

Peter Bankson: Render Unto Caesar that which is Caesar's ... and Unto God ...?

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

Peter Bankson

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Render Unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and Unto God ...?

Easter Reflection

If God is incarnate in ordinary life then we should see God, first of all, within ordinary life. Too often, even though we know this theoretically, practically we still look for God in the extraordinary. . . . Do you want to see a vision? Get up tomorrow and watch the sun rise.

Ronald Rolheiser, *This Holy Longing:*

The Search for a Christian Spirituality, pp. 100-101

Scripture

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous

hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Introduction

The reading from Acts for today is a little lesson in economics – a reflection on how those early followers of “The Way” structured their life together. Taking a closer look at their community just after the resurrection may give us some fresh opportunities to see things in a new light.

What I see as I look at this lesson is a small but rapidly growing group of people who have been so touched by the Good News that they are living in a way that is different from the culture around them.

They studied; they celebrated the memory and the resurrected presence of Christ; they prayed. They spent a lot of time together, praying and studying in the temple and sharing meals in each other’s homes. As they shared deeply with each other, they were awestruck by the “many wonders and signs [that] were being done by the apostles.” Moreover, they helped those who were in need by sharing what they had with “...glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” They shared their homes, their time and their goods. Moreover, as they lived this alternative lifestyle, “... day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

I see a people whose joy in the Good News of salvation was binding them together in a sharing, caring, loving community, a people who's use of land, labor and capital was a witness to those around them.

These days, I am taking the School of Christian Living class on Acts from David and Ken. It is giving me a good opportunity to look at the kind of activities that birthed the Christian Church. What I see is that once the Holy Spirit touched these followers of The Way, they saw **everything** in a new light. Once they had felt that inner shift and realized that the way to get what they wanted was to give away what they had, there was no stopping them. That kind of radical compassion holds a real attraction for me, even as it challenges me far beyond my comfort zone.

Today I want to look at how we offer our land, labor and capital as part of our witness to the Good News.

Goods in Common – Land, Labor and Capital

Friday was Tax Day, a day that always brings a certain tense attention to considering where our money goes. I don't know how those early followers of Jesus dealt with the tax collectors beyond Jesus' reminder to "... render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's," but I have been interested in how much activity there seems to have been this past week that tried to focus our concern on things economic – the new bankruptcy legislation, a steep decline in stock values and that growing murmur that the stability of the dollar is at risk in international markets.

All of that gloom creates an interesting contrast to the apparently simple picture of those early followers, who seemed ready to share what they had with each other. It was a family picnic rather than a burden of caring for others. It was a model that might help us see our own life together in a new light, a light of deeper compassion.

How do we behave as a community when it comes to sharing what we have – our land, labor and capital – this place, our time and the money we give in thanks to God?

Capital

For as long as I can remember, Seekers Church has had a commitment to give to other ministries about half of the gifts we receive. Even though our move to this place last year involved some big loans to ourselves and some unexpected expenses, we were able to honor this commitment to “giving forward.” Last year we received \$285,000 in offerings and special gifts. Here is a rough breakout of how it came and where it went.

Our Sunday offerings were \$220,000. We earned \$2,500 in interest on the loans made by us to us for renovating the building. In addition, there were \$59,200 in special “earmarked” contributions, \$2,400 in the Christmas offering, \$50 for the Thanksgiving baskets (in addition to the donated food.) We also received \$3,400 last year for use of our new home by outside groups. Moreover, we received \$57,000 in special contributions to the Bokamoso program. This generous support came mostly from families at St. Andrews School where Roy Barber teaches, families who were deeply moved by knowing the youth and leaders of Bokamoso who came from Winterveldt as

our guests.

From this, we gave \$142,100 to other ministries – about 58%. Here on the altar table is a representation of where our capital went. What we gave to others is represented by the gold blocks, one inch for each thousand dollars.

