

“Seekers as an Open System”

by Pat Conover

Sermon for Seekers Church

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The lectionary scripture in Mark (Mark 1: 8-14) begins with a link between Jesus and John the Baptist. Jesus repeats the good news of John: “Repent. The eternal realm is present.” Then we have the story of the gathering of the first disciples. Mark tells us that the first disciples follow Jesus because they believed, or at least hoped, that Jesus was the Promised One, the Messiah they had been waiting for.

It is striking that Mark presents the focus of the teaching of Jesus as a word for word continuation of the teaching of John the Baptist. First, this tells us volumes about the relationship between Jesus and John. It makes Jesus immediately understandable to his disciples. Jesus is in the tradition of John. Jesus believes in the free and available forgiveness of God. Jesus does not believe in salvation through the offering of animal sacrifice, which is at the heart of the liturgical practice of the Temple in Jerusalem, the center of official Judaism, the Disneyworld of Judaism, the rule of priests, the center of the political semi-independence of Judaism under Roman rule. Jesus believes in a God who is available in the wilderness, a God who is not stuck in an empty room, the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

This one line of teaching tells us that Jesus is set on a

radical course, a course that is radical both in spiritual and political terms. This course got John the Baptist beheaded for criticizing Herod Antipas and got Jesus crucified for challenging the temple leaders and practices in Jerusalem.

So let us consider the two parts of this preaching a little more closely. We have a declaration, "The Eternal Realm is present." This simple declaration has many implications. God is present. God cares. We are not alone. We have not been abandoned. Despite the signs of the times, there is room for hope. The Roman Empire is not the last word on political power. The ancient hope of Israel for a rule of justice and mercy can become manifest right now. We do not have to wait to start living the way God wants us to live. We can live according to our ideals and not be overly constrained by the practicalities of getting along by going along. Now is the time for courage and risking. Now is the time for making needed changes in one's life. In the language of the 60s, either we are on the bus or we are not.

The preaching of John and then Jesus is powerful. If you take it with full seriousness, it will change your life. It is just as risky to take it seriously now as it was then, though the chances of being literally crucified are smaller. Like the disciples, you are likely to take this preaching seriously only if you have some sense of how much you need it, how much you want it. If you are comfortable, you will probably prefer the status quo safety of temple worship, where you do what you are supposed to do and you believe that God will do what you think God is supposed to do.

The other half of this core preaching of John, and then Jesus, is that believing the message of hope is not enough. Repentance is required, a changing of direction, a fundamental turn toward the lures of hope. One of the Elizabeth O'Connor slogans that Seekers lives by is that an authentic inner journey inevitably turns one into an outer journey, a following of Call. This core link is the spiritual heart of

why [Mission Groups](#) have to have an action component.

Repentance: Like Fred Taylor used to say, "If you keep doing what you've always done you're going to keep on getting what you always got." If you are comfortable, maybe you think that is good enough. On the other hand, maybe you have hope that things can be better, a lot better.

Maybe instead of feeling comfortable in your good fortune, your wealth, your friends, your connectedness, your understandings, you feel thankful. Not deserving in the sense of taking things for granted, but thankful. ... Repent.

Mark writes the teaching of Jesus in a declarative style. I am a lot more comfortable with the language of witness. My restatement of this gospel message sounds more like, "I hope you will repent. I have come to realize that the Eternal Realm is present and that this is very good news. It is precious to me and I would be so happy if I could share this with you. I would be enriched, and I believe Seekers would be enriched, if you could risk reorienting your life to the Eternal Realm, if you could claim your calling, if you could join me, join us, in celebration."

[Short Pause]

For the rest of this sermon, I am going to explore this gospel message by considering Seekers as an open system. What does it mean to image the Eternal Realm in open system terms? What does it mean to repent in open system terms?

