

# Peter Bankson: Commitment to Call

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

*In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour*

Peter Bankson

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## Commitment to Call

### Scripture

Moses said to the Lord, "See, you have said to me, 'bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider, too, that this nation is your people." (God) said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And (Moses said to God,) "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way we shall be distinct, I and your people from every people on the face of the earth." The Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And (God) said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the Lord

continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Exodus 33:12-23

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Matthew 22:15-22

## Summary

1. We are a people committed to call
2. We are learning that call grows as we are faithful in living out our commitments.
3. As we enter our own new lands God's call is bringing us something fresh and new.

# **We are a people committed to living out God's call on us.**

This is our "Recommitment Sunday, the day each year in Seekers Church when we recommit ourselves, as individuals and as a community, to a life of faith in Jesus Christ. By that commitment this morning we acclaimed the warmth of this gathered body of Christ and our places in it. By that commitment we affirmed our belief that life after death means joy after sorrow and peace after war. By that commitment we acknowledged that the mystery of God's love is much larger and more inclusive than our own understanding of the world around us.

In our call to be church, we say that we are " ... a 'Seekers community' which comes together in weekly worship rooted in the Biblical faith, with shared leadership; and disperses with a common commitment to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives. For us, Christian servanthood is based on empowering others within the normal structures of our daily lives (work; family and primary relationships; and citizenship) as well as through special structures for service and witness. In Seekers Church we will equip and support each other in all of these areas and seek a balance among them."

This is an understanding that God calls us to live fully in the world, but to live in such a way that our very lives run counter to many of the commonly accepted practices that shape the culture we are immersed within. It is a call to live out the lesson of this morning's Gospel, to "give to the emperor

the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's."

In "Listening to Your Life," Frederick Buechner speaks of call as working at the crossroads where joy and need intersect: "Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place that God calls you to be is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Over the years we have tried to focus our attention on how God is calling us to be part of the body of Christ. We hold up the central importance of call in sermons, conversations, spiritual reports and classes in the School of Christian Living. As we began to make camp on Carroll Street we sent scouts ahead to help us understand our new neighbors, and what they have to teach us about the world's deep hunger. We are seeing the sprouting of new seeds of hope within us: the Seekers Church Peace Witness; renewed energy to help those whose needs we know in South Africa and Guatemala and El Salvador; our links with other churches and leaders who are hungry for a more vital, faith-full life together; our dreams of offering hospitality to new gatherings and groups when we have a place of our own. I believe we are beginning to hear something new.

Dealing with call is a central part of what makes us who we are. It is one key reason why we have this day of recommitment every year. This way we can be clear and current about the way God's call is growing within each of us as individuals and in our midst as a faith community. And we can celebrate and hold each other accountable for our commitment to this living, growing call from God.

We are a people committed to living out God's call on us.

## **We are learning that call grows as we are faithful in living out our commitments.**

This is the 22<sup>nd</sup> time I have made my commitment to Christ as a member or Steward of Seekers Church. That might make it feel like a routine, but this year it feels livelier, deeper and more fragile than I can ever remember. For the past two years we have been moving closer to our River Jordan, getting ready to leave this familiar place and pitch our camp on Carroll Street.

Like Moses, we want to be assured that God will be going with us, even as we leave this sanctuary, even as we pitch our tent in a new place. Moses challenged God: "Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight." He was worried that if he took this next step on the basis of what he thought he'd heard from God, he'd be all alone, at the mercy of the harsh realities of the world around him. In response to Moses' deep hunger for assurance, God said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." This sounds to me like a deep, resonant voice saying: "Trust me." What I'm learning to expect from God is not some detailed instruction manual for life, just "Trust me."

As I look at that 40-year narrative and think about the 27

years of our own story, there is a strong suggestion that we, too, have been given just enough to get us to the next place. And, our understanding of what it means to be a Christian community in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour is still changing. God's call on us as a community continues to grow.

Last week we heard from Gordon Cosby, the founder of Church of the Saviour and source of so much of our recent tradition. Gordon said that what God is doing has seldom made "prime time" news. He suggested that if we want to see what God is doing we need to keep a watchful eye on those who are not being well-served by the dominant culture. Gordon reminded us that the Good News comes to light on the margins of society.

We are packing our bags for the trip across the river. From there we will have a fresh view of the margins. In our New Lands we will discover things that we could never anticipate.

And, like Moses, some of us are asking whether God will be with us when we move, whether we will be able to find our place of Christian servanthood where our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger from our new camp on Carroll Street.

Last week in the "Becoming Fire" [class on call](#) we talked about how a new call really starts with a "STOP!" Moses and the bush; Samuel jolted awake in the temple; Mary trembling before the angel. Life goes on until we see the sign something stops us in our tracks. Then, and only then, are we ready make room in our lives for the new. If we have no capacity to take on the new, then we'll need to let go of something. In time this

may release our deep gladness, but there's often a lot of pain and grief as we let go of what we've been carrying and free ourselves for whatever is new.

But, when we've made room for the new, we enter a time of gestation, letting the new grow within, trying to find the place where our deep desire crosses with the world's deep need. This is the time for dreaming, for reflection, for doodling, for digging in the garden -- time to let the seed sprout, send out roots and find fertile soil.

Only after this time of waiting, this personal "Advent" time, are we ready to share the new call with a wider world. The tree needs time to grow roots enough to sustain itself, to hold out against the snow and the flood and the heat of summer. The Call needs its own deep conviction and clear access to creative energy to stand up against what the world will likely throw at it.

