

Peter Bankson: Let Go? – Of Course!

Seekers Church :A Christian Community
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Peter Bankson

Let Go? – Of Course!

Summary

I think there is an element of detachment in every expression of Christian community and Christian call. And it is more than simply “letting go and letting God.” This is the detachment of prophets and mystics. It is commitment without control, compassion without coercion, ministry without micro-management.

Introduction

During the third class Janice Sanchez led for us on the Christian mystics, I had a strong leading to offer a sermon on “detachment.” So I signed up for this morning. Once I started working with the lessons for this week with the idea of detachment in mind, I had to let go of it, or so I thought as I began. But there are echoes of detachment in the scripture lessons for this week, and some lessons on detachment for Seekers as well.

There are lots of ways to look at detachment.

- I detach one of these ribbons on the altar table.
- You detach a check from your checkbook to make an offering.
- Parents detach from their children, like Kyrie, and

Sarah and Susanna, who are leaving home to begin lives of their own.

- Seekers detached from Church of the Saviour in 1976 when we started worshiping separately, or in 1996 when we incorporated separately.
- Jesus had to detach from his family of origin in order to make a commitment to his faith community.
- God had to detach from imposing Divine will on the Israelites when they asked for a king so they could be “just like the other nations.”

Lots of ways to look at detachment.

I think there is an element of detachment in every expression of Christian community and Christian call. And it is more than simply “letting go and letting God.” This is the detachment of prophets and mystics. It is commitment without control, compassion without coercion, ministry without micro-management.

Its the kind of love we recognize in good parenting and caring companionship, the kind of love we seek to nourish in this faith community. I think we can take some lessons about this kind of loving detachment from the scripture lessons for this week and our life together in community.

Commitment Without Control: Taking The Truth Seriously

Commitment without control means taking seriously the truth that is given to us without forcing it on others. But we need to start with claiming the truth in what we hear. Is this true for me? How do I know? What does my body say? What is coming in my dreams? What does my journal reveal? What am I hearing in my prayers?

One thing I heard loud and clear in those classes on the Christian mystics is how clear the Word of God came to them,

and how hard it was to accept. Most of them had major, extended experience with illness or depression as they wrestled with the question: Is this Word true for me?"

I am reminded of an old favorite poem by Robert Bly: "Four Ways of Knowing.", Section 3:

*I know there is someone
who tries to teach us.
He has four ways
to do that. First
is Memory, chosen.
I remember that I fell
one Sunday – I was three
or four – from my parents'
car; I saw it leaving
me on the road.
My parents do not recall it.
If we ignore that, he
waits until we are asleep,
opens the images, borrows
faces, turns men to turtles.
I dreamt that I sat in a chair,
and every other
second I disappeared.
That didn't reach me;
I went on with no change.*

*Then he moves, inter-
feres with matter, books fall
open to a certain passage.
Two strangers in one day
speak the same sentence.
The funeral is over;
the telephone rings;
or tennis shoes
that have no molecules
wake a sleeper.
If we still learn nothing
then he turns to accidents,
disease, suffering,
lost letters, torpid sleeps,*

*disaster, catatonia.
We walk, the glass
mountain opens, we fall
in. I usually ignore
the earlier three, and learn by falling.
This time we live it,
and only awaken years later.*

Once the truth is clear, then it is time to move ahead. If it is not, then more listening is in order – or a different kind of listening. If you feel stuck here, I'd suggest that you try a new tool, or ask for some new companionship. We have the tools of our spiritual disciplines to help us learn the truth of God's call, and some friends to support and forgive us. Even when the glass mountain opens and we fall in, there are Seekers around who can help us find the bottom rung of the ladder in the dark.

Once we've heard a call and figured out that it is true, we're presented with the challenge of commitment. Are we ready to grow, and if so, how will we proceed? How can we practice commitment without control?

During the past two years we've tested our commitment through surveys, and discussion groups, and meetings and preaching and sermons. Last month we came to a point where three-quarters of us were ready to go ahead with an exploration of the purchase on Pennsylvania Avenue. But, after a lot of discussion, we decided not to move ahead. While the commitment was strong for many of us, it was not universal, and in the end, it seemed wiser to many (including me) to wait and let the process rest, rather than push ahead with an action that threatened to divide the community.