According to General Systems Theory, there are four components to any system: input, throughput (also called processing), output and feedback. Introducing the concept of feedback changes straight-line cause-and-effect thinking in two basic ways. First, of all an output loops back to become a cause and makes cause-and-effect a cycle. For example, what we discuss in a mission group in one session helps to shape the next mission group meeting. The second point is the more

interesting one. When output goes into the world around us, and then feedback comes back to us, our closed system opens up and many factors other than our own interests and perspectives come into play. In the case of ending the Seeds of Hope Mission Group such feedback was an important part of our learning, not only for what it taught us about the world we wanted to serve, but also because, upon reflection, it taught us about ourselves in the sense of sharpening what our call was, and was not.

It is kind of learning as you go that leads to changing Seekers from the bottom up and that is the key characteristic of open systems that I am focusing on today. No one in Seekers said we had to have the Seeds of Hope Mission Group and nobody said we had to end it. We heard the calling and that got us together. We engaged in group discernment, and that finally led us apart.

Let us consider ants for a moment. You can understand a lot about ants with cause and effect thinking but, if you include feedback, you get a better understanding of individual ants and a chance to understand what is going on in an ant colony.

The first thing to understand about an ant colony is that no ant is in charge. No ant is giving orders, least of all the Queen. She is just an egg-laying machine hidden away in the deepest part of the colony. The second thing to remember is that ants are not very bright. There are only a very few callings available to ants: forager, fighter, garbage collector, nest builder and queen tender. Any single ant can and does move around between these roles based on some very simple feedback. For example, if an ant goes out foraging and runs across too many other ants from its colony, it gives up foraging and turns to nest building or garbage collection. It is as if it thinks, "Aha. We have enough foragers so we will have enough food and therefore we need to expand the nest." However, individual ants do not think. They have fixed action patterns that are triggered by very specific sensory input.

The relevant sensory input is quite limited. Ant language is a language of scent and has less than a hundred phrases. Ants "speak" by leaving scents behind and "listen" by happening on these scents in their wandering.

While ants are not very bright as individuals, they make up a colony that is flexible and adaptive. It is because ants have a small range of fixed action patterns and just enough flexibility to move from pattern to pattern based on very specific and limited information that they can collectively be an ant colony and adjust to important changes in their environments. Newborn ants have no trouble fitting in. They just do what they know to do.

What I have described is a closed system. It is based in bottom-up logic but what it creates is a comparatively simple and tightly focused ant colony. Furthermore, ant colonies are a lot like. None of them produces Beethoven symphonies.

The achievements of the social insects are quite impressive and ants have survived as a species for millions of years. They have limited goals, limited outputs; limited throughput or processing alternatives, no leisure time, no reflection, no change; and ants respond to very limited aspects of their environments based on very limited sensory inputs.

People have many options that ants do not have. We can reflect on our goals and change them. We can respond to a vast variety of sensory inputs and process these diverse inputs with several dimensions of thinking, feeling and reflection. We can organize our collective activities in many different ways. We Seekers love to explore and express our creativity and imagination in myriad ways.

Nevertheless, ants have something to teach us: patience and practice. They do their few jobs repeatedly. They switch between jobs as needed, repeatedly. Without much consciousness, they act for the good of the colony repeatedly.

When the time for fighting comes, they give up their lives without question. When the Queen needs tending far from the light of day, the ants hang in 24/7, day after day.

One of the recent findings is that while individual ants live out very simple fixed action patterns responding to a limited set of signals, the colony as a whole displays learning over time. For example, when a colony is young it is much more likely to go to war with a neighboring colony than in later years. Patience and practice as individuals, even with low levels of consciousness, leads to collective learning, a kind of collective consciousness that no single ant can articulate.

Like ants, Seekers organizes from the bottom up. We do not have anyone in the role of clergy. We do not have a denomination insisting on doctrinal purity. Instead, we have Stewards who are conscious and intentional about holding the center of Seekers life, and who pray and act for the good of the community as a whole. Nevertheless, Stewards do not issue many orders. We rely on all the individuals in Seekers constantly to figure out what needs to be done. We do not assign or elect individuals to committees. We rely on each other to constantly figure out how the needs of Seekers match up against our individual senses of Call. We trust that the outcome will be a good one rather than trying to fit everything into a preset model.

