

Peter Bankson: Goats, Sheep, And Pastor-Prophets

Seekers Church

A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

November 24, 1996

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Introduction

For the past 10 weeks I've been part of a class on the history of the Church of the Saviour. It's the class that the Ecumenical Council decided last fall to offer to all the sister communities, to help members of the scattered churches reconnect with their Church of the Saviour roots. I've enjoyed the class, in part because it has given me an opportunity to test some of my observations about our recent history against the memories of some of those who have been here since the Church of the Saviour began almost 50 years ago.

(Before the class began I had hoped it would be an opportunity to trade observations with people who worship with other offspring communities of the Church of the Saviour, but since everyone in the class is from Seekers, that has not been possible. So much for the widespread interest in reconnecting with our roots! Keith Seat, Kevin Ogle, and various members of our Mission Support Group have had a good opportunity to gather in the forest with some of those who still remember how to build the fire and what prayers to say, and it has been

good.)

It has also been an opportunity to see how the life of Seekers stacks up against our tradition.

We have reviewed how the Church of the Saviour grew over the years, and how the many missions of the Church began. CofS began as a small church with deep commitment to community. Then it became a church built on small prayer and study groups. Then, in the early 1960's the missions began to emerge: FLOC, to free young orphans from bondage; Dayspring for renewal in the country; the Potter's House for hospitality and evangelism in the inner city; Jubilee Housing to help house the homeless; Christ House to help heal the sick; and Joseph's House, and Miriam's House, and Lazarus House. Currently there are almost 40 missions where ordinary people are giving their lives so that others might receive the help they need.

These are all stories about the "sheep" in this week's Gospel lesson.

The Gospel

While the Gospel from [Matthew 25 \(vv 31-46\)](#) reminds us of the importance of caring for others, it also teaches that the source of real change is through individual transformation.

As we heard earlier, when Christ comes again, all the nations will be gathered together, and separated into two groups. God will welcome one group with the blessing of Heaven. Why? "...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

In the Gospel, these faithful servants are surprised, because they do not recognize that "just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Why were the sheep welcomed? Was it simply because they had cared for the needy? Or was it because they had cared for God? Or that they had cared for God unaware that God was present in those in need? Or, were they welcomed because they'd had a change of heart?

Clearly, we are called to help "the least of these." But when, and where, and how? And what does it mean to be "helpful?" Most of us are engaged in being helpful, much of the time. For some, our daily work is devoted to improving the health, education, or welfare of others. Is this the kind of "...doing it to the least of these..." that Jesus was talking about in his sermon on the Mount of Olives about the end of this era?

And, perhaps more important for us, is it direct ministry to the needs of the poor that opens the door to Heaven, or is it something else?

The stories from class on Monday night have been impressive models of care for those in need. They are clearly examples of "doing unto the least of these..." Two or three of them would make an easy commentary on the Gospel lesson for this week. There is an article in the centennial issue of "Spirit," the magazine of Volunteers of America, highlighting Pat Sitar and Barbara Moore and the Good Shepherd children's center. It is a model of what can be done by those who have had a change of heart, and respond to a call to reach out in compassion to those in need.

But, I ask myself, how do I fit into this story? I work at Communities In Schools, the anchor for a nationwide network of local programs to help kids stay in school. Our mission is "to champion the connection of needed community resources with schools to help young people successfully learn, stay in school, and prepare for life." At CIS I spend my days guiding the organization through the maze of federal agencies, building relationships there that will, hopefully, help our local CIS programs accomplish the mission. And, I spent a lot

of time trying to insure that our computer system is working well enough so that we can turn dreams and experiences into words, and share them with each other. I do not feed the hungry, but I may help someone get access to surplus food for hungry kids. I am not clothing the naked, but I may help maintain an on-line bulletin board where a local CIS program gets the idea to build a partnership with the Junior League, so kids can get the clothes they need to go to school.

The clue is not in the nature of the needy, but in the heart of the heart of the helper. Since I've been around this church, I've heard over and over that "we need the poor more than they need us." I think that is true. The result of being in relationship with anyone in need is that we are changed. Our capacity for compassion is deepened. We are able to learn the meaning of community in a new and more interdependent way. I am convinced that a path to deeper faith, or transformation, runs through DIRECT relationships with those in need. But I do not believe that is the only path.

Living out this Gospel lesson at work seems like a challenge if I focus too closely on the traditional interpretations. But there is an old saying that it's a good thing to give someone who is hungry a fish, but it's better to teach someone who is hungry how to fish. And, I would add, that it doesn't help to teach someone to fish if there are no fish in the lake, so it's equally important to keep the lake alive and the school of fish thriving.

