

# **Rachel Halterman: Is This the Promised Land?**

A sermon by Rachel Halterman

March 8, 1998

## **Is This the Promised Land?**

**(God knows we've been in the wilderness long enough!)**

In the past six months or so we have been blessed with the presence of many first-timers at this pulpit, newcomers who have had the courage (or perhaps the naiveté) to jump right into our worship life. I welcome your infusion of freshness and delight in your willingness to share your journeys with us.

On the other hand, it's taken me seven and a half years to muster the courage to solo before you. While Diane and I brought the word together when we first introduced Seekers to Covey, it's a lot different to go it alone. Diane has gone on to bring the word several times since, but I've held back, believing I had nothing to say. That remains my fear today, but in the meantime I've developed sufficient hubris to disregard it. Perhaps that's part of being a Seeker.

This is also the first time I am speaking to you as treasurer of Seekers. This feels significant to me, as that responsibility has had a lot to do with shaping my life here. In fact, it was these two events – the arrival of a number of new people and my responsibilities as treasurer – that

ultimately inspired me to bring you the word today.

This morning I'd like to talk about community in Seekers. We've had some very powerful messages about community in the past months, and some of you are currently taking a course on the subject in the School of Christian Living. Also, we have devoted a lot of time in recent core membership meetings to examining who we are and who we are becoming as community.

The Scripture lesson this week folds neatly into where I want to take us. It is the story of God's promise to Abram to give his people the land "from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates" in exchange for uprooting his household and moving there. Abram was being asked to move from the comfort of his home to an unknown land. As I reflect on the subject of community and Seekers, particularly in connection with our pending search for new space, I am struck by the parallels the story of Abram offers. For example, can we imagine the potential of Seekers as community to become our Promised Land?

For me, the subject of community recalls two specific aspects of my experience with Seekers. The first is my journey toward belonging within the community. Since so much of this journey has been spent in the wilderness, it seems particularly appropriate to bring you this story during the Lenten season.

The second concerns my role as treasurer. I've learned a lot about community by observing this community's giving. I want to share some reflections on what our financial gifts mean to us, and how we might become more intentional in viewing our giving as a significant way in which we can participate in community.

I'm tempted to draw another parallel between Seekers and the story of God's promise to Abram. After all, if you look at this story in the context of our relationship with the Church of the Saviour, it wasn't Abram but his father who originally held the vision of moving to a new land, just as it was Gordon

Cosby's vision that eventually led to the creation of Seekers.

Abram's father took all his heirs and their households from their home in Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan. For reasons that aren't clear, he ended the journey in Haran where they settled for many years. After Abram's father died, God told him to take his entire household from Haran to the land that God would show him.

Again, this was not Abram's vision, but he believed in it and followed it. After suffering through famine and fighting, he still wanted to know why. "What will you give me?" he asked of God. Once again, God offered the Promised Land for his descendants, and even though Abram had no heirs at the time, he continued to follow the vision. Ultimately, he lived into the vision and it became his own.

For many years we lived out of Gordon Cosby's vision. We questioned it, modified it, and at times railed against the authority of it, but it remained the model. Now that we're on our own, gradually Gordon's vision has taken a back seat to our struggle to define who we are and who we are becoming.

How much of the father's vision is ours? What is our expectation of living the vision? What is the promise of community?

Like Abrams' descendants, we envision a place where we can live in peace and harmony, a place where each individual is free and supported to live according to their call. Our community strives for those ideals, but I feel and hear a longing within us for a community that is more fully committed to one another; a community that is more a part of our daily lives; a community that trusts its vision will prevail over individual interests.

For some, that level of commitment is solid; a concrete foundation upon which they structure their faith. But for others such a commitment – indeed, the word itself – carries

such baggage for so many that the reality remains illusive.

