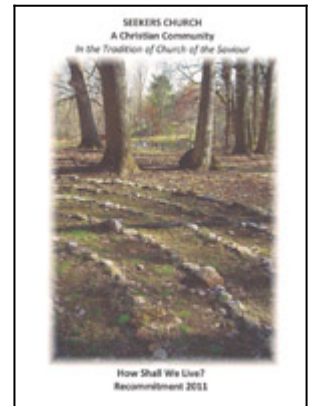


“...the Things of God: Thoughts at a Time of Recommitment” by Jill Joseph

16 October 2011



The 18th Sunday After Pentecost

Recommitment Sunday for Church of the Saviour congregations

“...then Jesus said to them, “Give to the Emperor that which belongs to the Emperor, and to God that which belongs to God.”

Thus for me, and perhaps for you, the question comes: what is it that belongs to God? And today we specifically ask if and how re-commitment or commitment to this particular Christian community, this small part of the larger body of Christ, is for us “one of the things of God.”

After all, another year has passed. A transformative year for this community in which we’ve experienced sudden grief and are

finding slow, deep healing. A year of change for many of us personally, with issues raised by retirement, and health challenges, and relocation, and evolving family circumstances. For others of us, perhaps the year has passed more silently and the landscape of our lives seems little altered. Yet whatever our circumstances, whether considering commitment for the first time or re-commitment, all of us have been presented with the same challenge: Reflect, pray, and, as Dave Lloyd reminded us in his sermon focused on this season, know that what is asked of each of us is integrity.

It is not that we ought choose commitment, but that we must choose integrity. In this community, both our “yes” or our “no” will be valued and respected and supported. It is given to each of us to consider deeply for ourselves the choice we make, to ask what in our lives “are things of God.”

As part of this consideration, I reflect on three resources available to us: our history has recorded in Scripture, our deeply personal lived experiences, and our life together.

We begin with Scripture, considering the question of what might be the “things of God” by listening again to the ongoing story of the desert travels following the exodus from Egypt. The triumph of fleeing Pharaoh is now a memory and the many tribulations of a desert life, perhaps some anticipated but many not, frequently bereft of even food or water, have taken their toll. There is that nasty bit with the golden calf.

But through all this, we have become acquainted with Moses as he builds his relationship with this God of parted seas and of

mountaintops, of intimate private conversations and of fiery, smoking pillars.

Our reading today suggests that one of the things of God is human need, for Moses presents very straightforward requests, one after the other. "Show me your ways", he asks. And have not many of us asked the same thing amid our own desert wanderings? Many of us deeply hunger to see and know the ways of God in our own lives. It's easy to make it sound poetic and ever so wonderful, but then there's the morning when I'm tired and morning meditation is seemingly nothing more than arranging my shopping list and obsessing about 5 overdue tasks and feeling cranky that I was not thanked for some little favor.....and the dark question rises up in me: Is this what my life of faith is to consist of? Is this all I have to offer the One Who Calls Us? Am I pretending?

But when asked to "show his ways", God spoke to Moses, saying, "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest." I notice that this God did not say anything about giving a sure sense of doing the right thing. Nor was there any mention of giving easy answers. Nor was an perfect 30 day, ideally online, program of spiritual development provided.

What is offered is both much more fundamental and much more challenging: the presence of God. For many of us, this presence God has promised us is something that comes alive in community. I read the sermons of Dave Lloyd and Deborah Sokolove who have guided us into this season of recommitment. Their honesty and humility and grace in reflecting on their own lives becomes a way that I learn a great deal about the presence of God with and among us, and I find rest. David saw and described how his loss and pain had challenged his ability

to set aside personal need and ego in favor of a loving attentiveness to the needs of community. Deborah described ways in which her own call to artistic expression of the love of God and teaching can be challenged of the thoughts of what others are doing. Both were able to confess parts of their lives that were perhaps not "the things of God", and in so doing, they brought the presence of God into my life and gave me rest.

For me, recommitment is an affirmation of my valuing, my seeking out, indeed my needing a confessing community that both encourages me to persevere and to confront that which is dark or wounded or hidden in myself. For me, this is one of the things of God.

But the audacious needs expressed by Moses do not stop there. In spite of the reassurances of God that Moses had found favor and that this God knew him "by name", Moses asked for more: "Show me your glory."

God protests, explaining that no one can see this presence and yet live, but arranges a remarkable alternative. Hidden in the cleft of a rock, covered over, Moses is reassured that he shall see "the back of God", though not the face of God as he passes by.