How can we move without having everyone unanimously committed to the same thing? I'd suggest there are at least two ways.

First, we move forward in some areas where we have given leadership to smaller groups within the community. We are

committed to a diverse, biblically based adult School of Christian Living. The Learners and Teachers mission group carries that call for us, and so long as their call can be confirmed by the community, we can move forward together. We are also committed to a worship experience that involves many Seekers in leadership, integrates the arts into worship, balances male and female energy and provides an inclusive and welcoming environment. That call is carried by Celebration Circle, and as long as their call can be confirmed, we can move forward together.

There are other examples of regular leadership within the community, like the monthly Seekers' sing-along, or the Easter breakfast and Christmas Eve dinner, where the leadership of one or two of us is confirmed by the actions of others. Some direction is evident in these activities, but it may be a bit harder to see. If you think about it, there is something new and exciting going on here. We are spending more time building up the body, and supporting one another in a variety of ways.

Let's look at the past week. Yesterday there was a quilting party here to work with Kate Amoss, who is making a quilt for her mother. Friday evening many of you helped Jesse's group stage a wonderful concert here. Thursday night there was an informal gathering of Seekers with Karen, to celebrate her successful defense of her dissertation. Wednesday there were mission groups here. Tuesday night there were mission groups, and a discussion of transgender issues led by the Spirit and Sexuality Mission Group. I think Monday was an off-day, but a group of Seekers went dancing together last Sunday evening. And I know there are other gatherings I left out, because I never know everything that is going on. I think that's exciting!

In addition to spending more time together, there is a growing sense that we want to direct some of our energy toward our growth as a community – skill-building for mission group leadership, workshops and activities for the community, with

opportunities to share this time with others.

This is what commitment without control looks like in the Body of Christ – following God’s call on our lives without forcing our truth on each other.

Compassion Without Coercion: Moving from my call to our call

In a community like ours, an attitude of detachment gives us the opportunity to practice compassion without coercion. Once you have a sense of what is true for you, it’s appropriate to ask: “Is this **my** truth, or **our** truth? Thinking in a community context is so alien to the popular culture of this time that it may feel unacceptable to you, but Jesus gave us a clue to this kind of community context in the Gospel lesson for this week: He was in a heated debate with a bunch of scribes, in the middle of a huge crowd. They were challenging him about his authority, and he was saying some pretty unorthodox things.

Then his mother and his brothers came: and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking around at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my mother and sister and brother.”

This seems like a radical detachment from tradition. Jesus is clearly putting his faith community before his family here.

As I think about this image for testing the context for God’s call, it seems to me that part of what it means to be called to core membership in this community is the readiness to make the same choice that Jesus made – to put the community first at least for the moment. Whether we are confirming a new

mission group, or struggling with questions of stewardship, or belonging or decision making, or our future home, those of us who have made a core commitment to Seekers should challenge each other to put the community first. That's not where we are today: today our focus is on individual call and the corporate call of mission groups. But I think we would be empowered to hear God's call more clearly if we could grow to the point where we could consistently put the community first.

There is nothing wrong with individual call: it is at the heart of our immediate tradition. We claim that each of us is called by God to a special ministry. We have worked hard to make this community a place where each of us can identify, clarify and live out God's call on us as individuals.

But I contend that, for leaders and prophets, individual call is subordinate to community call. If you feel called to take a leading role in some part of the life of Seekers, and if that call is true for the community, then your call will be received and your leadership will be honored. If you feel called to offer a prophetic word for the community, then the power of your prophecy will be affected by the way we listen. As John Greenleaf says in Servant Leadership, "Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. If their early attempts are ignored or spurned, their talent may wither away."

Compassion without coercion means offering our gifts in the context of community.

Ministry Without Micro-Management: Making room for the Holy Spirit

One key aspect of an attitude of detachment is just becoming much clearer for me – how to minister without micro-managing. Let me share a brief example from Communities In Schools, where I work.

