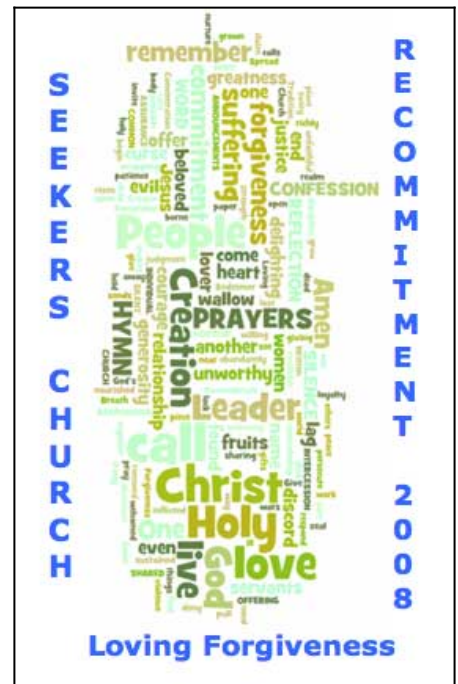


# "Our Commitment to Loving Forgiveness" by Peter Bankson

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### INTRODUCTION

This week's Scripture lessons hold up two familiar stories: The lessons from the Hebrew Scriptures tell us of the successful escape of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt as they crossed the Sea of Reeds on dry land while the pursuing army of Pharaoh was mired in the mud and then drowned as walls of water washed over them. In the Gospel lesson we listen as Jesus tells the disciples, beginning with an incredulous Peter, that the right way to deal with a member of the church who sins against another member is to forgive the offender,

not just once or even seven times, as Peter suggests, but seventy times seven!

It's been an interesting journey for me as I've wrestled with relating these texts to each other, and to "Loving Forgiveness," our theme for this recommitment season.

#### MEMORIALS ... TO FORGIVENESS?

I'd been reading the Scripture lessons for the week very much aware of the dedication of the National Memorial to those who were killed when that airliner was flown into the Pentagon. The terrorist attacks seven years ago last Thursday did not seem to me like God's wrath poured out against the cruel oppressors of the beleaguered people of Al Qaeda, although I have heard that argument in the intervening years. Neither did I feel an immediate calling to forgive the terrorists again and again for their violent, painful actions then or since, although I have felt a deep sadness over the whole situation that led to the attacks and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Those people, the ones we hear named "terrorists," aren't part of my faith community. But they are clearly part of this reality, and I believe that the God we worship is Creator of everything. I kept coming back to our worship theme for this recommitment season – loving forgiveness – and seeing it from different perspectives.

On Thursday night as I drove home from the Seekers prayer vigil I was seeing forgiveness from different perspectives. There had been 11 people gathered in the gallery downstairs

for an hour of silence, reflection and prayer. There were six current Seekers, one Seekers graduate, two from the Gandhi Brigade and two from Covenant Christian Community Church. I was aware of feeling connected to the people in that circle as we gathered around our Peace and Justice Candle and dropped into the silence as darkness fell outside. I wanted to hold their presence as we all shared our sense of remembrance, repentance and reconciliation. That quiet hour was, for me, a safe place to sit with my own feelings about violence and forgiveness: I found my awareness drifting over Jesus' teaching about forgiveness and old pictures of Moses leading the Israelites to freedom between walls of water. And I was aware that even though almost half of the people in the circle were not usually with us for worship, it felt like community to me. Partly it was the familiar place. But more important, I think, were the connections among us. We've worked with the Gandhi Brigade on several projects, including the bulletin cover from last Jubilee season, the one with a large black hand holding a smaller yellow hand and the words "No human being is illegal." And I know the two who came from Covenant Christian Community Church pretty well. In fact they'd been on last year's Faith At Work pilgrimage to Guatemala.

My sense of community in that circle reminded me that my sense of community grows as I work together with people. That made me glad for the opportunities we have to work and play and worship with others, here at Carroll Street and elsewhere: for work teams, Dayspring work parties, InterPlay, and the conversations on diversity and reconciliation. Being together shoulder-to-shoulder helps build community, and helps bring us to the place where forgiveness is possible.

Driving home from the prayer vigil I crossed the Memorial Bridge, which symbolically links the North and the South in its alignment between the Lincoln Memorial and Arlington House, the Robert E. Lee Memorial. A minute later I came upon

a huge American flag waving softly against the west wall of the Pentagon, bathed in blue light, facing the white headstones of Arlington cemetery glowing faintly across the road.

Behind me was a quiet, caring time of prayer where I'd felt a desire for reconciliation rising up in me. I'd just driven my body across a memorial to the long and painful reconciliation of the great civil war that divided this nation for so long. Now here was a memorial to the pain of terror and death on my left and on my right a memorial to some of those who've died defending the freedom of our people. In my head was that violent image of death in the rising tide of the Sea of Reeds. And in my ears the words of Jesus said softly, "Not seven times, I tell you, seventy times seven.

