

Peter Bankson: What Must I Do To Inherit Eternal Life?

Seekers Church

A Christian Community

Sermon: October 12, 1997

Peter Bankson

What Must I Do To Inherit Eternal Life?

[Pass out a basket of boiling onions and daffodil bulbs. Invite each person to take one. On the altar, place a large white onion, a large amaryllis bulb, a sprouting parsnip, a leek, and the Seekers' Swedish Ivy plant.]

Summary

Today we celebrate the relationships that bind us together as a community of faith – our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. It is those relationships that create and sustain this group of people we call the Seekers Church. As we live out our call to be church, we will grow toward maturity in ways that might surprise us. Today we made a commitment to live out of that call – together. Not only is Seekers the environment for our spiritual life and growth, but when we gather we bring with us the environment for the life and growth of Seekers. Today we made a commitment to maintain a healthy environment for this community – together. Today we made a commitment to this community – together.

Scripture (Mark 10:17-31)

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt

before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'"

He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the realm of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the realm of God."

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the

good news, who will not receive a hundred-fold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Background

Today we celebrate the relationships that bind us together as a community of faith – our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. It is those relationships that create and sustain this group of people we call the Seekers Church.

My earliest memory of being involved with a group beyond my family happened when I was ten years old. I joined the Cub Scouts. Cub Scouts are organized into "dens," and "packs." Each den had about eight kids, a den mother and some assistant den mothers. The den mother worked with one or two other moms to organize the den meetings and nurture the kids, and help get us ready for the monthly Cub Scout pack meetings, where all the local dens got together to show off their accomplishments.

My den used to meet in the basement of our home. My mother was an assistant den mother, who provided the place for us to meet. The den mother provided leadership for the program. One of the things I remember from those den meetings was reciting the Cub Scout Oath. It went something like this: "The cub scout helps the pack go; the pack helps the cub scout grow; the cub scout gives good will."

Heredity , God's Call To Full Maturity

The Cub Scouts were well organized. There were manuals for the kids, the den mothers, and the pack leaders. There were rituals and procedures, and uniforms and oaths and mottoes and

flags. We had fun as we learned how to behave – decently and in good order.

And, we knew where we belonged, Each boy started out as a wolf cub. After passing certain tests you earned the rank of bear cub. Then, when you passed even more tests you became a lion cub. I learned a lot doing those things. Or, perhaps I ought to say that I learned how much I could do by doing those things.

I have good memories of being a Cub Scout, but I can't remember much about what we did. The big things that stick with me are the sense of being part of a group that enjoyed being together, and the Cub Scout Oath: "The cub scout helps the pack go; the pack helps the cub scout grow; the cub scout gives good will."

Today we made our commitments to being part of a different kind of pack, the Seekers Church: a Christian Community in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour. In some ways Seekers is like my old Cub Scout pack. I enjoy being part of this group. We meet every week and do interesting stuff together. We also have our roles and rituals, our mission groups and celebrations. We learn how much we can do by doing this together.

But Seekers Church is not a program like the Cub Scouts. There is no detailed instruction manual to tell us what to do next week or how it will all turn out in the end. We often speak of Seekers as a "do-it-yourself" church. Liz Vail reminds us of the excitement of creating structures and then living within them.

First, we have made a commitment to a living, growing body, not a mature program. Rather than a boundary that frames us and sets us apart we have a call that describes how the Holy Spirit has come among us. As we say in the Call of the Seekers Church: "Seekers are not persons who have arrived, but persons

who are intentionally on the way."

Second, we are on the way to an unknown future. The quality of our commitment shapes the future of the community itself.

The symbol of Seekers, Swedish Ivy, gives us an image of Seekers as a plant. This plant needs good soil, a bit of sunlight, and a good soaking when the soil gets dry. It's done pretty well over the past 21 years. In fact this plant looks just about the same as it did when I received it as the newest core member in February 1980.

We know, though that this isn't really the same. Our plant has grown, spun off hundreds of runners, died and been replaced by one of its cuttings. But it still it looks like the plant it was almost 18 years ago. That's because it carries in its body the code for what it means to be Swedish Ivy, and with minimum care it will look like Swedish Ivy.

If Ken Burton plants this parsnip in the pot with the Seekers plant, and gives it the same care he gives the ivy, we all know that it will not grow up to be Swedish Ivy. It has different DNA, a different future, a different call.

The Swedish Ivy, like the Cub Scouts, is fully grown: we know what to expect when we plant it. But Seekers Church is not like that. While we are alive and growing as a community, I believe that we are not yet be fully grown.

Look at the bulb or seed you have in your hand. Do you know what it would become if you planted it? Half the bulbs, the darker ones, would grow daffodils early next spring with delicate, fluted yellow blossoms. The others would grow plain green shoots and large bulbs, like this onion, and eventually, a handsome ball of flowers on a long stalk if you waited long enough.

Each daffodil has its own inner nature, and they are very much alike from one plant to the next, although there are different

kinds of plants. The onions, too, are pretty much alike, but they will never be daffodils.

Each Cub Scout pack has its own nature, too, and with the constant, careful nurture by the den mothers, applying all the guidelines in all those manuals, all of them can be very much alike, as well. Of course Cub Scout packs are different from churches, just as onions are different from daffodils.

Seekers Church, too, has its inner code – partly captured in our call to be church. In many ways, we are like the other churches that have grown out of the Church of the Saviour, committed to balancing the inner and outer elements of our faith journey to live lives of action and reflection. But there are possibilities in our future that may be buried within us today. As we live out our call, we will grow toward maturity in ways that might surprise us. Today we made a commitment to live out of that call – together.