I have been struck recently by Doug Cochrane's public struggles over the concept of commitment during confessional prayers. I believe he mirrors the thoughts and feelings of many of us. Commitment can seem very vague and abstract and quite threatening. How can we hold these tensions together in a way that offers room for everyone to faithfully follow their individual paths to belonging?

For one thing, I think we need to honor the process we each must go through before we are willing to make a commitment. For some this is a lifetime work and the process is their inner journey. Perhaps it might be more comfortable to think of commitment in terms of a covenant such as the one God made with Abram. After all, don't we have a covenant with each other to live out of call? Isn't that a commitment, no matter what form it takes? I'd like to explore that theme by way of recounting some of my personal journey within Seekers.

When I first came to Seekers in July 1991 my sense of the community was that everyone here was deeply spiritual and able to elicit any number of gifts to fulfill their highly motivated calls. The creativity and energy of the community awed me. I was pretty intimidated as well, wondering what gifts I could offer to benefit such an erudite and dynamic collection of people.

I found it fascinating, stimulating, provocative – and almost totally self-deflating. I had no call. I had no gifts. I had always struggled with self-esteem issues, and at times it felt as though I was beating my head against a wall, surrounding myself with people who reminded me constantly of what I was not.

But what else could I do? I felt spiritually nourished here. I was at home. So I entered whole-heartedly into community life, fortified only by a deep knowing that this was where I

belonged.

I joined the core membership three years later. Seekers continued to be exciting, stimulating and challenging but still self-deflating. I still didn't know my call; I still couldn't find my gifts. What could I possibly bring of value?

I remember asking my therapist at the time if my participation in Seekers was just another form of self-sabotage. And yet I thrived on the environment. If this was sabotage, surely it was a higher form than in the past. I was evolving!

I have lived with these feelings of self-doubt for most of my time in Seekers; their ebb and flow were the tide of my existence here. But gradually, almost imperceptibly, I gained a sense of entitlement and belonging unlike anything else I have experienced. Now, rather than dwelling on what I perceive to be my inadequacies, I have found fulfillment in taking on responsibilities that contribute to the community. I have pushed aside my introverted nature to connect with people on a more intimate level.

As a result, I have been able to open my heart to receive the support of the community, to genuinely take it in and claim it as mine. I was able, for instance, to accept and embrace the warm love and support Diane, Covey and I received on our journey to bring Casey home from Vietnam. At another time I might never have taken it in.

I recall having lunch with Carol Ann Siciliano last fall when we were discussing how much we enjoy the intellectual stimulation of Seekers. I confessed my sense of intellectual inadequacy, and I'll never forget her response. She told me that, while the intellectual stimulation is what drew her to Seekers, it was people like me – people who do community – which has kept her here. That comment has stayed with me as a source of strength and encouragement.

Somewhere along the way I have come to accept that fact that I

am a learner, not a teacher; what feeds me are the thoughts and reflections of others. I am finally letting go of my frustration and regret that I don't have the gifts of teaching and prophecy so prevalent in this community. After all, what would all you teachers do if there were no eager learners?

Two roles I have taken on recently – Celebration Circle and treasurer – have had a significant effect on my new feelings of belonging. As a member since fall of the Celebration Circle mission group, I have developed an appreciation of the sacredness of the rhythm of the liturgical year. The nature of our task to energize and structure the worship service each Sunday dictates the importance of being attentive to the emotional and spiritual needs of the community. For me this has brought about an awareness of the intricacies of community and how we must work to bring in all parts to satisfy the whole.

My role as treasurer has pushed me reluctantly into looking at the importance of doing the spiritual work necessary to tackle the most difficult issue of money. There are many ways to commit to and participate in a community such as ours, and one of the most important is through our material offerings. I'll talk about that more in a moment.

So how did I find my way out of the wilderness? An easy answer might be the drugs. But the last time I looked, commitment and spiritual discipline were not listed as side effects on the label of St. John's Wort. I feel blessed that anti-depressants freed me to set aside the negative and focus on the positive.