For the past several months I've felt like Samuel, waking up time after time because I hear something in the night, and, time after time mistaking the voice of God for some minor thing. I'm not yet sure where this is heading, but I think it has to do with the image I had on the plane on the way to my high school reunion last month, an image of needing to shift from holding the container to helping something new emerging from the dark within. These days I feel like I'm going from being 'helpful' in one place after another, and never seem to get to the place where I can hear that midnight message for what it really is... There's a seed there, but I really don't know what it will look like when it sprouts. Without prior knowledge, I'd never guess "oak tree" when I look at an acorn.

As I've been reflecting on this "word," I've become clear that my commitment to Communities In Schools has shifted from excitement into duty. I have some skills that are needed there, but there really isn't any room for whatever creativity I might offer. CIS is still a place where we deal with the world's deep hunger. It's a real place of servant ministry, although most of the time it feels like I am washing pots and pans in the kitchen while a banquet is going on in the next room. What has shifted is my own sense of deep gladness. My work at CIS may be servanthood, but it no longer feels like a call to me.

As I sat here in this sanctuary last night for my hour of reflection before making my own recommitment, it was clear that my commitment to this community is deeper than it has ever been. But I had a sense that God is calling me to look – hard – at the way I live out that commitment.

We are learning that call grows as we are faithful in living out our commitments.

**As we enter our own new land God's call is bringing us something fresh and new.**

Our recommitment to this community is a commitment we make without knowing the path ahead. We will need help as we try to discern how to follow Jesus' teaching to "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and give God the things that



are God's."

We're asking what it means in these days to be "committed to ending all war, personal and public." What about the little wars, among us, here in this community? How do we end them? And the war of the sniper? If vengeance belongs to God, can we pray our way into a place of peace with this person who seems so angry, so sick? And what belongs to the emperor in the threat from Iraq ... or the threat from our response?

The Seekers Church Peace Witness is a fresh, new, prayerful response.

What does it mean for us to give the emperor the things that are the emperor's? Does this mean giving up our 'stuff'— cheap gasoline for our cars ... our cars themselves and the mobility they give us? Does it mean giving up movies, and the values they reinforce? Does it mean giving up new shoes ... made in a sweat shop in the Mariannas Islands?

Does our right to gather together belong to the emperor ... the right to speak out ... to protest? If the Bill of Rights claims freedom of speech as a right protected by the state, does that make it belong to the emperor? What belongs to the emperor? What belongs to me? And what belongs to God?

In many conversations and gatherings we are beginning to wrestle with these questions in fresh, new ways.

Like Moses, we ask for some blessed assurance for our thoughts and our actions, and what we get is just about what Moses got: "Trust me." But we are waking up to new voices of gladness and need, and God's call is bringing us something fresh and new.

## **Commitment to Call is at the Core.**

Those of us who have made a commitment to Christ through Seekers Church are both the vessel and the hands that are forming it, both the outer forces of nurture and the inner forces of new life. One dimension of our commitment is to our core values as part of the Body of Christ, and another part of our commitment is to the vessel that carries us. For members, this is a commitment to respond to God's call in the most authentic way we can, to have the freedom to be and do whatever God is calling us to, to give God that which is God's.

Every member needs to be able to trust that the vessel of Seekers Church will be there for them as they grow. For Stewards, though, the commitment is a bit different. Stewards are also called to nurture the health of Seekers Church itself. For years I've thought that for me this meant mostly the coordination – the care-and-feeding, cooking-and-cleaning-up kind of work – maintaining the Body so we could each grow in response to God's call. I've begun to see that a little differently. For years I've believed that my call within this Body has been to add my energy to the outer hand, and leave to others the creative, disruptive work of bringing new life into our midst. But I'm sitting with the Word I heard on the plane last month, and wondering if my place of deep gladness is shifting. As the experience of my life affects my sense of gladness and my awareness of need, it shouldn't be surprising that my call will grow and change. And, if you are anything like me, it should come as no

surprise that your call is growing, too.

As we stand on the bank of our Jordan River, looking across into our New Land, we need both nurturing energy and creative energy, just as we have for all the years we have been at 2025. But the times, they are a changin,' and we will need that energy in different ways, in different proportions, with different intensities and from different people.

The move will challenge all of us, but part of the challenge for the Stewards is to focus on what kind of energy each of us is called to bring to the task of nurturing the health of Seekers Church. What does the Church need from me, as a Steward, in these turbulent times? Stewards, the truth is that what Seekers Church needs from us now, what Seekers Church will need from us in the coming year, is not necessarily what we have been giving, not what feels most comfortable.

The dictionary says that a "steward" is "one who manages another's property, finances or other affairs." The property, finances and affairs we manage as Stewards of Seekers Church all belong to God, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of the universe. And just as the stewards on an airliner do different things during different parts of the flight to insure the safety and comfort of everyone on the plane, so, too, we Stewards must be ready to do different tasks now, as we face this move.

This commitment we have made is a life and death matter, for us and for the world we serve. Being a member or a Steward of Seekers Church means more than just being involved. Do you

remember the fundamental difference between involvement and commitment? I think I heard this truth here in a sermon Virginia Mitchell offered some time ago: In order to create a breakfast of ham and eggs, the chicken is involved; the pig is committed.

Let us follow God's call together, as servant leaders in God's unimaginable future: With a little courage and a lot of help from each other and the Holy Spirit, we really can let ourselves be pigs in the heavenly feast of God.

Let us pray. Holy Maker of this very moment and of every moment that is to come, we praise and thank you for calling us to be part of your people. We hear you calling us to something new. We want to be your servants now, and in the year to come. We commit ourselves to follow You into this unknown future, to love each other, to build up our body which is your Body, to love the world as it is and so to change it. God of all creation, send us forth to be your hands and feet in this time and place. **Amen.**