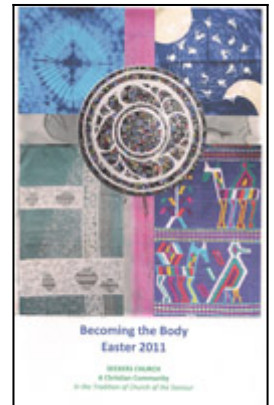


“My Story of the Sacred Conversation” by Sandra Miller

15 May 2011



The Fourth Sunday of Easter

On Pentecost you will get to hear what I think is a wonderful reflection piece taken from Jan Richardson's book *In Wisdom's Path* that reads:

We are the vessels of God's voice, her words blowing through us, bidding us to tell the tales that only we can speak.

Holy One, I pray that I will be a vessel of your voice, that it will be your words blowing through me and through us this day. In Christ's name, amen.

Each time I come to the pulpit to preach it is to tell tales. I am not a learned theologian able to deliver revelatory exegeses of the week's lections. Indeed, writing a sermon reminds me that even after a 30 plus year journey with Jesus, I am still like the apostles, getting it wrong too often but doing my best to follow the way by reaching into my own and the world's broken places. So, I fall back on stories, which fits with my tendency to use many words when a few will do.

The story I want to relate today is a tale that I only I can tell, but has many voices in it besides my own. I can't speak for others, but I can relate shared experiences from my vantage point in an attempt to express the effect and value that open hearts, honest communication, and respectful relationships have in moving us closer to becoming the body, closer to the city of God.

Be forewarned, like the footfalls of life this story moves through many doors, and, like truth, it is not a linear progression. With the help of the Holy Spirit, when all is said and done, the paths will come together in front of one door that stands open to all of us.

Some time ago, Kate Cudlipp shared an observation that I heard as, her spiritual life could not be compartmentalized, that it was a thread that ran through all the aspects of her life. Whether or not that is exactly what she meant, and despite the fact that I knew this already, and that this is hopefully true for all people of faith, something about the timing in hearing this brought it home to me in a deeper way. There was a gut level recognition of how true it is for me these last eighteen years or so. In practicality, it's not true every minute of every day, but when it is, grace spills out everywhere in

copious enough amounts that I can't help but sit up and take notice. And that grace carries me through times of doubt or just being oblivious. Even when I am working with or on my own woundedness or the woundedness in the world, that grace brings me a sense of completeness that I am exactly where I belong.

In John's Gospel today we hear Jesus tell us that whoever enters by the gate, which he is, is the shepherd of the sheep. There are parts of this passage that give me a lot of trouble, so that I almost avoided citing it altogether. First and foremost being that I don't believe that the only way to salvation, or through the gate, is through Jesus Christ. Secondly, I don't believe that there are only shepherds and sheep. I embrace the Church of the Saviour model that we all have the potential to be servant leaders, that sometimes we are the shepherd and sometimes we are the sheep, and mostly we are both at the same time. Being Christian, there's also that pesky fact that I believe I am part of the resurrected Body of Christ, and doesn't that also make me the gate?

That last scares the heck out of me, but carrying my doubts with me I did choose to walk through the gate that Jesus showed me and claim my role as shepherd, as well as my gate-ness. Though that is my path, it is not the path of everyone who participates in the places where I am engaged. Some walked through different gates and ended up as my fellow journeyers in those places. The ones that explicitly matter in this iteration of my story are my work with homeless people, the Sacred Conversation, and the discussion and action forming around the New Jim Crow issues. These three named places are not mutually exclusive, indeed they are inextricably linked, one leading to and from the others. And these three places are no less inextricably linked to my engagement in this community we call Seekers Church, or any other aspect of my life. Lucky

for us all, I can only tell a part of the story today, and that part is the one that marks the third anniversary of the Sacred Conversation.

Introducing a little levity to this homily, I can tell you that in our consumer society the traditional third anniversary gift is leather, and the alternate modern choices can be prisms or mirrors. Taken metaphorically I can actually glean some insight from these three items.

By trying to tell this rambling story I am holding up a mirror for myself with a view over my shoulder of where I've been, and a view of who I am becoming as a result of being a part of the relationships through the Sacred Conversation that have been built thus far. When I think of those relationships I feel as if I am holding a prism up to the light, which you can take to mean the light of Christ, and it sparkles with the many hued light of all the people who have come and gone. And because I hope to offer a window in the door of where the Sacred Conversation might be going as I understand it, I can say that my leather bag is packed and I am ready to travel.

Why are you here? I posed this question to my very small expressive writing class on May 6th, just a few days after the May planning committee meeting. Not a small question, and as you will soon see, a personal question as a result of that meeting. Some of what follows is what I wrote during that hour of reflection.