It seems to me that there are at least three "levels" of compassion: help, learning, and justice: feeding the hungry, preparing them for meaningful work, and making sure there are jobs for them when they go looking.

Our traditional mission groups most often address the first two levels – helping and teaching. There are many groups that provide direct service, and support learning new skills. Our own Hope and a Home mission group – part of FLOC (For Love Of

Children) is an excellent example of one of these groups. There are other groups that deal with justice at the systemic level. Our public policy mission group was one of those, and the Spirit and Sexuality Mission Group is another. And many of us work in this arena on a daily basis.

As I look at these three levels of relationship to the needs of others, I see two contradictory things: On one hand, as we move from helping toward justice work, the potential effect appears to increase. Changing a system can bring help to millions, whereas feeding the hungry will help only those who are fed. Then why does the Gospel say: "Feed the hungry?" Perhaps it is because it is in the personal relationship of feeding that the giver is transformed.

On the other hand, as we move from helping toward justice work, the opportunity for personal transformation appears to grow smaller. It is easy to sit in an office and write stirring papers, and fight the bureaucratic fight, and retire at night to an elegant home and treat the whole thing as a terribly interesting game – and never be changed by the process. I know this is true because I know people who are living it out. It's a version of "life as entertainment."

I believe that the heart of this Gospel lesson is that we are called to be transformed, to "take on the mind of Christ." Our challenge is to find the structures that can help us live out that call.

The other day I came across a copy of Senator Sam Nunn's remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast, in February of this year. He has his own perspective on the importance of personal transformation:

Our problems in America today are primarily problems of the heart. The soul of our nation is the sum of our individual characters. Yes, we must balance the federal budget and there are a lot of other things we need to do at the federal level,

but unless we change our hearts we will still have a deficit of the soul.

While the Gospel from [Matthew 25 \(vv 31-46\)](#) reminds us of the importance of caring for others, it also teaches that the source of real change is through individual transformation.

The Call Of Seekers Church: Serving As Pastor-Prophets In The World

Seekers Church is built on a call that responds to all three of these levels of compassion I have been describing.

Our call is to be 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 most of us, "understanding and implementing Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives" does not look much like Good Shepherd Ministry, or Christ House. We work in homes with our own children; at the Department of Justice, or Defense, or State; in organizations devoted to international development, or lawmaking – as staff for members of Congress or advocates for those in need.

We need some way to understand the pathways to personal transformation that may be present in our daily lives. We need some common language to help us claim our call, and then we need some ways to grow into that call, as a congregation and as individual Christians.

I believe there is a function in our Church of the Saviour tradition that can meet this need for common language, and give us a path to personal transformation through ministry in daily life, the role of Pastor-Prophet.

As an assignment for the Monday night class I went back to the Handbook for Mission Groups, one of the textbooks of the traditional structure of the Church of the Saviour. In reading again about the required roles or functions in any mission group, I came across this description of the "pastor-prophet:"

A ... gift of the (Holy) Spirit essential to the spiritual well-being of the group is the ability to carry out the function of Pastor-Prophet. This person, on a day-to-day basis actually nurtures the people within the flock. He or she stays in touch with them, makes them feel that there is someone who cares, and is in touch at the point of crisis, or in celebrations. When they are sick or grieving, he is there. He is there with something of the gentleness and meekness of Christ. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls." (Matthew 29:11) She is the kind of person who can help people find rest for their spirit, who can encourage them.

But in addition, he or she is a prophet who has the capacity to help people see the will of God for their lives now. She speaks forth the word of God, she helps with the unmasking process, she helps to produce crisis in that she helps people to engage in self-criticism and to see those areas where they are unsundered (to Christ). (The Pastor-Prophet) ...confronts a fellow member where that member needs confronting.

It is necessary that one individual should be both Pastor and Prophet. People tend to seek out the person who embodies the pastoral function – who encourages them, who treats them with gentleness and loving concern. But they likewise tend to avoid anyone who embodies the prophetic function – who deals with them sternly, when need be, admitting no evasion or compromise. The Prophet speaks in love but insists on the

truth being faced. Thus if both these functions are embodied in one individual, there can be no playing off the one against the other. However, it is a great responsibility of the Pastor-Prophet to avoid his or her own inner ambivalence in these matters.

