done before?

I started pushing through the crowd, looking for Mary. I had some questions that would not wait...

Many come, hungering and thirsting.

Will the Real Disciples Please Stand Up?

There are more "disciples" than I used to think. The modern English translation refers to the 12 who were chosen that morning as Apostles (or missionaries). In our Gospel lesson for this week Luke tells us they were selected from the disciples – implying a larger group, a "great crowd."

But I grew up calling that group of 12 – the ones Jesus called apart that day for special training – the "disciples." Because of that, it was easy for me to think that there was only that group of 12 men who were part of Jesus' family of faith.

I remembered the other stories of Jesus calling some of his followers – Simon and Andrew, and James and John, called away from their fishing boats, Levi called away from the tax office. These are clearly stories about the first transforming contact with Jesus of those who followed him, and later were selected to serve as "missionaries."

But as I read this tale, and went back and looked at other references to the "disciples," I got a different sense of that call.

There were the 12, but there was a "great crowd" of disciples, in addition to the great multitude of those who had come to be healed. Those who were known as disciples in those days were people who had decided to have a personal relationship with Jesus – to attend his seminars, to seek to understand his advice, to let his wisdom change their lives – learn, understand, and change.

What does it mean to belong to the Body of Christ ... then and now? If I was a disciple there in Galilee but was not picked to be a missionary, would that make me any less a part of the body?

If I am attracted to a life of faith in Christ, and come to a place like this where we name the name of Jesus and claim his place in our lives as the Christ, does that make me a disciple?

Through our recent history as a Christian church in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour, we have learned that being a "disciple" has much the same look and feel now as it did then – learn, understand and change.

We offer places to learn through worship and classes in the School of Christian Living and living our life in community; we seek to understand Christ's wisdom through the practices of prayer, reflection, meditation and journaling; and we try to support each other as we grow and change.

As I look at the structure of this church through the lens of the "calling of the Apostles" in the Gospel for this week, It looks like the same three groups are present now.

Some of us come looking for community ... because we want to be healed. I hope we can help these folks get close enough to Christ to feel the healing power that is there.

Others keep coming because we know we are disciples. We want to follow Christ, to attend to his wisdom and teaching for our own growth. If this is where you are, I hope we can help you stay close enough to Christ to learn, and understand, and change.

Finally, there are those here who know that Christ has called them to a mission, to some specific ministry of love and justice. I hope we can support you as you are changed and as you are moving.

Maybe we ought to change the term "member of Seekers Church" to "disciple of Christ at Seekers Church," but I think someone else has claimed that name already. Clearly, there are more disciples than I used to think.

Seekers Church as a Family of Faith

We can help each other get together, help each other be changed, and help each other get going.

Looking back over this reflection, I think the call to Christ, to the call to follow Christ, the call to be part of the "Body of Christ," has three parts:

- Get together: a call to community
- Get changed: a call to commitment
- Get going: a call to compassion

I think that in the old Church of the Saviour, the call to community came through the reputation of Church of the Saviour, or Elizabeth O'Connor's books. When people came to Church of the Saviour, they were already **ready** for a radical commitment to Christ. Gordon built on that effectively by nurturing the call to compassion – to service – as a way to deepen the commitment to Christ.

First, we are called to be part of the crowd, like those multitudes from Judea and Jerusalem who came out of a hunger for community, or a need for healing, or the simple curiosity that a large, enthusiastic crowd can generate.

They show up: the disciples are welcoming ... "Hi! I am Mary. Welcome to our time of worship and celebration. Yes, that is Jesus ... the one sitting there on the rock next to the fire. No, he will not mind if you come closer. I've seen him reach out to many people on their first visit." "Excuse me, but I notice that you don't have anything to eat with you; it's getting late and the crowd is so thick you may not make it to town and back before nightfall. Here ... take this bread ... please ... we will have enough. And here is a bit of honey. We've eaten what we need..."

The call to community is a call to get together, to gather in the presence of the risen Christ and see what wonder-full

things will happen. When folks get together, let us share our bread and honey with all who come.

