

"Saying 'Yes' to God" by Deborah Sokolove

A Sermon for Seekers Church

Recommitment Sunday, October 15, 2006

by Deborah Sokolove

Saying "Yes" to God

It is hard to connect the lectionary readings for today with our annual recommitment ceremony; therefore, in time-honored Seekers fashion, I am going to use one of today's texts as a pretext for the topic about which I really wanted to talk. This, of course, would probably horrify both the bible scholars and the homiletics professors that I count as friends. However, Recommitment Sunday is a special day in the life of all the congregations that are in the tradition of Church of the Saviour, and a lectionary designed for common usage all over the world simply does not fit our local celebration.

Nevertheless, I do not want to ignore poor old Job completely, who has been one of most misunderstood characters in the Hebrew Scriptures. I say, "misunderstood" because patience is the attribute most often used to describe him. For centuries, people have said that this or that person has "the patience of Job" when he or she bears up quietly and uncomplainingly under one trial after another. The problem is, of course, that Job was not patient at all. In fact, he complained loudly and bitterly at what he perceived as his unfair treatment by God,

his wife and his friends.

Last week, as you may remember, we heard how God was boasting about Job's righteousness, and how the Adversary challenged God, saying, "Oh, Job just honors you because he is rich and healthy and has lots of children. Let's see what happens when he loses everything." God agrees to the test, and Job's property is destroyed, his children die, and he is covered with boils all over his body.

Psalm 22, which is appointed for this week, could have been written by Job. We recognize the first lines as Jesus' words from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?", but they are the words of anyone who feels completely lost and alone. The psalmist continues to lament in images that are familiar to all who have suffered from depression, lost home and livelihood in natural disasters, or been overcome with grief at the death of a loved one: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death."

In today's reading, Job complains to and about God. His would-be comforters have been berating him to confess the secret sins for which they presume he is being punished, but Job adamantly protests his innocence. He is so certain that he is in the right that he is ready to take God to court. "I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments," Job says, certain that in a court of law, God would listen to his reasonable, rational points.

Job, however, is not as reasonable and rational as he

supposes. In one moment, he claims that God is nowhere to be found. "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him. On the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him." In the next breath, he says that it is God who has made his heart faint with terror. For Job, God is somehow both absent and terrifyingly present, and Job wishes that he, himself, could vanish into darkness. In his distress at the death of his children, the loss of his property, and his own physical pain, he wishes that he were dead. Job is not a patient man. He is a man at the end of his string.

Next week, we will read how God loses patience with Job's complaints. God, having heard enough of Job's challenges and protests, speaks out of a whirlwind, presenting him with incontrovertible evidence that God is not some cozy, comprehensible dispenser of predictable punishments and rewards. If Job is not being chastised for some forgotten transgression, neither is God willing to be on trial for not being what Job wants God to be. Instead, both Job and the reader are reminded that God is the creator and sustainer of everything that exists, beyond our ability to control or even understand. In the face of this ultimate reality, Job finally stops complaining, and simply says, "yes." Yes, you are God, and I am human, a mortal, with limited understanding, trying to do the best that I can with what I have been given.

In the end, God rebukes Job's friends for misrepresenting the divine character and restores Job's fortunes. Indeed, Job received not only twice as many sheep and oxen and camels and donkeys as he had had before, but also a completely new set of sons and daughters. This last bit has always troubled me. I understand that possessions can be replaced, but children are not as interchangeable as sheep and donkeys. Surely, Job and his wife still mourned for the sons and daughters that died, regardless of how many and how remarkable the new children may have been.

The daughters, in particular, must have been quite remarkable, for their names-Jemima, Keziah and Keren-Happuch-are preserved, while those of the sons are not. As the text tells us, "Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job's daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers." Here is where the text becomes a pretext, because what I really want to talk about is neither Job's lack of patience nor his remarkable daughters, but how each of us is called to say "yes" to God.

