

Peter Bankson: Finding My Way in the Wilderness

Seekers Church:

A Christian Community

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Finding My Way in the Wilderness

Summary

We are part of the Body of Christ. Our story begins in the Garden of Eden, where God reigns and we are innocent children. Our destination is the New Jerusalem, the City of God. Today we are on the way – a way in the wilderness, where we can't always see where we are heading or where we've been.

Just as all three characters are essential parts of this parable of the loving parent, so all three story lines are essential paths in the wilderness. We need to honor the faithful people of God, no matter which path they may be on. We've all got important work to do.

Scripture (Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him (Jesus). And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked him what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'

Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father,

'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

Seekers: A People on the Way

This Lenten season, we are reflecting on "A Way in the Wilderness." We are a people on the way: A way for each of us; a way for Seekers as a small part of the Body of Christ; a way for the nation; and a way for the world. Our story begins in the Garden, where God is in control. It ends, we are promised, in the City of God, the New Jerusalem, where God dwells among us, where there will be no more death, and no mourning or sadness.

But we are not yet at the end of God's story. We are living in the wilderness, always looking for the way. The search for a clear understanding of our way in this wilderness is an important part of our spiritual journey. Finding and claiming our path; claiming God's call on our lives; understanding and living out God's call on us as a community. We come at it from many different directions, but the basic point is the same: we know that living in the wilderness is more tolerable if we can see which way to go.

Our recent history in the Church of the Saviour suggested that finding and claiming a corporate call was a good way to live in the wilderness. The mission groups formed to live out these corporate calls focus individual lives in support of the

corporate call. They minister to those in need and bring meaning and purpose to the individual. We see the power of these shared visions in the lives of many we know, and in the city around us.

Our own call to be church and support the individual calls of each of us is not so tightly focused but it involves the same elements – discovering and following a way in the wilderness.

In *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg suggests that there are three narrative lines in the Hebrew Scriptures: the story of bondage and God's deliverance; the story of exile and God's promise of a return to the Promised Land, and the priestly story, of God's people in charge of the culture and the institutions that help preserve it.

We are living out the continuation of these three story lines as we move toward the New Jerusalem, the coming of the Realm of God on Earth.

This week, the Gospel lesson gives us a wonderful example of the intersection of these three story lines. The parable of the Prodigal Son has elements of the Bondage Story, the Exile Story and the Priestly Story all tied together in an explanation of what the Realm of God is really like. The Gospel lesson for today is a microcosm of the story of God's relationship with all of creation, including us. The elder sibling is following the Exile Way.

This is a good story for a little experiment. As you listen to the story, where do you find yourself?

- Are you there as the Prodigal Child, bold, adventurous, decisive, mistaken, forgiven?
- Are you the Parent, loving, giving and forgiving, longsuffering, merciful?
- Are you the Elder Sibling, dutiful, hardworking, careful, angered by the unfairness of the parent's love?

Seekers as an Exile People

For a long time I've identified my own life story – and the story of most of us in Seekers – with the stories of the exile in Babylon. The stories of Esther and Daniel are stories of faithful people who were sent by God to labor in institutions they did not create and do not control. Esther and Daniel, and Joan and Doug Dodge and Trish Nemore and Pat Conover and Carolyn Shields and Meg Kinghorn and Jesse Paledofsky and Sterling Wilde, and many more of us are laboring in institutions we did not create and do not control, trying to do justice, love, mercy and trying to walk humbly with God. In this parable I see that as the tale of the dutiful elder sibling – the elder brother.

When God's people are living into the Exile Way, they can't change the system. They can protect the status quo, making sure nothing happens. However, they do have considerable power to create new options (or introduce new ideas that come from somewhere else).

Seekers on the Priestly Path

I see the parent following the Priestly way. He sets the rules and determines the structure. When God's people are living the Priestly line, they have the opportunity to say "Yes" to changes. They can affirm options offered up from within the system. They can also block progress, and they seem to have a hard time seeing new possibilities.

And there are times and places where we walk the Priestly path. Parents set the structures for their families. It may be as much of a struggle for us as it was for the father of two sons in the parable, but parenting is a Priestly path.

In Seekers, core membership puts us on the Priestly path for the community, with the authority and the limitations that suggests. It might be worth some effort to think of the core

membership as the parent in this parable. Where are we ready to change the structures that have sustained us?

Seekers in Bondage

In the parable, the Prodigal takes what is rightfully his and goes off to seek his fortune in a far country. That sounds like the beginning of the classic American heroic myth.

In some very important ways, Seekers sees itself as a prodigal community within Church of the Saviour. And there are those among us who are struggling in the wilderness, waiting for healing, searching for meaning and purpose in a form that feels fresh and new.

In my own history, there are six generations of prodigals, who took what they could and left the family to move west across the American frontier. They rejected the system in favor of new opportunities. But, like the prodigal, their dreams turned to hard times when they found themselves in another system – one they neither controlled nor understood. One of the reasons I have rejected any identification with the bondage story is this history of broken dreams that I learned were failures.

The Reality: All Three Paths are Part of God's Story

The surprise for me in all this came the other day as I was thinking about this sermon in my office at Communities In Schools. It was getting dark. I felt frustrated by all the things I'd thought in the morning that I HAD to get done but weren't done yet.

(At [CIS](#) I'm called the Vice President for the Network Information Center. I have a staff of eight hard-working people. That makes me think, sometimes, that I ought to be operating in the Priestly mode at CIS – setting the rules and determining the structure; saying "Yes" to changes, affirming

options offered up from within the system. But we're really shorthanded right now, with more work to do than we have funding to support, and we're trying hard to figure out how to do more with less.)

I'd spent half the day fixing computers and the other half in meetings called by somebody else. It felt like I was oscillating between bondage to the lack of a computer specialist and dutifully working within the system on priorities that were not my own.

Then it hit me. Even though I've tried hard all my life to reject the prodigal and the priestly, both roles are part of my life.

At CIS, one of the lessons we help communities learn is that it takes close collaboration among three levels of the community to bring about lasting change that benefits kids. Unless the grassroots community AND the agency bureaucrats AND the community leaders ALL get together behind a plan, it will never work.

Or, to put it another way, if there hadn't been a restless prodigal, and a dutiful but resentful elder brother and a loving father, Jesus wouldn't have had much of a description of the Realm of God

And again, perhaps the reason there are three narrative paths in the Scripture is that it takes folks on all three paths to build the New Jerusalem.

Conclusion

We are part of the Body of Christ. Our story begins in the Garden of Eden, where God reigns and we are innocent children. Our destination is the New Jerusalem, the City of God. Today we are on the way – a way in the wilderness, where we can't always see where we are heading or where we've been.

Just as all three characters are essential parts of this parable of the loving parent, so all three story lines are essential paths in the wilderness. We need to honor the faithful people of God, no matter which path they may be on. We've all got important work to do.

In the parable, the parent maintains the structure of the family, and is free to show mercy, to bend the rules in the name of love. That is the call of those on the priestly way.

The elder child preserves the inheritance so that all can live to celebrate, even though his service lacks the romantic excitement he might have wanted. That is the call of the exile.

The younger child leaves home, lives through life near the limits, learns the depth of his father's love, and his suffering is redeemed. That is the call of those in bondage.

Where are you in this story? Which is your way in the wilderness?

I'm reminded of one of those deeply theological camp songs that goes:

*All God's children got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher.
Some sing out on the telephone wire,
And some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they
got.*

When our paths cross in the wilderness, it's time to celebrate, even if it is Lent!

Amen.