My dilemma deepened as night came on, a quiet roiling of the still waters in the heart of this retired American Army officer, a combat veteran of what the Vietnamese have come to know as "the American War." Have I let my soul cross that Memorial Bridge? Am I really ready to help build a community that is wide enough and deep enough to hold the tension of transformation, to lay down more of my life in loving forgiveness?

And ... what in the world IS "loving forgiveness?"

The risen Christ teaches us that the greatest manifestation of love is when you sacrifice your self for your friends. So, who are my friends? Do I set my boundaries for friendship so close that only a few of you are included? Do I allow anyone who says she or he is a member of this tiny part of the Body of Christ to be my "friend?" Am I ready to lay down my life for anyone who claims to be a Christian, no matter what their

values or politics? Am I feeling called to treat all of God's creatures as my friends – including all of you, plus those folks we've come to call terrorists, and snail darters, and drug dealers, and rock stars and the multitude who are dying in Africa from AIDS? Are my friends only those I love or agree with, or even know? I'd have a hard time addressing a TV audience as "my friends." But it's a question that calls me to deeper discernment.

The Exodus from Egypt helped the Israelites learn that they could be friends with each other, but it wasn't easy. Enduring hardship is a well-documented form of building friendship. I understand how very different people can become fast friends after months in the same foxhole – or the same HUMVEE. I've been there.

Sonya Dyer (one of the co-founders of Seekers Church) used to encourage us to work together to build community. Her mantra might have been: "Greater love will you build if you work together to reach common goals." That's an interesting way of looking at "lay down your life for your friends."

One way to look at loving forgiveness is to think about our life together in this faith community, where we try to live at the crossroads of inclusion and commitment. If we commit to treating each other as friends even when we don't think we like each other, and if we're willing to modify our personal priorities to fit ourselves into an emerging life together, then we'll slowly come to experience a deep love, the love that Jesus was teaching his disciples – the love the Risen Christ is teaching us today. So one insight that is rising out of this troublesome confluence of 9-11 memorials and calls to loving forgiveness is this: If I can surrender my own

priorities (i.e. "lay down my life") for the good of a larger community where I haven't chosen all the members (i.e. "my friends") then I can find the gateway to a deeper love (i.e. enter the Realm of God").

But what about those whose core beliefs will not allow them to enter into the same community with me? And what about me when my sense of "self" is threatened deeply enough that I can not accept the presence of another?

Isn't that what Moses and Aaron experienced as they heard God call them to lead the Exodus? "Those Egyptians are oppressing our people, forcing us to work to impossible standards with insufficient materials and inadequate compensation!"

And, frankly, isn't that what the rulers of Egypt saw in the Israelites? "Those Israelites are becoming so numerous that if war breaks out they will side with our opponents and leave the country. We need to take preemptive action." (See Exodus 1:8)

One enduring question for me, one that I haven't yet been given an answer is this: Is there still a place for "enemies" in this world? If Christ calling us to love all of Creation then what do I do with my reluctance to hold back?

As I drove home through the blue darkness on Thursday night the question took a different focus: If I am being called by God to love all of Creation, is it right to protect those I love and know better (and like) from the threats of those I love only in theory ... or don't love at all? I can't solve this one for myself. I believe I'm called to love all of God's Creation, including those who do things I don't like and

can't accept. But I wonder, at a deeper level, is it possible to separate love from friendship?

I set that down to simmer in the background while I went back to our Scripture lessons for this week and Marjory's sermon last Sunday.

### GENEROSITY, FAITHFULNESS AND SURRENDER

Last week, Marjory suggested that as a faith community we demonstrate a commitment to the traditional monastic vows of "poverty, chastity and obedience." In our experience, she suggested, these qualities seem to be expressed in language that is a bit different, but refers to the same deep values. She identified our version of "poverty, chastity and obedience" in the form of "generosity, faithfulness and surrender." That gave me a fresh opening to tie the Scriptures to my musings on Thursday night.

As I look at our life together in community, each of these three values – generosity, faithfulness and surrender – seems to be growing and changing. There's an outer dimension of including others in community: who are my friends; who is part of my family; if I'm part of God's family, how can I recognize the others; what's the sign?

And I think there are inner dimensions of generosity, faithfulness and surrender as well. Is part of God's calling for me to be more generous with you? Am I ready to hear about the pain I've caused you? And when it comes to forgiveness, can I find it in my heart to forgive you for the pain you've caused me? Can we find ways to be real and rely on the strength of our commitment to Christ to keep us linked together and growing in community?

Here's what I've seen so far.

### Generosity

It seems to me that generosity is at the heart of forgiveness. I think of it as the ability to love beyond the law, to turn the other cheek, to let go of my desires when they conflict with the needs of another. One real challenge here is when the opportunity to be generous to some who are farther away seems to compete with the needs of those who are closer to me – or those I hope will be closer to me if only I'm a bit more generous.

Another challenge is how to do that when I'm not conscious of my own selfish behavior. It's a lot easier for me to be a good boy scout – trustworthy, helpful, ... etc. – when I'm feeling good about myself and quite another when I'm ashamed of my own behavior.

Generosity is at the heart of forgiveness.

