

Peter Bankson: The Road to God

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

Peter Bankson

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The Road to God

Scripture

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'we have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowd asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food should do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3:7-15)

The Road to God

Good morning. It is the third week of Advent – a time of

waiting and watching, a time for commitment, a time for belonging.

A week from today we will gather here to share Christmas Eve supper. We will greet and eat, and worship together, sharing the familiar story of the birth of Jesus in Scripture and song. We will welcome friends and strangers to the table, and we will remember those who have gone to share the day with other family. That night, everyone who comes will be part of this self-chosen family of faith.

How do we know we belong here? For some of us, that is a large, lingering question. For the past 3 or 4 years, we have had one group or another trying to clarify how we speak of "belonging" in Seekers Church. Are we talking about "belonging" to Christ, or to this community? Are we trying to maintain integrity of membership, or limit who belongs, or welcome all who come? What does "belonging to Seekers Church mean, if all are welcome when we gather around the table?

There is a lot of emphasis around here on the importance of the "[inner journey](#)," and the "[outer journey](#)," the inner journey toward deepening faith in God, and the outer journey of living out God's call on our lives. So one way of thinking about belonging in Seekers is to consider how we are on this dual journey: where are we heading? With whom are we traveling? How do we recognize the road to God? In addition, how do we let each other know where we are on the road?

Finding the Road

Two weeks ago, Marjory and I found ourselves in a small Mexican resort town we had last visited two years earlier. It is one of those "high tourist density" places where everything is easy to find – until you get off the main street!

The first morning after we arrived, we set out to find a shop we visited the last time we were there, and promptly got lost.

We were on familiar ground. Both of us were recognizing shops and street corners we remembered. However, we just could not seem to find Raphael's restaurant, the landmark across the street from our destination. We could not seem to get our bearings. Alternatively, to be more accurate, we both could not seem to get the same bearings. It turns out that we were seeing this journey from two different perspectives. I was looking at the lay of the land – which way the streets sloped and how the hills rose behind the town. Marjory was looking at how the streets related to the harbor and the big landmark hotel on Marina Boulevard.

At almost every corner, our hunches about which way we should go were different. We would come to an intersection and have to choose which way to go. I would pick a street that looked vaguely familiar until we got to the middle of the block, and then realize that we were lost – again.

We wandered for a long time ... strangers on streets that were familiar to those who lived there. If my Spanish had been better I could have asked where Raphael's was, but I did not have the language skills, and I really was not sure that was the name of the restaurant. Isn't it interesting how low self-confidence can limit one's willingness to ask for help?

Finally, we went back to the main tourist area, found an intersection that we recognized, turned the corner, and saw a familiar sign up the hill at the next corner. Lunch that day at Raphael's was a minor celebration, a sense of coming home ... and a lesson in staying together, even when we don't see eye-to-eye.

That morning, lost on familiar ground, traveling with someone I trust, recalled a poem by Robert Frost that has been in me for 40 years: The Road Not Taken

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both*

*And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted that I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken"

The Road Not Taken holds up the image of different paths into the future, and our freedom to choose, with the reminder that there are consequences in every choice.

Today's Gospel lesson from Luke offers another example of choosing a road to salvation – with different routes for different folks. When the crowd asked John the Baptist: "What should we do," he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food should do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false

accusation and be satisfied with your wages."

Very different people were looking for the road to God. Moreover, John recognized that they needed to start where they were, and grow through discipline and practice. Some needed to learn discipline, others humility; some needed a safe place to heal, others needed enthusiastic listeners to help them find their voices. Getting started, we need to find the path that is right for us ... and we need some help along the way.

As a community, Seekers Church has been sitting with this question of the road (or roads) to God since we began in 1976. From the Church of the Saviour we inherit a description of the road as an unconditional commitment to Christ, and a set of spiritual practices or disciplines. These include:

- Attending **Sunday worship**, usually with Seekers;
- Observing **daily quiet time** – prayer, scripture reading, and reflection or journaling.
- **Giving proportionately** of income, to Seekers, beginning at ten percent;
- Making a **retreat once a year**, if possible with Seekers;
- Participating in an **ongoing mission or support group**;
- Being **accountable for your spiritual journey**;
- **Attending Stewards' meetings regularly**;
- **Supporting the life of Seekers Church** by –
 - *decision-making for the community;*
 - *discovery and use of gifts,*
 - *education and growth in the faith, and*
 - *pastoring and support of Seekers;*
- Reviewing the [Steward's commitment](#) and **recommitting annually** if called by God.

We have established these disciplines for the Stewards. We have been guided by them for our entire life as a church, and have found them a good guide for our spiritual journey, as

individuals and as a community.

Looking back on 20 years of living on this road, I can see that it is a lot like a labyrinth. Look at the labyrinth on the altar. There is only one path. It covers all of the space. You cannot get lost – but you can get frustrated. The path comes close to the center early, but even though the still point at the center is "right there," it is still a long way down the road. There are no blind alleys, no cul-de-sacs – but no straight path to the goal either. That is what the Road to God has felt like since I put down my roots here in 1980 – close, then far away, sometimes staring into the magnificent mystery, sometimes heading away from the center.

I think of this as the Steward's Road, the inner path, the road that is grassy and wanting wear. It's not the King's Highway, or Pennsylvania Avenue, but "as for that, the passing there has worn it really about the same." All are welcome to choose this road, as Kate has done this morning.

Nevertheless, that is not a requirement to participate in the life of Seekers Church. No, there are other paths here, the ones most Seekers are on. Those paths look more like a Bright Snarl than a labyrinth, like our Advent wreath.

