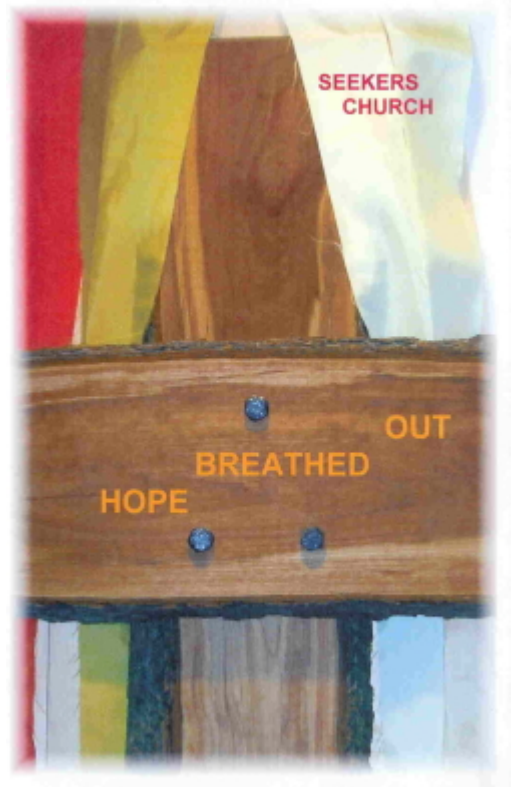


# "Honoring Our Prophets" by Marjory Zoet Bankson

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July 5, 2009

*Gospel: Mark 6:1-13 ...Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.*

Did any of you celebrate July 4 by watching Venus and Serena Williams compete for the Women's Wimbledon title yesterday? Or ride your bike through a spectrum of nationalities camped out by the river or in Rock Creek Park? Did any of you walk on the Mall surrounded by the sights and sounds of the Folklife Festival? Or lie on a blanket with thousands of other people, watching the fireworks without fear of police brigades?

At some time during this anniversary weekend, did you feel glad that we can celebrate a peaceful transition of political power – and offer a prayer for the safety and courage of our new President and his family. Did you notice the words of "America, the Beautiful" this morning, made more inclusive of all Americans by M.T. Winters, the Medical Mission Sister who served in Latin America for many years?

Because of the way Jesus lived his message of inclusion, I see all of these as prophetic moments, offered by ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

## **Gospel Reading**

Webster's dictionary defines a prophet as "one who speaks for God as though with divine guidance." Many people recognized Jesus as a prophet, but our Gospel reading for this morning describes the rejection of Jesus by his own family and close neighbors: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house," Jesus tells his disciples.

Is that because they knew him too well? Or couldn't believe he could heal others? Why couldn't they believe their own eyes? It's not that he was calling them to a rebel movement. He was just doing what God had called him to do – healing the child of Jairus, speaking to the woman with an issue of blood, calling Zaccheus down from a tree. Jesus lived out the radical message of God's love for the whole world in ordinary encounters with particular people. But the people closest to him could not believe that was really God's message for them.

Why is a prophet rejected by those who know him well? Who presumably love him? Is a family too close to recognize greatness? Or is it that we don't want others to rise too far above us? And what does this mean for Seekers?

## Seekers

From the beginning, Seekers redefined prophetic ministry, seeing it in the ordinary structures of our lives rather than solely in the political realm. It's a good story for this Independence Day weekend, because it marked our separate identity within the CoS community.

On July 4, 1976, Peter and I arrived in Washington, DC. The moving van disgorged our belongings on that Bicentennial day and we watched the fireworks from our back porch, exhausted but happy to be here.

The following Sunday, we drove into the city to visit Church of the Saviour, which we had been reading about for a decade. What we found was deeply disturbing. The church was in the process of breaking into five little churches and we had no idea how to choose which one would be right for us. Gordon Cosby was still preaching a Sunday service at the headquarters building, so we went there for a couple of months and in the Fall, joined an Old Testament class at the School of Christian Living. There we met a number of Seekers and soon decided to try the Seekers worship service which was in the same building, but at an earlier hour.

That Sunday was a communion Sunday, and I was amazed to see Sonya Dyer and Fred Taylor at the altar together. In 1976, I had never seen a woman preside at the communion table! Tears kept rising, unbidden. We took that as a good sign, so we came back to Seekers and stayed.

We discovered that Seekers had chosen its' funny name because Fred and Sonya wanted to change the paradigm around prophecy. They had read an article by Robert Greenleaf which said:

Prophets grow in stature as people respond to their message. If their early attempts are ignored or spurned, their talent

may wither away. It is seekers, then, who make prophets, and the initiative of any one of us in searching for and responding to the voice of contemporary prophets may mark the turning point in their growth and service.

The common definition of "prophetic ministry" is that which challenges the socio/political systems that keep people "in their place." In that view, Jesus died because he challenged the dominant political systems of the Roman Empire. In fact, because Church of the Saviour was so shaped by the civil rights movement of the late 60s, that was the predominant understanding there too.

But Sonya and Fred wrote the initial call of Seekers differently. They wanted to identify prophetic ministry in the ordinary circumstances of our lives – because that was the way Jesus practiced his prophetic ministry. They identified ministry in four areas: at work, in family relationships, through mission group service and as public citizens.

