

Recommitting to Be the Body of Christ by David Lloyd

In a few moments we will share the elements of Jesus' last meal with his followers. We will say, "This is my body broken for you," and "This is my blood, poured out as the cup of salvation." When she is administering the elements Deborah Sokolove usually says, "Become what you are, the Body of Christ."



On Thursday Sharon and I went to see "Bodies: The Exhibition" in Rosslyn, which ends next Sunday. It was fascinating, and in a way, deeply moving to see the human body dissected to display each of its systems in turn. We came out marveling at the incredible functioning of our bodies, wondering if the exhibit makes a better case for evolution or for "intelligent design."

One thing the exhibit makes clear: each system – skeletal, musculature, skin, nervous, circulatory, respiratory, digestive, and reproductive – depends absolutely on the other systems. They all interrelate. Without the muscles, guided by the nervous system, the bones cannot move. Without the bones, gravity would pull all the muscles and the skin into a blob at our feet. Without the skin, the bones and muscles would be susceptible to disease and the fluctuations of temperature, but without the central nervous system maintaining homeostasis, our heartbeat and respiratory systems would end. Without the circulatory system, respiratory system, and digestive systems the cells would die from lack of oxygen and nutrition and from waste products. Without the reproductive system, none of us would be here.

So too it is in the Body of Christ. As Saint Paul notes in his first letter to the church in Corinth,

For Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body. For indeed we were all brought into one body by baptism, in the one Spirit, whether we are Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free men, and that one Holy Spirit was poured out for all of us to drink.

A body is not one single organ, but many. Suppose the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it does belong to the body none the less. Suppose the ear were to say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it does still belong to the body. If the body were all eye, how could it hear? If the body were all ear, how could it smell? But in fact, God appointed each limb and organ to its own place in the body, as he chose. If the whole were one single organ, there would not be a body at all; in fact, however, there are many different organs, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you"; nor the head to the feet, "I do not need you." Quite the contrary: those organs of the body which seem to be more frail than others are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we regard as less honorable are treated with special honor. To our unseemly parts is given a more than ordinary seemliness, whereas our seemly parts need no adorning. But God has combined the various parts of the body, giving special honor to the humbler parts, so that there might be no sense of division in the body, but that all its organs might feel the same concern for one another. If one organ suffers, they all suffer together. If one flourishes, they all rejoice together.

When you eat the bread and drink from the cup, do you look at each other around the circle? Sometimes I look at a person

and think, "Thank you God for making it so easy to love this person as my brother/sister in Christ. I know we need his/her gifts for this local expression of your Body." I confess that sometimes I look at a person and think, "God, why have you made it so hard to love this person as my brother/sister in Christ? Does he/she **really** have gifts that we **need** for this local expression of your Body?" And in so doing, I create or perpetuate a sense of division in the Body. (By telling you this I have probably ensured that no one will dare to look around the circle later!)

Seekers Church is one local aspect of the Body of Christ, or as the Stewards commitment says, "An ecumenical body of Christians who are linked with the people of God throughout the ages." When we claim to be ecumenical we are claiming part of the tradition we inherited from the Church of the Saviour. The back of the Church of the Saviour worship folder has these words:

An ecumenical church is one whose heart is heavy because of a divided Christendom. It will pray and work for the healing of its divisions. Its only weapon is love.

It will at all times consciously feel itself a part of the World Church and give its first loyalty to the world Christian fellowship.

It will be open minded and sympathetic. This is different from tolerance. This spirit is born, not of indifference, but of deep conviction.

An ecumenical church gives unqualified corporate allegiance to Jesus Christ.

To be true to the tradition we claim then we must be seeking to pray for and work for the healing not only whatever divisions emerge within Seekers from time to time, as difficult as that may be, but also of the divisions within Christendom: between congregations welcoming homosexuals into full communion and into the clergy and those who so abhor homosexuality that they seek to change people's sexual orientation, between those seeking more leadership or less leadership for women in the church, between Christians who believe the role of government is to promote inclusive social justice and Christians who believe the role of government is to promote conservative religious and social beliefs, between congregations in the northern hemisphere with the style and tone of the European Enlightenment, and congregations in the southern hemisphere with fervent evangelical and fundamentalist tone.

Because Seekers Church is unique in some ways, if we are not careful we may slip into the sin of pride, believing that our local expression of the Body of Christ doesn't need other local expressions that are different.