External giving – \$85,500

· **International – \$25,900**

[Australia – \$1,500, Afghanistan – \$1,000, Ecuador – \$500,

El Salvador – \$2,000, Guatemala – \$4,000 (PAVA \$3K; Potter's House \$1K),

Morocco – \$2,000 (B'Tissam education), Nicaragua – \$500,

South Africa – \$10,000 (two years' commitment),

South Asia Tsunami Relief – \$4,400]

· **Local – \$45,500**

CofS – \$12,500 (Diaspora, New Community Church, Potter's House

Wellspring)

Education & Medical – \$9,500 [Academy of Hope, Horizon Theater (AIDS play),

New Community After School Program, Casa de Maryland, N Street Village

(Coming), Community Medical Care, NOW

CLOSED]

Hope & A Home – \$15,000

Housing – \$5,500 (Sarah's Circle, L'Arche, Silver Spring Housing Coalition)

Retreat – \$3,000 (Dayspring, Rolling Ridge)

· **Seekers Missions – \$14,100** (Advocacy – \$6,000, Community Passions – \$5,000

Carroll Street Ministry – \$500, Growing Edge Fund – \$800,

Holy Spirit Fund – \$1,200, Training 50/50 Fund – \$100,

Youth Opportunities – \$500)

· Earmarked gifts – \$56,600

Bokamoso – \$53,900 (From Seekers and others to support Bokamoso youth)

Other – \$ 2,700 (PAVA – \$25; Christmas – \$2,600; Thanksgiving – \$50)

Last year we also spent \$101,200 on internal community life, represented by the copper blocks on the altar table. Once again, an inch of copper represents \$1,000.

Building – \$15,000

Space use at 2025 – \$6,000 (for the first half of the year, before we moved)

Carroll Street utilities – \$9,000

Community Life – \$6,800

Loan service – \$32,400

Staff support – \$47,000

This is what we did with the gifts received by Seekers Church. This seems like an approach to sharing that is quite different from the early community of believers. Clearly, we are aware of needs beyond our own community, and able to help through other ministries. Our faith opens us to these needs, and we share God's gifts with them.

The Stewards are working on a fresh understanding of how our external giving can better support our values. The small group working on this will be hosting a community meeting in the near future. If you would like to be more involved with a particular external ministry, or with our discernment process for offering our support, watch for this gathering.

Although it may be overshadowed by our external giving, the kind of direct support that we see in those early disciples does happen here, from our Holy Spirit Fund, as well as times when one or another of us has been in need and others have offered their support – financial as well as prayerful, emotional support. Clearly, this is not “holding all things in common,” but it does represent a perspective on financial resources that is different from most of what I read in the papers and see on TV. It is one way we are trying to “see in a new light” as we follow Christ.

Labor – Call, Ministry and Volunteer Time

Let me turn from money to time. I cannot count the hours as I

count the dollars, but the phrase “All Seekers all the time...” crops up in conversations frequently.

There is our call as a church to support ministry in daily life – “... dispersing to empower Christian servanthood in the ordinary structures of our lives...” I think of this as our reach toward the way of The Way: “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

How do we spend our time? How is this like those early disciples? How have we found our own path?

As I got started at Seekers Church, the expectation was clearly that I would be worshipping with the community every week. Then, when I was ready, there were classes in the School of Christian Living. That got me used to being with my faith community twice a week – helped me get ready to participate in a mission group.

This seems very different from those early believers, who, it seems, were hanging out with each other all the time! However, my guess is that they lived pretty close to each other, and since most of them had short commutes and many were self-employed (or unemployed) they had a bit more “free” time than we think we have today.

In my early days at Seekers Church, nobody asked for more of my time until I was ready to give it. There were opportunities

for other commitments, and there was the overriding expectation that if this was the church for me I would come to want to spend more time and energy here. However, it did not feel like pressure.

Since Seekers Church began, we have had in our call a very important element that affects how I look at our use of time. It is that part about empowering Christian servanthood in the ordinary structures of our lives. I felt that support from this community, even when I was a policy analyst in the Pentagon, but mostly in my mission group, from my spiritual director. There never was much talk about ministry in daily life in larger gatherings, like worship.

As I was looking at how we spent our capital last year, I was struck by the fact that the largest part of our gifts to other ministries is the special gifts for Bokamoso. That is a direct result of Roy Barber's ministry in daily life, with some important help from the Washington Area Tumelong Team (WATT).