Loving compassion and confrontation – from the same person. As I look at the work I am doing at Communities In Schools, and think about my call as a Seeker, the role of Pastor-Prophet sounds like a place of growth. But, the truth is, I am not living out that call – yet – in a way that feels up to the challenges of my workplace. I have a way to go before I am serving CIS as a pastor-prophet.

The Challenge: Becoming Pastor-Prophets

For months, I have felt frustrated by the mountain of work, and the lack of deep commitment in some of my colleagues. I've been aware of the stress. Many have encouraged me to back off, to care less about what happens, but I don't think that is the answer. For me, at this point, the challenge is to balance my level of compassion with an increased ability for confrontation. Within the organization, I need to "help with the unmasking process; help to produce crisis by helping people to engage in self-criticism and to see those areas where they are unsundered to the mission of the organization. And to do that, I need the courage to risk failure and rejection. No-one has ever said that becoming a pastor-prophet in the workplace is risk-free, but that, I submit, is at the heart of our call as a church – to nurture each other to this point of servanthood in the structures of our daily lives – work, family and primary relationships and citizenship.

Some of you may not be able or willing to see yourselves in this place. But some of you do. Many of us are at the point in life where we need to grow in our capacity for BOTH compassion

and confrontation. Many of us need to learn how to offer these gifts in service to God through the structures of our daily lives.

One of the strong impressions I have carried away from those Monday night sessions is the extraordinary boldness – some might say foolish boldness – that has marked the beginning of missions in the Church of the Saviour. Time and again those who have started major missions – Jubilee Housing, Family Place, Lazarus House – have said: "we knew that something needed to be done, and we started doing something. What we are doing now grew out of our learning as time went on." This speaks of a structure where one can become the person God is calling them to be.

I think it is a structure we have available in our midst, but we may not be exercising it fully.

A Structure For Spiritual Growth

It seems to me that we need four basics to help us become pastor-prophets: a committed relationship with a spiritual guide; a safe structure to learn and practice the use of emerging gifts; new tools to tackle new challenges; and the experience of integrating these new gifts into our growing selves.

When I wrote these down, they seemed instantly familiar. On the back of our business cards at CIS we have listed four "basics" that "every child needs and deserves: a personal one-on-one relationship with a caring adult; a safe place to learn and grow; a marketable skill to use upon graduation; and a chance to give back to peers and community." Each of these is part of the structure for preparing pastor-prophets, and each can be part of our experience here in Seekers:

The one-on-one, committed relationship is spiritual direction. A spiritual director can help you see where you are blind, and

will stand with you as you grow.

For many of us, the safe place to learn and grow is the mission group. In the mission group we try out new behavior, take on new responsibilities, and learn to let go of work we have been doing when others are called to pick it up. The mission group is a safe place to learn more deeply through experience about the balance of compassion and confrontation.

For us the marketable skill may take many forms. Our School of Christian living offers continuing opportunities to learn new skills. There are books and books and tapes and books. (I thought of including material from Working from the Heart and Artful Work, but I ran out of room.) The disciplines of mission group life— regular prayer, reflection and study – can support the practice needed to understand and exercise any call, particularly the discernment and detachment needed to be a pastor-prophet in the structures of your daily life.

The fourth "basic," the chance to give back to peers and community, is where I began, with a call to ministry in daily life. For me, this is a point of major challenge. If I am going to change, then I must CHANGE. Until I experience myself as being received in my workplace in some new way than I will not know that I have grown. Fred Taylor used to remind us that "if I keep doing what I've been doing, then I'll keep getting what I've been getting."

So, the structure is there. The question is whether we are called to be pastor-prophets in our daily lives, and whether we will use the structure we have to help us get there.

Closing

Let me summarize.

The Gospel suggests that those who "feed the hungry" are transformed, and thereby enjoy a wonderful relationship with God.

As Seekers, we are called to support each other in understanding and implementing Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives.

For many of us, those structures do not serve the needy directly, like the Gospel lesson describes.

For many who work in these structures, personal transformation may come through serving as a pastor-prophet, balancing compassion and confrontation in the search for justice.

We need some help to grow as pastor-prophets. We need

- A spiritual guide;
- A safe place to learn new skills;
- Some new tools for compassion and confrontation; and
- A chance to practice

We have these opportunities here in Seekers, although we may not be using them in this way.

I agree with Sam Nunn:

Our problems in America today are primarily problems of the heart. ... unless we change our hearts we will still have a deficit of the soul.

Let's share the journey with each other. It's a good time in our life as a community to be on the road together. Remember, if we keep doing what we've been doing, we'll keep getting what we've been getting. And in many ways. that's not good enough!

Amen.