You might think of Seekers as a patch of woods, a bright snarl of trees and shrubs and streams and rocks, perhaps the kind of "yellowing wood" in which Robert Frost sets his life-path choice. In the center is a clearing, with a huge bonfire – the Holy Spirit. It lights the night sky, drawing people toward the woods, inviting everyone to come and "warm up in it's glowing." If you look carefully, you can see a path marked on the clearing floor, a tortuous, labyrinthine path that moves toward the center and away, with a few folks walking it, carrying wood to keep the fire going, or flaming pots of fire to shine a light in other places – where we work, or live, or bear witness to the reality – the Empire – of God.

However, there are folks in the woods who are still in the dark. You may be one of them.

You can see the glow through the trees but, frankly, all that bright light makes it hard to see the ground right in front of you – feet in the dark and bright light in the eyes. It is not too bad if you go slowly, but whenever you try to rush, you lose the path, or trip over one of those fallen branches. It is a reminder that this is a wild forest, not a city park.

That is where a friend can help ... a spiritual friend. Someone who may not know a lot more than you, but who's been in these woods a bit longer, and who is willing to offer a caring, but different perspective. As Marjory was, for me, looking for Raphael's, saying, "Why don't we try going over that way?"

So we struggle with how to be welcoming and inclusive, how to help folks get to the bonfire in the middle of the clearing. Should we pave a path, install a few solar-powered, low-voltage, environmentally friendly lights along it so people do not trip on the logs we have not been able to remove yet? Should we put a fence around the whole woods so everyone who comes will know they need to enter at the one gate where the well-marked path begins?

Alternatively, should we remind each other that these woods do not belong to us (even though we've agreed to help take care of them), and that the owner seems rather partial to Mystery? After all, over the years this yellow wood has developed a bright snarl of paths leading to the clearing – one for the tax collectors, another for the moms, another for the social advocates, another for the prophetic intrapreneurs, another for the soldiers, and another for you. This is the way it has been at Seekers, and I am thinking that it is working pretty well:

- Don't fence the forest;
- Help folks find their own path to get started; and

- Keep the labyrinth clearly defined and open to all.

Your path might include regular attendance at the School of Christian Living, or belonging to a Seekers mission group, or being part of one of the Carroll Street teams, or finding a spiritual guide, or faithful friend to help you stay on your feet in the dark.

Moreover, at some point, your path will lead somewhere else. As many of you know, I led a mobile life before Marjory and I found our way here in 1976. When we arrived at Seekers, I had lived in 24 other places. I know something about being sent away. Some Seekers leave because they are sent away. I am remembering Sonya and Manning, of course, and also Ken and Shauna Leinbach, and Art Carpenter, and Phoebe Girard and Mary Claire Powell. All of them made important contributions here then left town. Others leave Seekers because they are called away. Here Fred Taylor, and Anne Jarman, and Ron and Julie Arms come to mind. These Seekers also made important contributions, and then left to become part of the Body of Christ somewhere else.

Today, we mark the departure of Kathy and Doug Cochrane. This is their last Sunday with us, and I want to thank them for putting their weight down here. I will remember Kathy's tireless advocacy for the Earth before human intervention, and Doug's commitments to coffee hour and preparing the cherry wood for our new altar cross at Carroll Street. Kathy and Doug, we will miss you. We wish you God's blessings on your journey. In addition, we will always have a place at the table for you if you should return ... for a visit, or a sojourn.

Each of us needs to find a path that works, and those of us who have been around for a while need to be ready to serve as guides – spiritual guides – for any who come. The more I sit with our challenge to be both inclusive **and** intentional, the more I see belonging as a relationship that includes spiritual accountability. It is clear from the response to Marjory's

class last fall that there is strong, interest in this throughout Seekers Church. The challenge is how to nurture this interest, so that there is a spiritual director ready in Seekers Church for anyone who wants that level of connection here.

Conclusion

I just finished the class on "The Search for the Historical Jesus" led by Jeanne Marcus. What a powerful image – 32 of us gathered on a Tuesday night to wrestle with our understanding of Jesus, and really listen to each other. Jeanne dragged me into some good reading. I took The God of Jesus by Stephen Patterson with me to read (and nap under) while I was on vacation. In between naps, I found a fresh description of choosing a Road to God:

... Jesus preached an Empire of God whose presence was not guaranteed, and perhaps could not ever be. It depends on one's decision to live out its reality in an act of faithfulness. However, in precisely this sense Christian theology must still be thought of as fundamentally eschatological. It is indeed about ending something and beginning something new. In the preaching of Jesus the person of faith receives an invitation to embody new beginnings in his or her very existence, to assert the present reality of the Empire of God, and to live it from potential to actuality. The Empire as "eschaton," as "end," means the end of life lived out of the realities of sin, injustice, violence, shame and pain. Nevertheless, it also has an "end" – that is, a goal. It is not a distant goal, or one so remote that one must despair of ever reaching it. The Empire of God is reached day in and day out, in the very everyday decisions one makes to live faithfully to God."

Therefore, as I look at this matter of choosing the Road to God, and belonging here at Seekers Church, I see us as

- a deep woods with a clearing in the center;
- no fences, and people coming into the woods from every direction;
- lots of faint paths through the woods, heading toward the clearing;
- people willing to walk with you as friends and guides;
- and in the clearing, a labyrinth, leading deeper toward the mystery of the fire.

If you are in the woods and want a hand, or a friend, let me know. Moreover, if you pass the entrance to the labyrinth and feel God's call in a new way ... come on in. Each of us has that choice:

If you've been struggling with how to belong, or how we ought to describe belonging here as we revise our Guide to Seekers Church, think about "spiritual accountability" as the mark of those who have joined us in the woods.

In addition, if your heart leaps up at the idea of helping or guiding others on this journey through the dark woods, let me know. God knows we need all the help we can find.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Amen.