### Faithfulness

In the same way, faithfulness is a synonym for commitment – a learning laboratory for loving forgiveness. Many of you know that one of my earliest scriptures was "Horton the Elephant" by Dr. Seuss. I've always resonated with Horton's mantra: "I meant what I said and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful, one hundred percent." Once Horton made his reluctant commitment to Mayzie to sit on her egg and try not to break it, he was there for the duration. For a long time my understanding was so shaped by that image that I couldn't see why anyone would reject the idea of "duty."



I've come to see how "duty" imposed by an outside authority can be oppressive. And I'm learning how when I talk about the satisfaction I find in accepting as a duty the opportunity to serve the needs of others, I need to be careful to make a distinction between "duty accepted" and "duty imposed," between service and slavery. I'm learning that my commitment to be a faithful member of this community gives me lots of rich opportunities to learn more as both a receiver and a giver of loving forgiveness.

Faithfulness is a synonym for commitment, a learning laboratory for loving forgiveness. And forgiveness is rooted in relationship.

### Surrender

The third value Marjory suggests is surrender. Surrender is SO un-American, so not-proud. For me, "surrender" is the most challenging of the three. I hear our cultural opposition to it all the time, from all kinds of public and private sources: "Stick up for yourself!" "You'll never win if you surrender!" "Who do you think you are, telling me what to do!" Although I keep learning more about surrender to the will of God and the will of the community, there is a part of in me that is not ready to surrender to someone who is an "outsider." In that regard, I'm standing in the shadow of Moses, afraid to stand up to this new Pharaoh who does not know him, yet faithful to God and committed enough to go back to Egypt and help make something happen.

What does it mean, really, to lay down your life for your friends? I know about sacrifice, like the father who drowned himself last week to save his son with Downs Syndrome who had fallen into their septic tank. But I'm working with a less-than-total image of that, an image of "laying down" my life as

setting aside my own priorities to serve the needs of others. Surrender is easier within a committed community where we can learn that we are known and loved for who we are.

Within a committed relationship – mission groups and marriages come to mind here – within a committed relationship mutual respect, love, and a foundation of forgiveness help soften the hard edge of surrender. When I can see that my “way” is not good news for my beloved community its easier to stand aside. It’s a bit harder when I think I’m the only one who has seen the truth, but even there, even when I stand as firm as a rock in the road, I’ll be helping us create another opportunity for loving forgiveness – no matter who turns out later to have had the deeper discernment, and who is called to forgive whom.

There is another kind of surrender that often slips under my radar screen, the possibility that if I risk listening to you I might give up my “self” and change. (Some call that personal growth.) I’d like to think that I’m open-minded and eager to change, but there’s some evidence that my self image is a bit rosier than I’d care to admit.

For example, it isn’t easy for me to admit that there are things I don’t understand. As a kid I learned to hide that in order to look smart, and the lesson stuck for a long time. But now I think I’m beginning to learn the freedom and the delight that come from being able to admit that “I don’t understand.” I still worry that confession might cloud the way you see me, but I’m learning to surrender my fear of our shared responses.

I have a growing sense that Jesus loves me, and will love me even if I admit that I don’t understand. And because of our

commitment to be together in community with the risen Christ I am learning to risk the possibility that loving forgiveness is real – from Christ ... and from you. Even though the road is rocky, surrender can be a path to transformation. Are you with me?

#### CLOSING: A COMMITMENT TO LOVING FORGIVENESS

Being part of Seekers Church gives us lots of ways to practice generosity. Whether it's the Growing Edge Fund, or our external giving, or the support that is part of every mission group, there are opportunities here to help, occasions to help each other when help is needed. (I'm comforted that we choose to give away so much, even as I long for ways to make that better known without bragging about "how good we are.")

The foundation of this community is the commitments we make – to Christ, to the community, and to one another. This season of recommitment is our annual time to focus on that commitment, and if we are called to continue it.

This book, made by Deborah and Glen, records the commitments of all the Seekers members since we began as a separate faith community in 1976. If you'd like some ideas about how to consider your own level of commitment for the year ahead, there is a small brochure on the table outside the sanctuary doors. And if you'd like to learn more about this faith community, there's still time to join the "Semi-Secrets of Seekers" class in our School of Christian Living on Tuesday nights. See me or one of the members of Learners and Teachers after worship.

The Israelites' journey took them from familiar, if troubled relationships with the Egyptians out into the desert. Time and time again they have been called into the unknown. And their experiences shaped them. Jesus' experiences shaped his faith community in new and unfamiliar ways. Part of our spiritual journey is to surrender the familiar and walk into the unknown future knowing that we are part of God's unfolding story. It isn't easy to stretch the boundaries of who we trust, but it helps if we can find ways to work, play and worship together.

† Generosity is at the heart of forgiveness.

† Forgiveness is rooted in relationship.

† Even though the road is rocky, surrender can be a path to transformation.

I know I need the commitment of this community to help me grow, and I'm ready to give myself to God's call through Seekers for the coming year. This is particularly true as I peek into those places where I've let assumptions substitute for realities in my relationships with others, both here and beyond Seekers. I'll need some of that loving forgiveness we've been talking about to keep learning.

Are you with me?

Amen.