The second level is the call to commitment. I think that is how we talk about the call to discipleship, or "membership" in Seekers Church. It's this commitment to be part of the Body of Christ that helps us learn and understand and change ... it's what helps get us ready to respond when Christ calls us to be missionaries in some unique way.

A key part of this kind of belonging is that special relationship – like the one with the "mythical Mary" that I mentioned earlier. These "relationships with accountability" include shepherds, faithful friends and spiritual directors. I would like to see us able to offer that kind of companionship to every disciple of Christ in our midst, through a [mission group](#), or the structure of classes in the School of Christian Living, or through a special shepherding relationship. Marjory has begun to meet with our spiritual directors and guides once a month, to nourish them in that call.

Finally, there is the call to compassion, to get going in the world in a way that harks back to the 12 missionaries. In the call of Seekers Church we speak of that as living out our call to Christian servanthood by "empowering others within the normal structures of their everyday lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for service and witness." Sometimes that means working quietly from within. Other times it means standing prophetically for justice with mercy, or healing, or empowerment.

In the Gospel for this morning, Jesus offered a teaching about this call to servanthood: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Realm of God. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." And how will this healing happen? The needs of others will be met because someone has been called by Christ to help. Many of us spend our days – and nights –

responding to that call from Christ to help those in need, whether they are strangers, or those we know and love.

Yesterday we welcomed about 125 people for the service of thanksgiving and remembrance for Carl Benson. Many Seekers helped, early and late. (I lost count at 20.) It was good to share our bread and honey with Carl's friends and family, to weep ... and laugh together.

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

One way to understand what it means to be "in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour" is to create a new form within the Body of Christ that deepens our commitment to Christ. In the original Church of the Saviour, strong charismatic leadership drew people into deeper commitment to Christ through small study/sharing groups. In the early 1960's, Gordon Cosby realized that this commitment would be deepened through service to the poor, and study/sharing groups gave way to mission groups. He met people where they were when they walked through the door, and gave them a way to go deeper.

We find ourselves in a slightly different place in Seekers Church today. People who find us are often attracted by a hunger for the kind of community they experience here. They are ready to acknowledge that the community is built on a foundation of commitment to Christ. But that commitment may seem more than they are ready for initially. So many of us are more like the one of multitude from Jerusalem and Judea when we arrive; we are hungering and thirsting, but not sure what it means to be a disciple. Our task is to welcome all who come, and to nurture one another – like that faithful friend Mary I talked about – answering questions, encouraging prayer and reflection, offering support. We need to find some way to "Mary" everyone who comes. Then when Christ calls each one of us to deeper commitment – to a commitment to compassion for

others – we can stand with those who are called, and give life to that "koinonia with one another and genuine self-giving to the world" that we understand as the way we can be in Christ today.

Belonging to the Body of Christ

For me, the understanding of what it means to "belong" to Seekers Church has grown to include three things

1. a public acknowledgment that I am part of this expression of the Body of Christ,
2. a commitment to deepen my relationship with God through Seekers Church, and
3. a relationship of accountability for my spiritual growth.

In our Gospel lesson for today, the "apostles" were called from a body of disciples. From that day on, many others have been called out by Jesus for special tasks and missions. They came from a body of disciples who were learning, deepening their faith and supporting one another. They went on to give their lives, one day at a time, to bring the Good News of Christ to others.

In 1994, a class in the School of Christian Living drafted some recommendations for [Belonging in Seekers](#). The recommendations began with six observations about our relationship with God. I think they stand today as a description of who we are:

- God is experienced in many ways: central to Seekers Church is one's inner sense of call, a disciplined community and outreach to others.
- Jesus is central to our life together.
- Seekers Church is a "body of Christ."
- One way the Holy Spirit is experienced is shared leadership and gifts.

- Seekers are open to struggles and questions of faith.
- We seek ecumenicity, incorporating the richness of many traditions.

I think that is a description my faithful friend Mary might have offered to describe that gathering of disciples on the plain the morning Jesus chose his missionary team. I hope it helps us all know that there is a place here for us ... in this small part of the body of the risen Christ. It is a place to get together, a place to be changed, a place to get going. Let's go! We have bread and honey to share.

Amen.