

"Labor and Inner Work" by Marjory Zoet Bankson

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

by Marjory Zoet Bankson

Labor and Inner Work

Lectionary Reading:

James 1:17-27...but be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23... Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

This is Labor Day Weekend, the tipping point between summer and fall and a time that was traditionally set aside to honor "laborers" who actually produce the things we use every day.

I would like to take a few minutes to focus on Labor Day, to honor the kind of physical work that undergirds the more intellectual pursuits that many of us enjoy.

- How many of you have worked in a building or farming trade?
- In mining or construction?
- Or in a manufacturing plant? Or in commercial food preparation and preservation?
- Or in farming?

Close your eyes and breath into that body memory, remembering how it felt. What were the sounds? What were the smells?

Those are the people Jesus was talking to as he moved about the countryside, people who could not possibly follow all the Temple rules for approaching God and therefore failed, year after year, to measure up as worthy and acceptable **to God**.

By his life and his actions, Jesus brought them the radical message that God loved them all – without condition, or rules, or rituals. In our text for today, Jesus tells the thousands of people who were crowding around him that God is not so concerned with what they **ought** to do or not do, eat or not eat, but that God **is** concerned about how people treat each other. As Sherri said in her sermon a couple of weeks ago, the standard of Jesus is to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Labor Day is a time to honor hard physical work-and the necessary teamwork that it often requires. When we go to Guatemala and work beside farmers who are skilled and strong from working their marginal fields at 8,000 feet or so, I feel the solidarity that comes from working together – laboring to build a school that they want for their children. When I am there, I also remember the six summers that I spent picking crops beside migrant laborers in berry and bean fields – glad for the work and glad when it was over. Labor Day always marked the return to school for me, but not for them. They moved on to the apple orchards, east of the mountains. Labor Day is a time of remembrance for the people who put food on our tables, cars on the road and build roofs to shelter us.

Labor demands teamwork. In our reading for today, Jesus says that we are not defiled by what goes into our bodies, but by what comes out. In other words, actions speak louder than following Temple rules. Jesus spoke first to the large crowd about that, and then he took his disciples aside to make sure they understood what he was saying-that God cared less about hand-washing and avoiding certain foods, than about acting with honesty and care.

As Aeren said in [her sermon last week](#), the image we worked with on the [Faith At Work](#) Pilgrimage to Guatemala was “being the body of Christ.” Every part was important: weak and strong, quick and slow, playful and serious. It was not just “a good idea,” it was something we tested over and over again: on the bus, in shared living spaces, loading wheelbarrows and tying rebar, watching out for each other in sickness and in health. Working together made it more important to watch out for each other!

We live in a culture that breeds separateness. We use our money to buy privacy. Cell phones give us the illusion of connection and iPods take us away from each other even when we are standing close. We literally do not know that we make a difference to one another. On this Guatemala Pilgrimage, it was no different. After we had been there about four days, one woman came to me and asked about going home early. I was taken aback, and said that she would have to make her own arrangements to do that. “But,” I said, “I hope you won’t leave because the whole group needs you.” She looked doubtful, but she stayed. On the last day, she brought it up again...and said she was glad I had not made it easy for her to leave. I think she had a hard time believing we needed her-would miss her-would indeed suffer without her. She was part of a body, but she did not know it.

I think that is an issue for all of us here too. We are creatures of our culture, and Jesus is speaking to us. We do not easily know that each one matters to the whole body here. We have to learn how to love one another. It is not obvious. It takes practice. Moreover, when we have been close together more intensely, we Americans need our breathing space. On the day that a 40-passenger bus arrived to take us to Chi Chi, **everyone took a window seat.** We had had enough closeness! So much for our relational life together!

Yet when the transmission went out that same day that stranded us on a mountain road, people moved in close, talking quietly in twos and threes. There was no panic, no blame. The driver used his cell phone to call for help and soon we were on our way home in two mini-buses...with 11 people crammed into each! What I noticed was our flexibility, like breathing in and breathing out. We were becoming a healthy body, able to adapt.