As long as I can remember, I have wanted to say "yes" to God, but I have not always done a very good job of it. When I was fourteen or fifteen, I briefly belonged to an organization called The Order of Job's Daughters. Created as an offshoot of the Freemasons, the organization draws its name from those few verses at the end of the book of Job that describe his beautiful offspring. It is part social club, part service society, part quasi-religious sorority for teenage girls. I joined it mostly because my cousin asked me to, and because I was drawn to its apparently spiritual foundations. I wanted it to be a place where I could say "yes" to God, and God could say "yes" to me.

Like the Freemasons, Job's Daughters is heavy on secrets and ritual. I do not remember any of the secrets, so I cannot share them with you, but I do remember quite a bit of the ritual. We met in a large, ornately decorated room that had a double row of carved, dark wooden pews around the outside and a large, carpeted area in the center. Visitors and pledges were expected to wear dresses or suits, but fully committed members wore special garments that were intended to evoke Grecian tunics. Made of a silky, white fabric, the robes fell to our feet, belted at the waist with a heavy, gold-colored, tasseled braid.

I can still remember how splendid and romantic it seemed to wear those silly gowns as we walked in double file, making patterns like a marching band around the grand, carpeted

square. Despite the fact that all the members of my particular group were Jewish, we often marched to Christian hymns, so that we would know them when we went to gatherings with other chapters. We sang Onward Christian Soldiers, barely able to make our mouths form the words; Marching to Zion, which was a little better; and Holy, Holy, Holy, which – except for the Trinitarian language, which I did not understand until many years later- I liked quite a lot. In fact, the robed, singing processions in that impressive space were the only things I liked about the organization, and I resigned after a few months, disgusted with what I experienced as the self-centered, unfriendly behavior of the other girls and their disregard for solemnity and grace in their performance of the rituals. Disappointed by the disjunction between my desire to say “yes” to God and my inability to do so in the lived reality I encountered, I fled back to the familiar comfort of books, music, and long, solitary walks.

Now, I do not want you to get the impression that entire Order of Job’s Daughters is hypocritical and mean-spirited. It was then, and continues to be now, a fine organization that tries to provide a way for girls to socialize and do charitable works. Today, I believe that what I encountered was due to the inherent awkwardness of teenage girls, and to a mismatch between my own needs and what that particular group had to offer.

In fact, I was an outsider, not only in Job’s Daughters, but also in practically any gathering except the tiny, optimistically-named Philosophy Club that a few of us tried to organize at my high school. This was not so much a club as excuse for four or five of us to sit in a quiet classroom at lunchtime and talk about whatever we were reading or thinking about, uninterrupted by the casual rowdiness of the noisy, bustling quad. In that protected, thoughtful space, we were free to stop competing with the popular kids; to forget that we were always picked last for team sports; to say what we

thought without fear of being laughed at; to use big words and talk about big ideas; to simply be ourselves. The elaborate rituals of Job's Daughters, with young women parading about in virginal, white robes while singing spiritual songs and hymns, may have looked like my naive, idealistic notion of heaven; but that plain, institutional green classroom, with its scarred desks, dusty blackboard, and overflowing wastebaskets, felt a lot like the heavenly realm of God to the bookish, clumsy, painfully shy teenager that I was then, and still carry with me today.

It was not perfect, of course. What the Philosophy Club lacked was the embodied spiritual intention that I had found so attractive in Job's Daughters. Intellectual, nerdy, and unstylish, the members of the Philosophy Club sat and talked as if we were disembodied heads, completely ignoring the fact that we were also eating lunch, not to mention that we were a group of mixed-gender, hormonal adolescents. As a kinetic learner, I often had trouble following the more abstract discussions or got annoyed with theories that were disconnected from the concrete realities of actual lives. I could not just push ideas around, taking pleasure in their aesthetic purity, as though they had no practical consequence. I could not name it then, but I already sensed at a deep level that my engagement with music, dance and crafts tended to ground my ideas in the created world. Once again, I wanted to say "yes" to God, but could not figure out how to do it within the implicit rules and customs of the Philosophy Club.

