

Provoke One Another to Love and Good Deeds by Peter Bankson

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SCRIPTURE

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:19-25)

INTRODUCTION

*But we never can prove the delights of his love
until all on the altar we lay;
for the favor he shows, for the joy he bestows
are for them who will trust and obey.*

I could stop there, and let the lyrics of our hymn sink in...
However, I will not because I wrote a few more things!

Sometimes I am going so fast that I miss something important,

like a key intersection. That happened to me on Tuesday when I was driving out to Saint Andrews Episcopal School to meet Roy Barber at work, the day before he took off for South Africa to be with April as she gives her paper to the national conference on truth and reconciliation. I have been to St. Andrews before, and the road looked familiar. I was moving along with the traffic, and the street signs were there at the corner, but I was traveling alone and running a bit behind schedule. As I drove past the intersection and looked down the familiar road I had not taken, I saw that I had made a mistake.

Maybe that was part of the problem: When I think the road is one I know, it is easy for me to miss the place that I am looking for. The poet David Whyte has been reminding me "our language is not sufficient for the territory we have come into." That rings true for me. The older I get the easier it is for me to assume that I understand, when what God is calling me to is something I don't understand yet, something brand new, something with all the excitement I remember as a kid going to a new place. Nevertheless, in order to find my way in new terrain I do need to move a little slower, keep my eyelids up, and ask someone to go with me.

*Trust and Obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.*

Sermon Hymn

In this season of Jubilee, our theme for worship has been "Dreaming Anew." As Celebration Circle was developing that theme we considered what we thought would be familiar

territory:

- 1. we would have just recommitted to our journey in Christ together,*
- 2. we'd be turning the corner on 30 years as a faith community,*
- 3. the national elections would be happening during the season,*
- 4. the country would be observing Thanksgiving,*
- 5. the weather would be turning colder,*
- 6. the war in Iraq would still be deadly.*

We prayed that there might appear among us some signs of new dreams, some unfamiliar territory offering us new opportunities to claim and follow God's call.

We have had some provocative preaching since recommitment Sunday. I have the sense that something new is stirring in us. Then, last week, the shoot from the Seekers Plant that lives at our house began to bloom! I cannot remember the last time I saw the Seekers Plant in bloom. I am not sure yet what to make of it. Maybe one of you will see something more clearly as we continue our worship together. If you do, please share your insight. Around here, we count on the fact that the Holy Spirit is likely to speak to any one of us.

I missed being here at worship last Sunday. I was attending the board meeting of Faith @ Work. This time it was at the Cenacle about an hour west of Chicago. It is a lovely retreat center run by half a dozen feisty nuns. We did good work in an

atmosphere of prayerful retreat. While I was there, I really was able to set aside the cares and crises du jour. As I went out on Thursday carrying my laptop and board report in one hand and my one-quart zip-lock plastic bag with my toothpaste and deodorant in the other, I was reminded repeatedly "the Transportation Security Administration has raised the national alert level to ORANGE!" I wondered if it was the unfinished elections, the continuing death and destruction in Iraq or some less obvious threat motivated this heightened caution. As I settled into my seat on the threatened plane a phrase from my notes for this sermon rolled up on my inner screen: "Fear is the least of our worries."

How I wish that were so for us as a nation. There is enough to worry about without filling my finite capacity for wonder and work with yet another fear. During "spirit time," as our breaks at the board meeting are known, I was reading the lessons for this week. I was drawn to the Apostle Paul's compassionate advice in our Epistle text: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds..."

Paul's admonition is a challenging response to many factors around us, our gifts, our needs, our frustrations and our faith. Moreover, it is an invitation to dream anew, to enter new territory. It is a question worthy of careful attention: **How can we provoke one another to love and good deeds?**

Say "Yes" to Fundamental Wildness

Four weeks ago, Anna Gilcher shared some powerful images of dreaming anew, of fear in the face of the fundamental wildness of God's creation. She shared the image of waking in a

campground to hear a bear just outside the tent.

She spoke of her yearning for purity of presence. She reminded us of part of the original commitment to Christ, made by members of Church of the Saviour from the beginning of that Body of Christ 60 years ago: *I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ. I believe that God is the total owner of my life and resources.*

Anna told us of her hunger for that level of trust: *I yearn for this, [she said]. For purity of presence. Pure fear. Pure gratitude. Pure sadness. Pure joy. For a full realization of my creature-ness. Unreservedly and with abandon, to commit my life and destiny to Christ...*

She held up a powerful image of the fundamental tension between fear and love. What I heard Anna telling us is that in this season of dreaming anew we can choose to trust God enough to live into our fear. Urging us to risk being together even though we are afraid, Anna said: *As we live in community, as we hurt one another and bless one another and misunderstand one another and make our confessions to one another and forgive one another and feel angry with one another and love one another, we can call each other to a deeper "yes," to dreaming anew.*

This week we hear Paul encouraging us to use our time together to say "Yes" in new ways. Paul says, *"And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some."*

It will not be easy, but with Christ, all things are possible.