Essentially, Seekers charted a new path of honoring prophetic ministry in the daily rhythms of our lives. And on that communion Sunday at Seekers in 1976, I felt included by Sonya's presence as a woman for the first time in my life. It was a prophetic moment and in its own small way was indeed addressing a system of religious exclusion which had been in place for nearly 2,000 years.

## **Who Are We Now?**

Many things have happened in the 33 years since Seekers began. Much of that is documented here, in *The Seekers Story, 1976-2006*. Today I want to focus more on who we have become and how we seek to honor the prophets among us.

In a sermon that Deborah preached back in September of 2000, when we were thinking about what we wanted for our new home,

she spoke about the yearning among poor factory workers for "bread and roses too." It was a plea for beauty as well as functionality in our new building.

Later, Sonya named the special gifts at the heart of Seekers in a slightly different way. She named our charism as ADVOCACY and ART – another version of bread and roses. Advocacy speaks of the systemic change that many Seekers work for in their jobs and volunteer service, both here and abroad. Art though speaks more broadly of creativity in many forms. Making art is not usually identified by Americans as prophetic ministry, and yet we know that repressive regimes frequently jail the poets and other artists who can inspire others with an alternative vision. I think of advocacy as systems change and art as individual creativity – two sides of a dynamic process that looks like a mobius strip. [gesture]

This past week, several Seekers attended the opening of an art show by Steve Estrada at the Dadian Gallery, which Deborah oversees at Wesley Seminary. On the surface, Steve's slightly abstracted birds are beautiful and skillfully rendered, but they are divorced from their natural context and I found them slightly troubling. I went home and couldn't get them out of my mind's eye and then I realized they are all warblers – tiny songbirds which are fast disappearing from the biological diversity of this planet. It was art and advocacy woven together, honored publically by another member of Seekers.

But what about people who aren't so visible? How are we to honor the places where they impact others with love instead of rejection – as Jesus did.

Recently there has been some discussion at the monthly Stewards meeting about who we are at this point in our story as a community of believers. Since the move to this building five years ago, we have noticed that the people who are being attracted to Seekers are more often mature people who are looking for some combination of call and creativity. Some know

of our roots in Church of the Saviour, but others do not.

I have a hunch that we are becoming a church for the "third round of call" – that period in life beyond child-rearing and primary vocation. It grows out of our tradition of linking the journey inward and the journey outward, but it also grows out of our call to look for prophetic ministry in the ordinary structures of daily life – in work and family relationships, in volunteer activity and public citizenship. That appeals to people who are ready to shift away from the unrelenting pressures of large organizations but still have energy to care and serve and create. (We should not forget that Church of the Saviour was 30 years old when the "diaspora" occurred in 1976 or that Gordon was 59 at the time. He has lived to see a full round of ministry develop along Columbia Road, around the Festival Center.)

We will need to be alert for ways that these experienced people can offer their gifts. One way, of course, is to speak from the open pulpit, but there are others too – like the Art Camp that Martha Phillips pushed for when we first move here, or the Katrina fundraiser that the Smith-Estradas sponsored this spring, or the class that Nancy Sutton offered in the School of Christian Living.

We need to be especially aware of people who are not in mission groups, because they are not in the systems that we have for listening to one another carefully, prayerfully. One way might be something Jane Engle has been voicing – the need for a group of spiritual companions who would be available to people who are not already in mission groups.

Another aspect of who we are now is that we can support prophets without sponsoring their programs. In the past five years, we have established this building as a ministry of place – offering flexible space to many groups and trusting the Time and Space Mission Group to discern appropriate guidelines (and exceptions) for renting the space. The

building itself has supported others without needing those efforts to be named or controlled as a ministry of Seekers.

Interplay is a good example of that. Sue was the original link with Interplay, Kate and Billy Amoss have become local leaders within the national association of Interplayers. Many Seekers have participated in both the practice and leadership development programs without needing to claim it as a Seekers program. To celebrate our connection, the chant which we sang earlier came from Phil Porter, one of the founders of Interplay.

When we moved here, many people were afraid that the cost of repaying the renovation loans and running the building would drain energy from external giving. In fact, the opposite has been true. In spite of the economic crisis, our contributed income is now higher than it was in 2004 when we moved here, and external giving has increased substantially – largely because Sue has been able to track money that Seekers gave to Bokamoso students beyond their Sunday contributions here. That will change now that Bokamoso has become a separate non-profit, but it's an illustration of Seekers financial generosity.

In addition, many Seekers have gone with us to Guatemala in a program sponsored by Faith At Work and Seekers has been generous with money for the work project and with scholarship help for participants from Seekers. I trust that other forms of local and international mission will continue to emerge as newcomers realize this is a do-it-yourself church.

Independence Day has many meanings in our culture. As we embark on another year in our life together, let us continue to honor the prophets in our midst as they challenge dehumanizing patterns in the four areas staked out by the call of Seekers: at home and at work, in volunteer arenas and as citizens of the United States. And let us keep a sharp eye on those who are less obvious, less visible because of our

mission group structure for care and belonging, but who are changing the world, one encounter at a time.

My prayer is that Seekers can continue to grow and change so we can all find a place of call and commitment to God's work in the world and be honored by our brothers and sisters here.

Amen.