Today, I know from a lifetime of experience that the embodiment of an idea always entails compromise and collaboration with the limitations and possibilities of matter; and that ideals are always tested as they are lived out in the presence of community. It is in Christian community, and most specifically in the midst of worship, that I finally have been able to say "yes" to God. Here, I find both words and actions, both ideas and ritual, lived out in

the presence of others who are similarly called. We do not always agree on the specifics, but I believe that in our communal worship, we are called to say “yes” to God with our whole selves. We are called to heal every division that cuts us off from ourselves, from true communion with each other as members of the grace-filled earthen vessel that is the Body of Christ, from all of creation.

Sacraments are one of the ways that we do this. For instance, Holy Communion has three elements: the real, physical food and drink that connect us bodily with creation; the words of consecration that connect our eating and drinking with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and the sharing of the food and drink that connects us with other members of a gathered community. Eliminate any one of these three, and it is merely empty words, a simple lunch or private prayer.

Another way that we say “yes” to God is in the ritual of recommitment that we will enact in a few minutes. Unlike Communion, for which the physical signs are hallowed by scripture and centuries of tradition, the physical signs of recommitment change from year to year. One year, we tossed balls of yarn to one another, to help us visualize our tangled, interconnected relationships. Another year, we exchanged our old, battered keys to the Church of the Saviour headquarters for shiny, new keys, symbolizing our new relationship as owners-in-common of our new building. Another year, we all put our hands on a long, knotted rope, signifying our willingness to pick up a share of the burden of carrying this do-it-yourself church. Yet another year, we picked up stones from the altar, to carry with us as daily reminders of our connection with all creation and with Christ. Today, those of us who will commit to another year of following Christ through the practices and traditions of this expression of Christ’s Body will pick up a piece of the fabric that covered us like a tent from Ash Wednesday until Pentecost, and today flows among us and between us and around us as a symbol of the

Holy Spirit and our interconnectedness in Christ.

Although the physical manifestation of our recommitment may change from year to year, and even the particular words that interpret the sign have changed from time to time, the intention of the gathered congregation to witness and attest our common life in Christ does not change in substance. On October 19, 1947, the nine members of the original [Church of the Saviour](#) stood together to make this commitment:

I come today to join a local expression of the Church, which is the body of those on whom the call of God rests to witness to the grace and truth of God.

I recognize that the function of the Church is to glorify God in adoration and sacrificial service, and to be God's missionary to the world, bearing witness to God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ.

I believe as did Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ, promising to give Him a practical priority in all the affairs of life. I will seek first the kingdom of God and His Righteousness.

I commit myself, regardless of the expenditures of time, energy, and money to becoming an informed, mature Christian.

I believe that God is the total owner of my life and resources. I give God the throne in relation to the material aspect of my life. God is the owner. I am the owner. Because God is a lavish giver, I too shall be lavish and cheerful in my regular gifts.

I will seek to be Christian in all my relations with other persons, with other nations, groups, classes and races.

I will seek to bring every phase of my life under the

Lordship of Christ.

When I move from this place, I will join some other expression of the Christian Church.

Today, members of the ten small churches that grew out of that original group will commemorate that first commitment ceremony, nearly sixty years ago, by recommitting their lives to Christ through the disciplines and practices of a specific community. Some of the other churches have kept the old words or something very close to them. Others, like us, have found different words to embody our commitment to Christ; all of us have set aside a part of our worship, as close as possible to the third Sunday of October, as a time to renew our vows to live intentionally as members of the living, resurrected, holy, Bo

dy of Christ on earth. Today, we say “yes” to God in the midst of our worship.

Here, at Seekers, we are celebrating our thirtieth anniversary. In the summer of 1976, the Seekers Church began its own life as a separate worshipping community. Some of those who took their vows that October are still among us – David Lloyd, Mary Carol Dragoo, Muriel Lipp, Emily Gilbert. Some are with us in spirit only, having left life as we know it for a different experience of the realm of God. Some of those early members, and others who sojourned with us for a shorter or longer time, have been called to other expressions of the Christian Church, by work or family commitments or because they needed something that Seekers could not provide, and we bless them on their journey.