Environment , The Place Where We Grow

Look at the bulb you hold. Feel its firmness. Notice its living color. Each of them is ready to plant. But if we neglect them, as I have done more than once with a bag of daffodil bulbs, eventually they wither. If we plant them today in good soil with adequate water, they would soon sprout and begin to grow.

Communities need nurture too. As we heard in the plant ritual when Ken made his commitment to core membership, like the Swedish Ivy we have chosen as our symbol, we need good soil, modest sunlight and a good soaking once in a while.

It may be easier to see the environment that Seekers creates for each of us than it is to see the environment we create for the community. Seekers creates places for celebration, learning, growth, ministry and accountability. Through worship, the School of Christian Living, Sunday School,

mission groups and our direct involvement in Hope and a Home, Seekers provides each of us with plenty of opportunity for living lives of faithful reflection and action.

But the life of the community is made from the energy we put into it. None of those structures – worship, School of Christian Living, Sunday School, mission groups or our direct involvement in Hope and a Home – would exist without the watering, and nurturing that each of us brings with us when we come.

This may sound odd, but Seekers is sort of like a Cub Scout pack with no manuals, where whoever wants to be den mother this month can volunteer, and expect the rest of us to be good scouts and "help the pack go."

So, not only is Seekers Church the environment for our spiritual life and growth, but when we gather we bring with us the energy that creates an environment for the life and growth of Seekers.

Today we made a commitment to maintain a healthy environment for this community – together.

Commitment , The Energy That Animates Our Growth

That brings me to the Gospel lesson for this week. In the story of the rich young ruler we find someone who comes to Jesus wanting some assurance about his future: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asks. Jesus offers him the test of the doctrine of that day. You know the commandments. Have you lived by them? But we know for this rich young ruler, living by the commandments was not enough. It could have been, but it was not. He needed something beyond the law, beyond the Cub Scout badges and arrow points, beyond the spiritual disciplines.

Jesus' answer has come to sound like a heavy load: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

As I see it, Jesus offered that young man the choice between involvement and commitment. Although he was rich, he had followed the commandments since his youth. Clearly he was involved in the faith life of his community, or the question of eternal life would not have bothered him. It also seems clear to me that he had been challenged to a level of faith deeper than that which could be supported by his former level of involvement in the community.

So Jesus called him to a deeper commitment – and it was more than he could grasp. For that young man it would have meant giving up something he depended on – his riches. He felt the stirring to deeper commitment, ran up to the edge of his current reality, asked the transforming question, and could not grasp the transforming answer.

That reminds me of an old description of the difference between involvement and commitment. In a traditional breakfast of bacon and eggs, the hen is involved, but the pig is committed. In the garden, the daffodil is involved – that same bulb will live to grow flowers every spring for many years. The daffodil is involved, but the onion – the onion is committed.

I believe that we do not know the full nature of God's call on this community. I think we are like this leek, healthy, growing, and able to provide some green tips from our leaves for the table without sacrificing our root. Like Seekers Church, this leek is healthy and growing, but far from mature. There is within us – in our collective understanding of who we are as the Seekers Church, at a level that we can glimpse but

not yet name – there is within us some flower, some fruit, some larger ministry of justice and reconciliation.

One of the exciting developments in science over the past two decades, from physics through biology, is the growing understanding that there are properties that emerge in systems as they become more complex and more energetic. These emergent properties could never be predicted from earlier characteristics of the system. It is as though we are discovering that the future can not be predicted from the past. That may not seem surprising, but for me, the idea that the future really is unknown opens up a fresh sense of hopefulness about the future. And, since new possibilities emerge faster in systems that are more energetic, we can expect the new where the energy is high. Just as these bulbs will grow to full maturity only with proper nurture in the right environment, so this community will mature as we become more deeply committed and concentrate more of our energy here.

Does this mean I must give more – more money, more time, more space in my heart? I don't know. I'd take a clue from what Jesus said to the rich young ruler. In order to inherit eternal life he had to learn to trust God for his future and make a real commitment to follow Christ.

That is what we learn here. We come, bringing who we are and we are welcomed. We offer what we can give easily and it is received with thanks. We respond to the needs of others even though it is inconvenient and find that our love grows. We risk being known more fully and we are still welcomed. We are challenged by life, and find comfort in our relationships here. We are called to understand and implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives, and our commitment deepens. Through it all, Seekers Church grows more mature, and we discover new properties, new characteristics in our call to be church.

Today we made a commitment to this community – together.

Conclusion

Today we have reminded each other that we will keep pouring our energy into this church. We do that, in part, because we find ourselves nourished and nurtured by our involvement here. We do it in part, because we are called into the ministries of this church.

But there is another possibility here... Seekers may be called to something more, some fruit or flower, some ministry that we have not yet imagined. And by our commitment, we are being faithful to the search.

As we live out our call to be church, we will grow toward maturity in ways that might surprise us. Today we made a commitment to live out of that call – together. Not only is Seekers the environment for our spiritual life and growth, but when we gather we bring with us the environment for the life and growth of Seekers. Today we made a commitment to maintain a healthy environment for this community – together.

Today we made a commitment to this community – together. Instead of the Cub Scout oath – the cub scout helps the pack go; the pack helps the cub scout grow; the cub scout gives good will – our motto might be: "Each of us helps Seekers go; Seekers helps each of us grow; Seekers Church does God's will."

Let us place our trust in God, and follow Christ into the future that God is ready to reveal to us.

Amen.