After Sherri Alms preached on “loving your neighbor as yourself,” citing Kathleen Norris’ book, *Dakota*, I went back and reread it along with the books we had used in the Benedictine class last spring. Norris herself is exploring what it means to be part of an extended Benedictine community. She tells an old Benedictine joke about the monk who was asked about the greatest difficulty in living a spiritual life. “The other monks,” he said, knowing that they had all taken a lifetime vow of stability and obedience. That is, they had promised not to move on in search of better company. If you have not read *Dakota*, I highly recommend it. Norris is clear about the downsides of community, but she is also clear how essential it is to developing the capacity for detachment and commitment. In some ways, that is what I did here at Seekers

when I decided to become a steward. I chose to let this community be the place where I could see my shadow parts mirrored back. I chose to move beyond pursuing my individual call as a member. I chose to cast my lot with this whole body – people I do not necessarily like or agree with, but I know we are called to hold a container in which each of us can learn who we are in God’s unfolding story.

Parker Palmer writes about the importance of “dis-illusionment” in community. That is, we need to confront our **illusions** about what a community **ought to be** and learn both the limits and rewards of what it is. A community like Seekers can be a place to bring our fears, discover our hopes, strengthen our spiritual practice of including another in the hard work of inner healing and continue to ask the questions of call that God has planted in our lives at each stage. I know that I am not always loving or thoughtful, kind or caring. As an introvert, I am not good about reaching out. But I can only learn a different way if I’m close enough to others to let them influence me...and that doesn’t mean sitting in a row all by myself, looking out the window. When Jesus reminds us that we will be **known** by what comes out of us, he is talking about how we act-how we love one another.

I want to close with a few words about this unfired burial urn on the altar. It is the work of my hands, made this week for my mother’s ashes. Next Saturday, we will gather with my sisters, their spouses and children and grandchildren for a memorial service in Bellingham, Washington, where I grew up. Then we will take the urn out to Lynden for burial next to my father, in the plot with my Dutch grandparents and great-grandparents. It could be the last time we gather as an extended family.

The urn is small, but sufficient to hold her ashes. Long ago, I had to let go of my anger over her alcoholism, my disappointment that she was not the mother I wanted her to be. And being in Seekers has helped me do that in many small and large ways, so I could come to her bedside with an open heart-ready to walk with her in those last days.

I realized with a shock as I began to work with the scripture today, that I spent many years blaming her for what she was putting into her mouth, angry with her for drinking instead of facing into the life she had been given...which I saw as full of privilege and opportunity. She would never have gone to Guatemala! She was angry and depressed much of the time. I tried distance. I tried spiritual discipline to unhook from her complaints. Nevertheless, I need to tell you that I could not really forgive her or shift my focus all by myself! It took a miracle – an intervention by God in 1982, to open my heart...just a little at a time. I will be glad to describe it if you want to know the details. I began to notice that I was able to love her even though she was still drinking. That does not mean I wanted to be with her, it just means that I was able to tolerate being with her and not let her actions throw me completely off course.

After my father died in 1987, my sisters and I participated in an intervention with the help of a social worker. Mother went into treatment (at age 73) and began her recovery. We had nearly 20 years of sobriety before she died and I gradually began to see the woman that my father had fallen in love with. I saw her most clearly that way in the last months of her life. What was coming out of her then was gratitude for her life, for the way we were living our lives and for the

qualities that she saw in her grandchildren. Her needs were small, but she spoke them. She organized her affairs, simplified her life and did not cling to independence when that was no longer possible. She stepped into her diminishment at 90 with considerable grace...and I had done enough of my own inner work to see it.

That is not going to happen for everyone, I know that. Nevertheless, I think it is important to tell the stories when it does, because we are all in process and we need to know that hope is real, not some pious wish for change. God is the healer, but we-as a community-are the body, the crucible for change. It will not happen in a vacuum. We must be confronted and loved into the new life Jesus promised to the laborers around him.

The work that we do in the world is important. It is the fruit of our lives. However, when we too rest in a small urn like this one, the legacy that we leave behind will be measured by how we have learned to love.

That is what Jesus wanted his disciples to understand.

Amen.