Roy teaches at St. Andrews. As a drama teacher and a member of Seekers Church, Roy connected with the Bokamoso Youth Theatre and brought them to our attention. Since then many of us have been to Winterveldt to visit Bokamoso and the sister ministries of Tumelong. Several years ago, we formed WATT to facilitate support for this ministry of Seekers Church. Without Roy's commitment to ministry where he teaches there would be no visit by Bokamoso, and the families of the students in Roy's classes would not be having their lives changed by knowing the youth and leaders of Bokamoso. THIS is a wonderful example of what it means to me for us to be supporting one another as we "disperse to empower Christian servanthood in the ordinary structures of our lives."

I hope we can find some even better ways to support each other as we claim God's call out there beyond the life of this gathered community. I have a few ideas, and would welcome the chance to talk with you about them.

I know that these days there are some of us who do feel the pressure of things not being done around here. No matter how much we talk about the importance of living out of a sense of God's call, at any given time there are things that may not seem like call to anyone. Many of those activities, even things that seem so central to the life of most churches, like a choir, do not happen here. It is not that we would not value having them, but until someone claims a call to offer them, we find other creative ways to move ahead.

I also know that each of us has different demands on our time. Even though I am retired from my full-time job, I can remember how fragmented my time often felt. At first, there just did not seem to be time for all those church activities. Once I began to put my roots down here at Seekers Church (29 years ago this Fall) I began to see this business of church busyness in a new light. Then, all that was "expected" of me was worship, mission group, and of course my ministry in daily life.

When I look at the time it takes to be an active member of this faith community now, and remember what I felt back then, I think the balance has shifted for some of us. Since we started renovating this place, there has been a LOT of work that needs to be done. We have never wanted to have a full-

time staff that played “Martha” so the rest of us could be “Mary” all the time. Therefore, we had a big pile of important tasks – the planning and coordinating of the renovation and the move, and settling here, and learning how to share our space – all stacked up waiting for someone to take care of them. For some of us a pile of unclaimed tasks is an opportunity to offer sacred service. For others the same tasks emit the foul odor of forced labor. I can smell it every now and then, myself.

As part of the Servant Leadership team, I get a stipend to help nurture the life of Seekers Church. That puts me knee-deep in the pile. Sometimes I can find things that someone else is excited to do, something that really does feel like call. Often there are things in that pile that I really enjoy doing. It takes some will power to give those things away, but I am working at it!

Sometimes we need to be able to set things down, knowing clearly that if they are done as “duty” they will not be done well. It is better to leave room for the future rather than create growing frustration. When we set that work down, I think that it is important to name it so everyone knows that we are doing our best to respond to God’s call in the letting go.

I hope our commitment to shared leadership can be an invitation to every member of this church to respond where we are called, and I hope our commitment will give each of us the freedom to set down what we have been carrying when God’s call moves to a new vision.

This sense of call growing as time passes is part of my taking up responsibility for coordinating use of our space for special uses. You may not have heard, but as of last Tuesday, I have picked that up from Jeanne Marcus. Jeanne has been doing this for almost a year. During that time, she has developed an exciting schedule of groups who are using our building. The next issue of Sounding will have a full report. In the meantime, check the calendar on the bulletin board.

I am excited to add some of my experience to this ongoing effort. I hope to build an easy-to-use database of all the tasks that are part of offering our place to other groups. (On Friday, I created a "new user" on my computer at home, the "Building Use Manager." This manager has a separate calendar, address book and task list, just for the building.) I am hoping to work with several of you to see how we can make this a shared opportunity to build relationships with other groups and make sure they get the support they need. For me, this is part of my call to hold the space for our life together without holding on too long, as we discern how best to coordinate and support use of this space.

Can we see our commitments in a new light? Can we find better ways to honor those places where we really are "... empowering Christian servanthood in the ordinary structures of our lives?" Can we get (back) to the place where we say "yes" to what we are clear we are called to do? Furthermore, will you be compassionate with me when I decide that I am no longer called to do something that you find very important... Learning compassion, seeing in a new light, it is all part of this faith journey.

Land – Our Ministry of Place

We looked at how we use our capital and our labor. Let us look at our land – this facility.