But to those of us who make our [vows today](#), and to those who are still, even now, discerning whether it is right for them to do so, I want to offer some thoughts about our call as Seekers Church. In particular, I want to talk about shared leadership and the yearning that some folks have expressed for

something called “being pastored.”

In today’s Epistle reading, we are encouraged by the writer of Hebrews to take heart. For even though we must give an account to God for every thought or intention of our lives, Jesus Christ will intercede as a high priest, enabling us to “come before the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” This image is probably very helpful to those for whom the intercessory actions of a priest or minister are a familiar and necessary mode of approaching God. However, for me, it is very strange. In all the twists and turns of my particular journey, it never occurred to me to look to any clergy person for spiritual solace or even guidance. I looked to books, to friends, to a variety of religious traditions, but not to any one person that some group had designated as a leader. Thus, Seekers insistence on not making a distinction between clergy and laity seemed natural and right to me. This egalitarian understanding of the priesthood of all believers relies on collaboration and cooperation, and a willingness to look for the greater good rather than my individual preferences and desires. It is one of the ways that an entire congregation can say “yes” to God.

Indeed, if we are an expression of the Body of Christ, and Christ is our Head, we do not need anyone other than Christ as a charismatic leader. If we really believe that the word of God comes to each one of us; that each of us has been given at least one, God-given, spiritual gift; and that we have authority at the point of our gift, then shared leadership is not simply a slogan or bit of jargon. Rather, this phrase describes the way in which access to Christ’s leading is passed among us, as each of us exercises the gifts and charisms that God has given us.

A corollary to this notion of shared leadership is shared pastoring. In churches that divide people into the categories of clergy and laity, the clergy are understood as the

shepherds, and the laity as the sheep. The job of the pastor, the shepherd, is to take care of the sheep. The relationship is not one of mutuality, but of hierarchy. Nevertheless, again, if Christ is the one, true shepherd, then we sheep need no other shepherd, no single person who stands always in persona Christi. Instead, perhaps we can learn to love one another as Christ loves us all, each of us taking care of one another as needed, allowing Christ to act through us, saying "yes" to God in our interpersonal relationships.

The other night, in our Celebration Circle meeting, somebody (I forget who) said, "what if we become a community that loves one another so well that "pastoring," with its sense hierarchical relationships, becomes irrelevant?" The more I think about it, the more I realize how important this mutual, egalitarian caring for one another is to my sense of what Seekers is and how we operate.

Indeed, it is to precisely this sense of caring for the common good under the leadership of Christ as our (only) head that I take our recommitment vows today. If Christ is our shepherd then we do not need anyone else to stand in his stead in the sense of a permanent, fixed office. Rather, as transient, individual needs arise, we pastor one another, living out Jesus' command that we love one another as Christ loves each of us. "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

Therefore, I return, after all, to Job and his would-be comforters. In Chapter 2, which does not show up in the lectionary, it is clear that they are sincere, trying to help Job in his time of need. We are told, "When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and

sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because each one saw how great his suffering was. [Job 2:11-13]

It is only after Job starts complaining that his friends get off on the wrong track. The fact that they were inept, repetitive and judgmental does not diminish their intention to do the right thing. It just makes them a lot like us. In the end, something wonderful happens. Job, still on his ash-heap, still covered with boils, but now in a new relationship with God – this Job says “yes” to God, and prays for his hapless friends. The would-be pastors have become the sheep, and the apparently wayward sheep takes a turn at being the shepherd, interceding with God on their behalf.

It is this intercession for others, for the world, that my teacher and colleague, Brian Wren, had in mind when he wrote the hymn we just sang, “We are not our own”. Brian suggests that our entire life can be a sacrament, a continual liturgy of caring for the earth, for our neighbors, and for one another. I love this hymn, because it expresses my own passion for worship that is physical and mental, worldly and spiritual, personal and communal all at once. Such worship continues into every part of my life, helping me to remember that I am never alone in my journey, but that all of you, and all the saints, are always praying for me, as I am praying for you, as we are all saying “yes” to God.