My bag may be packed but I can't know, no matter how much I might want to know, exactly what God's plan is for me, or for

the Sacred Conversation, and where we are going. And I wager that even God's plan changes based on my/our actions and the rapidly changing world around us. As a person of faith and in this community of Seekers, asking ourselves why we're here could be said to be the constant question behind our becoming the Body.

There isn't one simple static answer to this enormous question, although there may be places in our lives where our feet are more firmly planted than in other parts. Our Christian faith may waver but in and through the community of Seekers we acknowledge that we are all beloved of God, that we are here to serve each other and a broken world, that the journey is not about the destination, and I think it is safe to say, we believe in the Golden Rule, that we should treat others as we wish to be treated.

The fairly newly penned mission statement of the Sacred Conversation is:

The Sacred Conversation encourages wholesome, respectful relationships across borders that separate people by race, beliefs, culture, economics, gender, and other factors in order to create new experiences of trust and peace building.

This mission statement is certainly in keeping with our contemporary understanding of the Golden Rule. Yet I was recently brought up short by the briefest part of an NPR program I heard on how to build peace. The interviewee said that the question needs to be reframed as "treat others the way they wish to be treated." I'm sure that the speaker didn't

mean to imply that we should treat terrorists or dictators or any number of other oppressors the way they would wish to be treated. There are common sense limits to the scope of application. However, the way I want to be treated may be situationally or culturally totally different than virtually anyone else. This restatement is in fact another way of framing the teaching of Church of the Saviour that asks us to meet people where they are. It is also at the heart of why I am part of the Sacred Conversation on Race & Diversity. I want to expand the scope of how I understand God's realm by building relationships with people different than myself. Borrowing a phrase from Elizabeth Gelfeld that has become common parlance at Seekers, and which the planning group incorporated into its mission statement, I want to cross borders – as many borders as I encounter in the daily structures of my life, and some that I have to travel outside those structures to encounter.

Certainly the Sacred Conversation has, in some sense, become an ordinary structure of my life, but it did not start out that way. Perhaps a better adjective than ordinary would be regular – it has become a regular part of my life, but it is not ordinary. Indeed it has been an extraordinary personal journey started by a chain of actions that began with a campaign speech by Barack Obama inviting people to come together in order to build understanding and racial peace within our nation. The UCC picked that up and issued a call to its churches to do just that. Pat's connection to the UCC brought her to bring it to Seekers, asking if there was anyone interested in spearheading an interfaith dialogue. My first response was "what a great idea", and my second was to notice a visceral desire to leap into the unknown. When Pat approached me personally I said yes for the purely personal reason that it filled a need in me best expressed by quoting Simone Weil from *Waiting for God*:

When I think of the act by which I should enter the Church, nothing gives me more pain than the idea of separating myself from the immense and unfortunate multitude of unbelievers. I have the essential need, and I think I can say the vocation, to move among men of every class and complexion, mixing with them and sharing their life and outlook, so far that is to say as conscience allows, merging into the crowd and disappearing among them, so that they show themselves as they are, putting off all disguises with me. It is because I long to know them so as to love them just as they are. For if I do not love them as they are, it will not be they whom I love, and my love will be unreal.

In sharing about saying yes to Pat's invitation in Celebration Circle, I was all over the place about what faith communities to approach. Group wisdom helped me to focus and I reached out to Covenant Christian Community, The Divinity Center for Better Living, and The National Spiritual Science Center, all those who were regularly worshipping here at the time. The Divinity Center put their weight down in the Sacred Conversation for a time, but has unfortunately since ceased to exist. It was Covenant who most fully embraced the invitation to engage, and on May 18th, 2008 the Seekers' sermon time was one of personal story telling by Reverend Paulette Imani and Maybelle Bennett around issues of racism, followed by an after worship discussion. Two of the happiest outcomes of this first nervous outreach for me were a friendship with Maybelle that I hold very dear, and personal treasured relationships I have with several members of Covenant.

I had no idea where I or we were headed, or that three years later there would be ideas for continuing to go forward with

these dialogues. Maybelle had responded to my invitation to be part of this first exploration by saying let's get together over a meal and talk about what this looks like. In that very first meeting of relative strangers she looked at me and said, "Girl, you can't do this by yourself!" and a planning committee of two was born.

Rather than telling the history of the last three years, recounting all the events and forums we've tried, some which worked well beyond our wildest expectations, and some which didn't work so well, my story today is about the heart of the Sacred Conversation, which is the planning committee with its humble beginnings.

Here I start tracking with our reading from Acts, with the scripture that I most connected to this week. Let me read it to you again:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day God added to their number those who were being saved.