Once I escaped from my debilitating self-denigration, I was motivated to become a more active participant in the community. I began to take more seriously the disciplines I had pledged to engage as a core member. In turn, this led to a deeper sense of commitment. I began to take on roles that felt useful and comfortable, and to learn how many elements go into spiritual growth. More importantly, I experienced the positive

effect individual spiritual growth can have on strengthening a community.

For those of you who have traveled the inner journey for many years this is not news. But for me, it's been a major revelation.

I want to get back now to my role as treasurer. I took this on two years ago without any appreciation of what I was getting into. My qualifications consisted of a willingness and availability to do the job and a relatively competent understanding of accounting software. But what I found in the process – something every accountant learns early on – is that when you know the details of where the money goes, you have a very solid grasp of the substance of an organization. And substantively, Seekers has every reason to be proud. We receive an impressive amount of contributions from a very small congregation, and our giving is close to fifty per cent of our income.

Since individual giving is confidential, I have a unique vista. What has been more instructive for me is to be able to look at giving patterns of individuals who make up the community. I have learned a lot in the process about who we are. I see people with scarcity stretching to do their part. I see people with abundance holding back. But what impresses me most are those who have developed a habit of giving; who give as a regular, automatic act that speaks volumes about their faithfulness, regardless of the amount.

It has taken me some time to learn that the greatest value of daily disciplines is it's a statement that my spiritual journey is a major life priority. It is an investment of God-centered time every day. It makes the emotional and intellectual connection between what we talk about at Seekers and what we do here. The truth of this has been particularly evident to me as I've slipped from my discipline routine since Casey's arrival.

It is the same with the discipline of giving. Our financial gifts make a spiritual statement that we value this community enough to invest here in our future. I believe our financial gifts are as important to the spiritual life of the community as participation in the worship or any other Seekers function. This is not because of the money itself, although certainly we need it to survive. What is essential is to establish a regular habit of giving that makes a statement of belonging – a covenant, if you will – that this is where your faith lies and this is where you are willing to place your hope, your trust and your future. The significance of the act of giving is not the amount. It is what the giving represents.

A large majority of people in Seekers are active participants in its life. We attend worship services regularly. We participate frequently in the School of Christian Living, retreats, overnights and other events. Many of us are members of mission groups, and many of us socialize outside church activities. Yet when it comes to giving, only fifty per cent of the community are regulars while the other fifty per cent give seldom or not at all.

Why are so many people willing to offer their time and energy to Seekers yet not their money? Perhaps they worry that what they can offer isn't sufficient or worthy. Perhaps some don't like where the money is spent. Perhaps it just doesn't seem important. After all, Seekers has plenty of money. What difference would my contribution make?

To those of you who give little or nothing at all, for whatever reason, whether you are new to the community or have been attending for years, I ask that you give some serious thought to why this is so, and what needs to change in order for you to participate in this aspect of community. To those of you who give irregularly, I ask that you consider how you might benefit from being more intentional about your participation. And how might the community benefit?

Kate Cudlipp recently gave a courageous sermon on this subject wherein she offered a provocative invitation to honestly engage us around the issues of money. It's an intimidating challenge, but one that has the potential to expand the depths of our inner journeys. In truth, how can we claim an effective inner journey that does not include an examination of the issue that most dominates our culture and our choices?

Before closing I want to draw your attention to the altar and the visual interpretation of the Seekers community. This work was created by a small group within the core membership during an exercise designed to convey an idea of what our community looks like. It is a reminder of the complexity and interdependence of the Seekers community that may become our Promised Land.

Abram gave up his comfortable place of community for an unknown land. What are we willing to give in exchange for unknown but potentially authentic community?

Whether we journal, pray, volunteer, engage in devotions or offer financial gifts, spiritual disciplines create a habit of being that serves as a constant reminder that we are here because we want to be; that we are an important part of the whole; that we belong here.

When we do *all* these things, we make a covenant with one another in God's name. Amen.