Read the Whole Story

Three weeks ago, Pat Conover called us to another arena of concern – dare I say, "worry" – when he challenged us to see what we do not want to see, to read the whole story. Pat led us on a guided meditation into the clogged stairwell of one of the crumbling towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 9/11 and invited us to see what we do not want to see there.

Pat challenged us to *"... follow Jesus into caring for the world even when we have little hope of being understood or appreciated, much less of being effective or successful."* He wondered if we can *"engage our conflicts with more caring and intentionality"* and *"talk to each other before we are articulate, risk[ing] words that we will need to take back?"*

Harking back to Anna's image of fear, Pat invited us to waltz with the bear in our tent so we might learn something new about where we are and where we are being called to grow.

I heard Pat calling us to provoke one another to love and good deeds by claiming our power for compassion and action even when we know we do not have it all together. If we know God's love, we can commit ourselves into an effort that is bigger than we could ever accomplish without divine help; we can reach out to meet the needs of those whose pain is more than we could ever bear without God's help. Pat is right: we will surely step on each other's toes in the process. Can we trust that God's love is bigger than our hurt feelings?

To me, this is a path to finding a place in community where I can muster the will to claim God's call on my life. It will be a path where the need is beyond measure. To follow this path I must find a place where I can offer something that helps. Christ's promise is that I will find deep gladness at some point along this way.

What I have carried away from Pat's sermon is that there are needs and fears out there that I will not be able to face by myself. What I have learned from 30 years in this faith community is that I am not alone.

Recognize the Power of Our Poverty

I missed Dave Lloyd's sermon last Sunday, but I downloaded it as soon as Jeffrey had it posted on the web site. David's title, "Daring to Live the Widow's Dream," gave me an image of sacrificial giving, a powerful image of trust in God; a fresh image of singing "We Shall Overcome" in this crowded stairwell, knowing that in the end it is God's love that will save us and not our 401k retirement plans.

Dave dared us to live the dream of the widow who gave God all she had. Her two small coins were given in a love moved by the faith that God loved her and would care for her. They were more important than much larger gifts from others.

In Dave's sermon, I heard a strong invitation to recognize our own poverty, to climb into the boat with the widow, to find

our joy in giving all that we are and all that we have to Christ. The original Church of the Saviour commitment statement says it well: "I joyfully and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ. God is the owner. Because God is a lavish giver I too shall be lavish and cheerful in my regular gifts." God knows, this kind of commitment is what it takes to bring a new dream from a root buried in the cold, wet earth to a hearty plant in bloom.

Claim our Call – Where Need and Gladness Meet

There is a well-worn description of God's call that floats around here. It goes something like, "*Call is where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.*" The idea comes from Frederick Buechner. In May, he told Bob Abernathy from PBS: *The vocation for you is the one in which your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet – something that not only makes you happy but that the world needs to have done.*

The first time I heard that description of Call it had a strong ring of truth about it. I knew enough about the call of duty and my own tendencies to over-commitment to believe that I unless I could find some gladness in my giving, I'd run out of energy long before I'd met very much of whatever deep need I'd latched onto.

I have always had trouble with a lot of gladness. Maybe it is because when I was very young World War II disrupted my family for a long time and I had to grow up fast. I do not know. What I do know is that I find it much easier to focus on the need and look for the gladness to sustain me than the other way

around.

I am beginning to see, however, that there is an equally valid path to call that begins with gladness and leads to a place where that gladness crosses paths with a deep need. There are artists among us who know that path much better than I do. I want to learn from folks who are following that path. Funny thing, one place where folks on the path of gladness meet up with folks on the path of duty is at the point of call, the place where both groups are serving a need **and** finding their gladness. That is the place here at Seekers Church to which I want to point.

Over the past 30 years I've been able to see the intersection of need and gladness in the lives of other Seekers who have claimed the call of this church: *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.*

We are a worshipping community committed to sending folks out with enough gladness to engage the deep needs of the world, and to companioning each other as we grow. Put a different way, we are a faith community that can welcome those who are working to meet the world's deep needs and help them find enough gladness to go back out tomorrow to share the Good News again. The way I see it, Seekers Church is a place where we can learn how to support each other as we find that the place where need and gladness meet.