By way of explanation, let me say that I believe that the members of the planning group, with all their various beliefs, are both the apostles and their followers. It's that servant

leader thing that comes up so often when we are living an authentic life.

The planning committee has grown over the years, and its membership has varied some, but currently it numbers eight committed people – four from or with connections to Covenant Christian community, and four members of Seekers – equal representation of the faith communities that continue to hold the center. Those people are Maybelle Bennett, Ed Cooke, Kate Cudlipp, Kim Jackson, Trish Nemore, Will Ramsey, Betty Wilson, and I. In *Call to Commitment*, Elizabeth O'Connor wrote of Church of the Saviour members:

We believe ourselves to be engaged this very moment in that which is the hope of the world. Our commitment is to the Lord of that redemptive community which has the task of pushing back its boundaries until it holds the world. There will be no peace or healing in our day unless little islands of koinonia can spring up everywhere...

I think that is a fair representation of our higher goals and selves, made possible because of deep listening, respect, building trust, and forming bonds with one another over our three year sojourn. All who believe in this conversation choose again and again to come together on common ground every month in fellowship and prayer. Month by month, and sometimes day by day, we have spent time together, we have broken bread together in each others homes, and we have eaten our food with glad and generous hearts. We do love our food! We have praised a higher power, whatever each of us might call it, and we keep the goodwill of all. Many wonders and signs have been demonstrated in this fellowship, and that has carried over to larger group venues when those present bring with them the

same intent of hope and authenticity.

While we have not literally sold our possessions and goods, I think it would be fair to say that we are faithfully working at shedding our biases, misunderstandings, and stereotypical understandings about people different than ourselves, and we are making an effort to share the benefits of our experiences with others. Through the sharing of and with others this past three years, I have gained a new appreciation for the plight and circumstances of the homeless population I serve in my work-for-pay life. By sharing the experience with others on the planning committee, and the larger Church of the Saviour community, I was able to look at the injustice at work in our criminal justice system right up to the Supreme Court that has come to be called the New Jim Crow. I was empowered to support a group within a larger group around finding avenues of action and advocacy in this arena, and I can look with sympathy at many of the clients at Community Vision where once I sat in judgment. My spirit has been enlarged, and my call to the Sacred Conversation remains strong.

The question that follows "why are we here?" is "where are we going?", or maybe it's "why are we here?" asked again. The last planning committee meeting was sparsely attended. Kate, Trish and I were the only ones present, which wasn't a fair representation of the group on any count. Nevertheless, we had a deep and searching discussion about the why and where questions. What emerged among the three of us was a recognition that our deepest place of engagement, the place where we faced our challenges and did our best work, where we grew the most as individuals and as community, was at the planning committee meetings.

We brought to light a similar yearning for each of us to engage as deeply as that every time we come together, which just isn't possible in most of the venues we sponsor. The reason is simple. There isn't a committed group working towards becoming the body. As wonderful as the after film or other "successful" event discussions have been, the gathered community is a temporary one, made up of a different mix of people every time. It is virtually impossible to build a community of trust through deep listening and respect that way. Don't misunderstand me. I can categorically say that Kate, Trish and I do not yearn for a planning group status quo and nothing more. While I can't speak for Kate and Trish, my understanding of what emerged in that meeting is quite to the contrary. Harkening back to the quote by Simone Weil, I, and I believe they, yearn for an enlargement in numbers and diversity of those committed to becoming the body. How this will unfold, and how the other members of the planning committee receive our yearnings is a mystery.

Let me bring you back to the Easter season reflection Peter read at the start of our service:

The story begins when God puts on flesh and comes to walk among us. It ends, or perhaps it just begins again, when God's spirit is uncaged by death, when the one who walked among us dies an individual and is born again as a community.

For me, the meeting with Kate and Trish was an ending of a sort – a death of how the Sacred Conversation has occurred to this point. At the same time, a new way was revealed for growing community. As the moderator of the planning committee I can tell you that the agenda for our June gathering will be

to flesh out the questions “why are we here?” and “where are we going?”

I am standing in front of that one door I talked about at the very beginning of this tale. I invite you all to stand here with the planning committee, to reach out and grab the door handle and turn it with us. Perhaps you will come, bringing some food to share to test the waters this Friday night when we gather to celebrate this anniversary. Maybe, just maybe, you will choose to commit to enlarging the circle of people committed to this dialogue. Even if you don't walk through the door in full engagement in the Sacred Conversation, please stand at the threshold and pray for those of us who choose to walk through to follow one of the paths toward equality, and the dismantling of the borders that separate people for the good of the whole body.