A strange interlude. But the rabbis who commented on the Torah provided a wonderful interpretation of this Scripture that speaks to how we might find "the things of God". They write that we are typically blind to God as this grace weaves its way into our lives moment by moment, day after day. Rather, it is only in hindsight, as we look over the events of our lives, that we discern the presence of God. We see the back of God,

not the face.

And thus, the importance of storytelling, both individually and collectively. How often have I, a woman of robust doubts and uncertain faith, quizzically considered and re-considered the wonderful post-Easter transformation of the ragtag, quarrelsome apostles? I can't ignore this story, seemingly of a time and place where God had passed by in a special way.

And it is not only scripture which holds our stories of God among us. It is our collective history, our community retellings of how the Carroll Café grew, of the many ways Kate moved among us with quiet grace and strength, of Matinicus Island and the rescue of downed plane passengers, of how I walked by this place and sent my first defensive e-mail and heard from many of you and was welcomed in. These are also the stories of times and places where God can be seen, at least in retrospect, passing by and through and in our lives.

For me, recommitment is an affirmation of my valuing, my seeking out, indeed my needing a community that remembers and tells and retells stories about God among us. For me, this is one of the things of God.

There is much more than could be said about what is to be found here: of the learning and teaching, of the passion for and commitment to social justice, of our mission groups, and the use of this space in so many creative ways. Of our shared leadership and luminous worship, of our welcoming many voices at this pulpit. In our diversity, these each represent call to some, but opportunity for all.

Today, along with many of you, I will recommit to being a part of this small part of the body of Christ. Dear Marjory has challenged me to try to articulate what this might mean in the dramatically altered circumstances of my life, living 3000 miles away from this community of the brethren who have shaped and continue to shape my understanding of, and relationship to, the one who calls me: Creator, Incarnate One, and Spirit among Us.

First, my recommitment is an expression of a deeply personal need, the need to remain in relationship with this community called to the Jesus Way. It is an expression of my need for a confessing community, a storytelling community, a community that holds, with equal tenderness and respect, my doubt and my faith, that summons me to the intersection of inner intimacy with God and outer passion for justice. My recommitment also expresses my need for a home where I can accept accountability for the mature expression of both my doubt and faith, where I can be challenged. The discipline of spiritual reports will continue and I'm deeply grateful that my mission group is exploring with me ways we might remain connected.

Second, my recommitment is an expression of call, a call that begins by being in dialogue with God about the substance of our lives, as Moses was in dialogue with his desert God. As the disciples and the tax collectors and, yes, the Pharisees, were in dialogue with Jesus. Many yearning, most perplexed and often confused, some outraged...but all asking, challenging, listening.

This is a deep listening attuned to silence and dream and the

slow continental drift in the continents of our hearts.. But it is also a listening attentive to one another, to the voice of the brethren, to the glimpses of God we offer one another in community.

And from this inner and outer listening can emerge our call, both a concept and a reality with which I continue to struggle. My fundamental understanding of my own call is that expressed so clearly at Seekers as, "Christian servanthood in the structures in which we lead our lives."

It is both wonderful and untrue that I am "Jill who goes to Eritrea" as I am sometimes thought of here. In retrospect, I was too eager to affirm my own yearning to heal the world, to stand with others who work for justice and hope in Africa., to assure myself that I had a call. I hope my work in Eritra is important. I also know that it is difficult and expensive and a very small part of my life.

Rather, in my Spiritual Reports I have been led to claim, as I think we are all invited to claim, the call of our ordinary life. For me, this is a call to long days spent teaching and mentoring, to supporting-and yes, loving-those with whom I collaborate and for whom I bear some responsibility, to the "ordinary" struggles to refrain from gossip and pettiness, to acknowledge and apologize when I offend, to accord respect to all undistorted by status or roles, to hold up core values, to promote countless research projects supporting disadvantaged, minority, and immigrant families as they struggle to raise their children in our broken cities.

Today I also claim the ways I am called to consider with you, however we might, ways that those who are away but not gone from this community might remain connected. As I will be away but not gone. This is a promise that my life in California, although distant, will remain linked in ways I can't fully understand to the heart of this community. That my professional life, that my family life with JoAnne and our son and his family, that the way I use my income, that my often faltering attempts to support my aging parents, are understood as part of my call to express the love of God.....part of our collective call to express the love of God.

Today, some of us will commit to this community for the first time. Others will not. Today, some of us will re-commit to this community. Others will not. But, each of us knows that woven into our lives are "the things of God" that we hold with gratitude and tenderness. "For," as Paul tells the church in Thessalonica, "we know, brothers and sisters, that we are beloved by God."