I see it often. When I had Lunch with Roy Barber, I met some of his students and colleagues, including the school chaplain. The chaplain asked me why I was there. I said I was visiting Roy at work to see where he was living out God's call. The chaplain's face lit up. He looked over my shoulder at Roy and said, "People say to me, 'How can you do your job? There are 450 students and only one of you?' I tell them that we're all serving these young people." It is clear to me that Roy is out there trying to "understand and implement Christian servanthood" at Saint Andrews Episcopal School. When I asked, Roy was clear: he could see and affirm that.

Here is another: Three weeks ago, I was honored to offer a prayer for Dan Phillips as he was ordained as a minister in the Baptist Church. At the reception after the ceremony, and in e-mails since then, both Dan and Martha have told me how important it has been for them to be able to put their weight down here at Seekers Church as they grew into the call that God has for them. Dan is now serving as associate pastor the Mount Vernon Baptist Church where Martha is senior pastor. They are another example of claiming call at the point where deep gladness meets deep need.

I'm also aware of how richly the Holy Spirit has nurtured many people here, offering encouragement and accountability for us when we are together, to help us search for meaning, and struggle with loss, as we offer ourselves to implement Christian servanthood in the structures in which we live our lives.

There are places becoming known where we might build a more communal calling. This morning about 15 of us of us helped the Covenant Christian Community Church fill 200 Thanksgiving food

boxes for families in need. Covenant Community is the Baptist church that worships here on Sunday afternoons. This was the 22nd year of their Thanksgiving food basket ministry. It felt wonderful to lend a hand to this church of about a dozen members as they served a clear need for so many families. It was a delight to watch as Kevin and Charles and Marjory tossed empty boxes around in the cold parking lot, lining them up so Julia and a young colleague could number them off as we waited for the food to come. That congregation spent \$7,500 to make Thanksgiving dinner more of a celebration for 200 needy families and I felt deep gladness as I helped them make it happen. It was the invitation from Reverend Lola Johnson-Singleton, and the example last year of Margreta and Jeffrey and Margreta's invitation this year that provoked me out of bed earlier than usual this morning to do what felt like a good deed. Thanks you Margreta. We could do more of that kind of partnering.

Last week I answered the phone here and talked with the director of Love Thy Neighbor, a peacemaking ministry that is looking for office space. They have some Church of the Saviour connections, and they are bringing Christians, Jews and Muslims together to search out fresh paths to peace. As I talked with the director, I thought of Rebecca Sears' work with Communilog, the community application of Imago Therapy she is helping to introduce in Russia. I thought of our growing commitment to non-violent communications. I wondered what could blossom if Love Thy Neighbor became our tenant downstairs. They may not need the office space we have to offer, but they may be offering us an opening to a new way to the spot where need and deep gladness meet.

Closing: Seekers Church is a Learning Lab for Claiming Call

I dream of Seekers Church as a "Learning Lab for Claiming Call," a vocational training center for pilgrims who are on mission in the world and a community for encouragement and accountability.

I want us to be a place where we can find the vocational intersection where the forces of gladness and need converge, where we can face our fears with all our imperfect energy and incomplete commitment, where we can provoke each other into love and good deeds that will flow out into the ordinary structures of our lives and beyond.

One of the challenges to finding that intersection is that whether we favor the path of need or the path of gladness, we tend to take God's call seriously. We are out there – or in here – with our eyes focused on the need (or the gladness) trying to follow a sometimes tortuous path of call through a complex and challenging culture. Given our concentration and our speed, it is easy to miss the intersection, as I did on Tuesday on my way to have lunch with Roy.

As we travel together, imperfect in our relating to one another and the world around us but open to the healing, teaching presence of the Holy Spirit, facing our fears and the enormity of the needs God is revealing to us; as we travel together in community we can offer each other support and accountability.

- ***Look for a place where you can provoke someone to***

Love and good deeds

- *Build a relationship there that calls both of you out of your safe places into the deep gladness of unreservedly and with abandon giving yourselves to Christ.*
- *Ask someone at coffee hour what he or she needs so he or she can trust God enough to live into his or her fear of God's Call – then help him or her find it.*

Look! Our little piece of the Seekers' plant is blooming! Maybe this season of dreaming anew means that it's time to dance with the bear in my tent, to learn something about how to let Christ help me find that intersection of deep need and deep gladness ... and hang around for a while.

Amen.