Sometimes this does not work too well. I have been convener of the library group for over a year. We had a meeting and made some simple reasonable plans. We got part of our work done. David Lloyd figured out that we needed bookshelves, which matched up nicely with his enjoyment of carpentry. Therefore, we got the shelves up, called for books and got them roughly sorted on the shelves. However, I have never gotten around to the follow-up of putting nametags on the divisions of the books into categories, a simple task. Very bad patience and practice on my part and no one has both noticed the incompleteness and stepped forward to fill in the gap in my

performance.

How do individual Seekers figure out what to do? What is the collective consciousness of our community that helps our community to thrive? What are the pheromone smells that help us understand that some ant trails are better than others are for our foraging into the world when we are a community in dispersion? That is, we expect Seekers to live with the hope that the eternal realm is indeed present; that we can risk into trust, and caring, and love; that we will realign our lives, repeatedly, to express such trust, caring, and love; that we will notice our failures and confess them; that we will try not to hurt each other and that we will be accountable to one another when hurt happens anyway. It takes patience and practice to try to live this way.

The first aspect of our Seekers answer is that we expect everyone to do their individual inner work: to take seriously the disciplines of bible study, prayer, reflection, journaling, and, for many of us, body spirituality and exploration of the arts. Many churches call for such inner work, especially prayer. However, Seekers does not merely call for such work, we expect it. We do not expect all newcomers to be good at inner work or to be comfortable with it, but we do expect everyone to work with their inner journey starting from where each person is. Moreover, we expect all Seekers to share the challenges and results of their inner journey with at least one other person, a spiritual guide. Spiritual guides do not give orders, do not assign penance, but they do listen and they do care. Sometimes they ask questions, hopefully helpful questions. Therefore, a second aspect of our answer is that Seekers help individuals connect their individual inner journeys to community caring, encouragement, and support. The inner journey takes patience and practice, daily patience and practice. In addition, we expect such patience and practice to pay off in an expanded consciousness, an expanded caring and trust, an expanded readiness and confidence to do what need to

be done.

A third aspect of bottom up guidance for the community is that we expect Seekers to take advantage of the learning made possible by the School of Christian Living. The School emphasizes living questions and tries to respect the many different backgrounds and journeys of those who participate in the classes. The School embodies the culture that we believe individuals can understand Christianity, can grow in their understanding, and can use their understanding to help figure out their paths in Seekers and in the wider world. Moreover, the School introduces and reinforces the patience, practice and expectations of life-long learning. We believe in trained leadership in Seekers and so we are training like mad.

There are many other aspects of preparing individual Seekers for bottom-up initiative. We have our [sermons](#) that come from many members of the community. We have our mission groups, and the ebb and flow of mission groups that gather and release different energies from time-to-time. With my remaining time, I want to focus attention on another aspect of our common life, our unstructured conversations, the conversations that happen around the edges at Coffee Hour, before and after meetings, during dinners at the School, during retreats and overnights, and especially the conversations that happen in the dozens of lunches and dinners of Seekers getting together.

The organizational grounding for these informal conversations is that they happen within the context of community instead of the context of bureaucracy and voluntary organizations. These conversations are where Seekers learn the guidance rules so that we can fly together in a flock without bumping into each other. Birds only need to learn three rules to fly together in a flock. Our flock needs more rules and we need healing when we do bump in to each other. Nevertheless, we are flying.

Collectively we need to know two things about flying. First, we need to fly efficiently and we need to fly in formation.

Secondly, we need to remember that flying efficiently and in formation does not help if we are going in the wrong direction. We count on everyone to help us set and adjust our directions. Furthermore, we break out of flock flying to do our individual exploring, foraging and work. We need everyone to remember how to find the flock again, even when the flock is moving South for the winter.

