

“Being the Body of God” by Marjory Bankson

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The 1st Sunday After Pentecost

Today is the first Sunday after Pentecost. Many liturgical churches celebrate this day as Trinity Sunday, because, in the story of our faith, the Holy Spirit has now arrived on the scene to carry on the work of Jesus through the body of believers which came to be known as “the church.” Seekers Church is one small expression of that tradition. And, as is our custom, CC has given us a new liturgy, a new altar installation and a new bulletin cover to invite us into our focus for this season: “Learning to Live in the Body.”

In the reflection paragraph, Carter Heyward reminds us that God is embodied through us: “Our hands are God’s hands in the world. Our hearts are God’s heart in the world. God pulsating. God beating. God yearning and open and growing in history.” In other words, we can understand ourselves to be the body of God in this time and place...right here, right now.

After hearing the whole first chapter of Genesis read this

morning, I would also say that God is embodied by every sunrise and glacier, every stone and tree, by every quark and neuron of the universe. Human beings may be specially equipped for conscious reflection, but God, the Psalmist reminds us, is bigger than that.

GENESIS

Let's begin with the creation story that we heard this morning. As a child, I loved to hear this amazing account of how the world and everything in it came to be. I heard God's blessing repeated over and over again with each day of creation: "It is good. It is good." Humans were made in God's image, male and female, so mutual attraction and even sex might be included in the fabulous account of God's good creation. And the image of God resting on the Sabbath seemed especially delicious – just the way I felt after a week of sitting still at school.

As I began to study the million-year age of rocks and fossils, those facts slid easily into the biblical story like drawers of specific information within the swirling images of God's good creation. I didn't actually know anybody who took the biblical account literally, so it was a surprise to discover that there were people who made each biblical day into 24 hours and got upset about scientific study – archeology, geology, evolution and quantum physics. It seemed logical to me that God's day might be millions of years long or that our human language was simply inadequate to describe the wonder of creation.

The story of creation which we read this morning described the true nature of God as it was understood by the Jews of Jesus'

time. Marcus Borg, in his book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, suggests that we ask WHY ancient Israel told their story of prehistory in this particular way. Like other scholars, he notes there are two creation stories in Genesis. The one we heard this morning was probably written about 500 BCE, around the time of the Babylonian exile. Rather than being a literal account of how long creation took, Borg says "the six-day creation story was meant to reinforce the importance of the Sabbath."

Even though they had been conquered and taken off into exile, Israel still claimed that they worshipped the God of all creation and not just some tribal god who could be vanquished by the King of Babylon. Keeping the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship became a touchstone for Jews in diaspora. Later, when the Temple was rebuilt, keeping the Sabbath holy was a mark of God's covenant promise to be with them wherever they were.

By the time of Jesus, 500 years after this creation story was written down, the radically expansive vision of God as creator of the universe had taken on the priestly garb of a tribal god with limited access through the Temple hierarchy. Indeed, keeping the Sabbath properly was one of the difficulties that the Pharisees had with Jesus, because he insisted that he was honoring God by healing people on the Sabbath, rather than keeping the many rules which had grown up around what it meant to keep the sabbath holy.

With his life and actions, as well as his words, Jesus began to interpret God in a new way, pushing the boundaries of The Law to invite everyone to God's banquet table and hallow the lives of everyone who was hungry for God. For Jesus, holiness

happened when the lame could walk, the blind could see again and outcasts were included.

The God of Jesus was also as intimate and caring as a good father, not some far-off source of creation. Jesus embodied a different understanding of God and the people around him recognized that. Some were offended and others were overjoyed to think that they too could relate to God as he did, but without what happened after his death – without Pentecost – Jesus would probably have been known as the leader of a reform movement within Judaism, not the founder of another religion.

Last week, Peter preached about Pentecost as the spirit of connection within community. He spoke about us being stem cells in the body of God – capable of changing function for the good of the whole body. I have no better metaphor to offer you. If creation is the manifestation of God, and Jesus showed us what humans have to contribute to the larger web of life, then the Holy Spirit makes chosen community possible. Pentecost moves us beyond the families that we are born into and the tribes we grow up in.

TRINITY

Although I like to tell heartwarming stories that celebrate the body that we are becoming together, I want to tease apart Matthew's Trinitarian formula a bit, because it's been such a stumbling block between Christians and Jews for millennia and more recently, between Christians and Muslims. All three of these religious traditions claim Abraham and Sarah as our forebearers. All three would claim there is only one God, creator of the universe.

But when Christians talk about the Trinity, it is a barrier. Because of that, we need to think about how to engage our brothers and sisters in the wide tent of Abraham and Sarah. They would say “How can Jesus be one with God and still be a human being? And where does the Holy Spirit fit in? Is that yet another God? What does it mean to sing the doxology, “God in three persons, blessed Trinity?”