At CIS, we are in a period of fundamental re-evaluation of our corporate call. Since the Presidents' Summit on America's Future, we have been working with many of the leaders in the Summit process, trying to discern whether CIS should assume a central role in helping reach the goals of the summit, to bring coordinated access to key resources and services to 2 Million new children and their families by the end of the year 2000. We have formed internal discernment groups to test the truth of this new possibility for us. We know already that the context is far beyond the expectations we had before the Summit. It is clear that IF we accept this new challenge it will require us to change our larger vision. In fact, if we go ahead we will be following a strategy that is different from our traditional approach to community development. To me, that looks like great opportunity and great risk. If we are given this opportunity, we could offer real help in many communities where help is really needed. But what if we can't get enough resources to do the job? What if we can't find the money, or the people, or the information? What if we are rejected by community leaders? What if our process does not work if we are using it to create a local structure that is not CIS? At CIS we are at a point in our history where we are being called to grow our vision, and all the latent fears and issues are rising to the surface.

It reminds me of our own process here at Seekers over the past two years. One thing that has become clear to me during our search for a new home is the fact that the choice of a new home raises questions about our call as a church. At that point, we have a choice. We can constrain our options to fit our current call, or we can look again at our call, and let the search for a new home raise deeper questions about who we are called to be.

Uncertainty raises my need to know what the results will be . Uncertainty puts me in my engineering mode: focus on the details, limit the options, hope for the best but plan for the

worst, and above all, don't count on anything you can't control. That's micro-management , not ministry. There's not much room for the Holy Spirit in my life when I'm in that frame of mind.

I think we've done the right thing in our search for a new home. The vision of Seekers at 1101 Pennsylvania Avenue SE was not congruent with our current understanding of our call to be church. We need more insight to see what should change – our vision of the space we want or our vision of ourselves as a community. If a new call is true for the community, we need prophetic vision to lead us into ministry without micro-management.

Our challenge, as a faith community, a part of the living Body of Christ, is to find and affirm the ways the prophetic Word of God comes to us as a faith community, to find authentic ways to experience commitment without control, compassion without coercion, ministry without micro-management.

Let go? – Of course!

Let me see where we've come in this brief reflection on detachment.

First, we don't deal easily with direct authority in Seekers. Our style is to confirm authority for the community within mission groups, but to be wary of individuals. As the gray-haired male on the Seekers staff team, I can frequently see our antipathy toward authority. Sometimes I experience it more viscerally, too. But our commitment to shared authority is clear, and our challenge is how to share it more broadly, and how to focus it when we need to come together as a community. When it comes to prophets, I think we listen pretty well. And we're beginning to move, but it is a slow process. Perhaps we've been too invested in our own future, too committed to figuring it all out, too committed to our own individual perspectives of what is right for the community.

As I sought some detachment from our search for a new home I remembered a teaching from my father.

When I was very young, my dad occasionally cooked breakfast for me on Saturday morning. We'd usually have pancakes. He had a recipe from his mother, and he knew how to bake little pancake sheep and birds and dogs. Every time we'd start the process, the first pancake he'd make was a big round one, right in the middle of the griddle. We'd watch, and talk about whether the griddle was hot enough, and turn it over when the holes stopped filling in with wet batter, and check to see that the underside was done. Then, Dad would throw away the first pancake, even though it might look OK to me. He said the first pancake was for the griddle, and the rest were for us.

I've seen that played out lots of time since then, particularly when I was in a learning process. The first time through is for the process. It's a time to learn, to get the temperature right, to adjust the recipe, to remember how to turn things over, and how to know things are done. Even though it takes a certain amount of detachment, the first pancake is for the griddle, the rest are for us.

I think there is an element of detachment in every expression of Christian community and Christian call. And it is more than simply "letting go and letting God." This is the detachment of prophets and mystics. It is commitment without control, compassion without coercion, ministry without micro-management.

May the Holy Spirit blow through this place, fill us with vision and commitment, and help us let go. Amen.