Most of you already know some or all of our guidance habits for individual Seekers, so habitual that in many cases they have become unconscious. I'll mention my version of some of the habits in the interest of helping those who still have a learning curve to complete, and in the interest of all of us so that we can become more intentional about fostering our best practices.

We talk a lot about calling: the theological, emotional, discernment, and practical aspects of calling. Most visitors are asked during their first day with us what kinds of things they care about, asked about their hungers and hopes. Such is the beginning of raising calling to awareness.

To talk about calling carries several crucial assumptions that we sometimes overlook. We just assume that everyone has a calling and that everyone has something valuable to contribute. We assume that a calling should be self-fulfilling, however frustrating or upsetting, and not be merely task oriented. That is the key to having a generative community where morale depends on everyone and not on the inspirational quality of a leader. The most important thing for understanding Seekers as an open system, for understanding the Eternal Realm as an open system, is that if everyone learns and follows their callings the community will work itself out in a good way. Just follow the thread of calling in your inner journey and open your heart to what is needed all around you. The right questions will arise and you can live into answers, self-correcting your flight patterns as you go.

Which lead us to a second common kind of conversation: I perceive that Seekers lives out a belief that the Holy Spirit is alive and well, that the Holy Spirit is present and ready to be engaged, that the Holy Spirit is accessible to your inner journey and also ready and available for whatever group discernment we need to do. Sometimes we talk about the Holy Spirit with language that uses the words Holy Spirit. Sometimes we use other words and are hardly aware of spiritual or theological implications or assumptions in our speech. This conversation is implicit in our name: Seekers. It is part of our emphasis upon careful listening and in hearing each other into speech.

We also believe that the Holy Spirit helps us in group-discernment. Seekers is awash in good ideas, creative suggestions, various passions. The Holy Spirit helps us sort out what is timely, what is good news for us here and now. The Holy Spirit helps us prioritize what will get the next emphasis with our limited free energy and attention. Most of all, we expect the Holy Spirit to help individuals decide if they will respond to a call, a need. All are free to propose and all of us have to live with the rejections of no or not now.

For example, after twenty years I still want Seekers to reconsider tithing as a spiritual standard. I still consider tithing to be unbiblical and unfair as a spiritual standard and not our best guidance for stewardship of our wealth and energy and attention. However, I am practicing patience and I try to be patient in my gentle prodding of Seekers on this subject from time-to-time.

Practice and patience are good things. Nevertheless, practice and patience in the midst of hurting can feel cruel, can feel like rejection. I want you to ease my hurting, not be patient with me in the midst of my hurting. I want you to make an exception to deal with my hurting, not just stay in a rut of what you think is good practice. I want you to respond to my

individuality, my creativity, my intelligence, my examples of risk taking and courage, and not just slog along with your practice and patience.

Appreciation and caring keep patience and practice from being wooden. Appreciation and caring makes patience and practice into an open system.

Because Seekers is an open system and relies on bottom-up initiatives we have significantly different common problems from those found in institutional, clergy dominated, churches. That is territory for many other sermons but I want to be clear here that the choices we have made are not utopian and have their own costs. For example, we have to live with a lot of incomplete conversations and unresolved conflicts. There is no one but ourselves to step in and make things right.

What I hope you can take away this morning is a celebration of the possibilities in Seekers as an open system: opportunities to be known, opportunities to become active without worrying about finding the center of Seekers. When you notice so much that is incomplete and underdeveloped, I hope that it will stir your appreciative rather than your critical reflection. Your ability to see what is incomplete and underdeveloped is part of your awakening sense of calling, part of sorting out whether you want to be a forager or a nest builder. Because we are more than ants, I hope you will find satisfaction and joy in the feeling that we are in this together, that even that when we hurt we are hurting for the right reasons. Welcome to the Seekers conversation! The Eternal Realm is at hand.