For centuries, wars have been fought and lives have been lost over those questions. But if we look at the way Jesus handled such doctrinal questions, what we see is the evidence he gave to the followers of John: lives are changed, bodies healed, outcasts included, spiritual guidance honored. Ordinary people discover their call and gifts within God’s ongoing creation story – and they are transformed in the process.

At the risk of offending the more sophisticated theologians among us, let me describe the Trinitarian pictures that I hold in my own prayer life. God is the name I give to the source of all creation. This God has no face, no long beard and Michaelangelo garments flapping in the clouds, but is the dynamic force in the universe. It could be what scientists call the Big Bang. Like the Hebrew Testament prophets, I feel awe and trembling in the presence of that God because it is so unpersonal.

And Jesus? I think of him as embodying the possibilities for human beings in a new way. He enlarged our understanding of what life is for. He showed us what humans could contribute to God’s creation story. It is his humanity that makes Jesus a compelling teacher for me. I believe that we all contain the

breath of God in our bones and sinews, but our culture seems to encourage a reptilian concern with safety and comfort, settling for success and security. But Jesus came to show us a broader path – to “love one another as I have loved you,” he said. That principle is found in nearly all the world’s religions. The question then becomes, how to do it.

That’s where the Holy Spirit comes in. Think of the Holy Spirit as the soul of every relationship, every community, leaping the barriers of individual differences, drawing us together for a common purpose. Luke envisioned the Spirit as tongues of fire. The Gospel of John calls it “teacher, counselor, and guide.” However we experience that fire of connection, it quickens the lifeforce in us. It draws us together in community. It propels us here, rather than staying home this morning to read the paper or watch TV. If the person of Jesus narrowed our experience of God to one man, who lived and died in history, then the Holy Spirit opens us up to the intangible nature of God once again.

GO...AND MAKE DISCIPLES

Our readings for today include Matthew’s understanding of the purpose for Pentecost: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In other words, go out into the world and make disciples of everybody. Commonly known as the “great commission,” many have seen this directive as a mandate for charismatic individuals to convert everyone to Christianity, baptizing people who

could say the proper words. But I don't think that's what Matthew is saying here. If we put the emphasis on "making disciples" rather than on baptizing people, this text presents a very different picture from an army of evangelists who are counting converts. Instead, we would ask "What does it mean to follow Jesus? To be a disciple of Jesus? To invite others to that journey?"

The word "disciple" means "learner," and so making disciples means "being a company of learners" – something we strive for here at Seekers. Not only do we encourage people to continue taking classes in the School of Christian Living, but we expect people to learn more about themselves in the close quarters of their mission groups.

Elizabeth O'Connor reminds us in her many books that we will undoubtedly find the very person we don't want to be with in our mission groups – because when we notice what's wrong with that person, we will discover gifts lurking in the shadows of our own lives. By confronting the "otherness" of one another, we learn to love in a new way – one that is not so ego-bound. Indeed, learning to love one another as Jesus loved his disciples has little to do with mutual attraction and much to do with letting our ego-boundaries be permeable and elastic, of knowing that we belong to God's renewing work in the world and continuing to explore the changing DNA of our souls.

When I look at the life of Jesus for guidance, what I see is complete integration between his inward dependence on God and his outward life with the disciples, teaching, guiding, modeling and challenging them to grow in their ability to love one another. Indeed, making disciples as Jesus did implies walking together in the geography that we are given – right

here – in this family, this neighborhood, in this city and this world.

And so it was that Seekers decided to be a body of God in this very place. With fear and trembling, about 35 Seekers pledged their time, energy and money to buy this derelict building in the year 2,000, fearing that it would undermine our ability to give generously to the many ministries that we were already involved in. Although we agonized for years over whether to buy, rent or build a new home, I believe it was the RISK that we undertook TOGETHER that gave us a sense of our collective strength, our trustworthiness and our resilience. When individuals objected or dropped out, we found reservoirs of caring and collaboration which allowed us to make our life together a priority. Together, we took another step on the path that the Holy Spirit set before us.

Making disciples takes time and intention. We are all in the process as learners and teachers, as givers and receivers. Learning how to love one another is only part of the curriculum. When we recognize that loving God means caring for all of creation, then you know that part of the task is to let our hearts grow beyond the little corner that we had staked out for ourselves. If we are to be stem cells in the body of God, you know there is more change ahead.

We are here to encourage and support one another; to be the body of God in this time and place. Jesus gives us eyes to see and ears to hear the next step in our journey together.

As an invitation to what more we might be doing, I'd like to

close with a short poem from Mary Oliver. The title is "Watching a Documentary about Polar Bears Trying to Survive on the Melting Ice Floes."

The poem goes like this:

That God had a plan, I do not doubt.

But what if His plan was, that we would do better?

I hope we will.

Amen.