When I think about “land” in a new light, one image that comes to me from our lesson for this week is a growing crowd of followers of The Way, gathered along one side of the temple, reading, praying and sharing what they had with one another. They must have been obvious, since “...day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” The community was living out a good part of its life together in a public place, and it was making a difference on those around them. We’ve come at that idea – being a witness to those around us – from a different direction, but I’m beginning to see some signs of that same kind of witness right here, at the Takoma Metro station, across the street from the 7-11, on the worldwide web.

Five years ago, as we were planning the renovation of this place, we knew we wanted to make it available for many different users. We planned to share the office with another non-profit organization. We imagined recitals and concerts here in the sanctuary. We hoped community groups would be using the classrooms during the week. We prayed that we might be an asset to the community rather than an empty storefront for most of the week. We are still in our first year here, but our prayers are being answered. Here is part of a letter we received this week from the I Have a Dream Foundation of Charlottesville:

I wanted to express my heartfelt thanks for the use of the church building to provide dinner to the Dreamers on our

Spring Break field trip to Baltimore. After a long day of fun and excitement, dinner in the calming sanctuary at Seekers was just what we needed! I know a lot of time, planning, effort, and prayer went into the design and renovation of the Carroll Street building, and it was wonderful to see (and benefit from) the fruits of your faithfulness. Many thanks to those who lent a hand in setting up, serving, and cleaning up. I look forward to seeing you all again soon.

On Easter, [Marjory offered](#) us a vision of Seekers as a faith community with a call to nurture creativity. Afterward, I was playing with the idea of opening the “Faith-Full Co-Creation Center” here, a place for folks to sharpen their faith tools and help bring the Good News to a hungry world. It might look a lot like that bunch of folks who are described in our lesson for this week: “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.”

We already have some wonderful, “co-creation” going on here by the groups who are using our space. This month, in addition to the Washington Storytellers in the office every day, there are 38 events scheduled for this place.

For example:

Daily:

- Washington Storytellers Theatre – last night held a fund-raising event to help Tsunami victims
- Liz Lerman Dance Exchange is using the sanctuary 5 days a week for rehearsals and recitals while their space over on Maple Avenue is being renovated. (Who knows,

they may be here for a while!) The other day while I was here the father of one of the young dancers was quite interested in the building and the folks who are letting the Dance Exchange use it.

Weekly

- Tiffany is offering YogaRythmics sessions here every Monday.
- Four out of Five Sunday afternoons the Science of Spirituality group meets downstairs for meditation and fellowship.

Monthly

- One Saturday a month, Conscious Collaboration brings a very high-energy group of folks here for a night of drumming and dancing called "Soul Fire Inside."
- Sue Johnson and her InterPlay Partners are offering an InterPlay event each month (come this afternoon at 2:00!). They are planning a weekend of InterPlay in June.

Others of Note:

- WPFW, the local Pacifica FM station held a board retreat here in February.
- EDUSEED, a mentoring organization for African-American girls held a training session here.
- The Takoma Park Food Co-Op and Old Takoma Business association are holding board meetings here at least once a month.
- Takoma Park Presbyterian Church is using our place for close-by retreats.
- The president of the Washington Area Folklore Society came by on Wednesday, looking for a venue for smaller events. She is thinking about open-mike singing nights downstairs, smaller gatherings in the conference room ... and she was really excited by the idea of offering

Sacred Harp Singing sessions here in the sanctuary.

We have created a community center that is drawing creative energy here. We can offer people a place to share their creativity, even as we listen for new ideas for sharing the Good News in creative ways.

Closing

Who are we? As I look at how we spend the gifts God is giving us, I see a people whose joy in the Good News of salvation is evident in some very important ways.

- We have a place here that gives us an opportunity to serve the wider community and encourages creativity in some fresh ways.
- We are conscious of the need to honor God's call in each of our lives, and working to accept the reality that God calls us in different ways.
- Moreover, we are still able to help others with the gifts we receive.

We are being stretched beyond our comfort zone, but I think that fits our call: "Seekers are not persons who have arrived, but persons who are intentionally on the way."

As our reflection paragraph suggests, "If God is incarnate in ordinary life then we should see God, first of all, within ordinary life." Peace be with you.

Amen.

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