In two weeks, on Recommitment Sunday those who are Stewards and those who declare themselves to be members of Seekers Church will have the opportunity to recite the words that have been an insert in our worship folders for this season. Whether you are declaring yourself as a member of Seekers Church for the first time or renewing your commitment for the umpteenth time, or whether you are choosing not to do so, I hope you have taken the opportunity to spend an hour here in the sanctuary in silent reflection about your decision. I want to thank Celebration Circle for providing that opportunity yesterday.

I have a special love for Recommitment Sunday. I have had it ever since Sharon and I first attended the Church of the Saviour in 1972, and read the membership commitment printed on the back of the worship bulletin. There were three sections in that membership commitment that particularly caught my attention, and still have great meaning for me:

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 will seek to bring every phase of my life under the Lordship of Christ.

Neither of us had ever seen such a church membership commitment before. When I joined the Presbyterian Church as a 14 year old, I remember making a profession of faith, but I know that it had nothing anywhere near the radical specificity of this commitment. Recommitment Sunday in the Church of the Saviour is so momentous an occasion that to me in ranks second in importance as a Church holiday only to Pentecost, the beginning of the Church universal.

Since 1976 Seekers Church has had its own commitment statements. It seems to me that whether one makes a commitment or as a member, the commitment is a vow, an oath, a sacred pledge. My life has had a number of pledges, oaths, and vows, and I expect yours has also. When you were a child, did you begin each school day with the Pledge of Allegiance? Perhaps some of the men here joined the Cub Scouts, taking its oath each time we met. When I was older, instead of joining

the Boy Scouts, I joined the 4-H club, and recited its pledge on many occasions. I can still recite them from memory.

In college I professed to the Principles of Faith of a Methodist service fraternity, Sigma Theta Epsilon, but I don't remember the words. At the end of college, I became a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia, and for the first time took a legally binding oath:

I, David Lloyd, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.

I took this same oath when I became a civil service employee in 1991. When I completed my service as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1970, I was going to be drafted. I enlisted in the Army and took an oath that began the same but ended with a vow to "obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice." Since the invasion of Iraq, members of the National Guard are finding out that the oath they took actually includes going to war, something they didn't really expect would happen when they enlisted in the Guard.

Only a year later, in 1971, I made the first of the two most important commitments of my life – the other being my commitment as a Steward in Seekers Church. My commitment 36 years ago was:

I, David, take thee Sharon, to have and to hold from this day forward: for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, so long as both shall live.

I confess that what I was really hearing was “I, David, take thee Sharon, to have and to hold from this day forward: for better, for richer, and in health, as long as both shall live.” Today, as a person currently being treated for cancer, I am so grateful that as Sharon said those same vows she meant “in sickness” as well as “and in health” and she’s had many occasions in 36 years to reflect on what “or worse” means.

The movie *A Man for All Seasons* focused my attention on the meaning of an oath, a vow. In his preface to the play, Robert Bolt wrote that for Sir Thomas More,

...an oath was an invitation to God, an invitation God would not refuse, to act as a witness, and to judge; the consequence of perjury was damnation...A man takes an oath only when he wants to commit himself quite exceptionally to the statement, when he wants to make an identity between the truth of it and his own virtue; he offers himself as a guarantee.

In the play and the movie, More’s daughter Margaret attempts to make him swear to the Act of Succession, which not only declares Henry VIII’s marriage to Queen Catherine invalid but also that Henry is the head of the Church in England. Margaret says, “‘God more regards the thoughts of the heart than the words of the mouth.’ Or so you’ve always told me. Say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise.” More responds, “What is an oath then, but words we say to God?...When a man takes an oath, Meg, he’s holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers **then** – he needn’t hope to find himself again.”

So when we commit to Seekers Church as a Steward or as a member, inviting God to act as a witness, holding our selves in our own hands, what are we asking God to witness to? What does commitment mean to us as Seekers, a Christian community

in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour? I believe that commitment is one of three interrelated principles of that tradition: "call," "commitment," and "accountability."

The Call of Seekers Church is printed out for us and I encourage you to reflect on it as part of your preparation for Recommitment Sunday. In *Mission Groups in Seekers Church* we state the interrelationship between call and commitment for us as individuals:

At Seekers Church, we believe God calls each of us to an active partnership, to be co-creators of God's realm here on Earth. This call comes through a sense of awe and mystery as we live into a growing relationship with Christ. It is a persistent, costly commitment to give ourselves to the task of bringing peace and justice to those in need. At the same time, once we accept God's call, God's gift to us is that this call leads to a life of love in service. Concretely, God's call is a deep, inescapable desire to transform the world and the church. It is a desire placed by God in the heart of each of us to be servants to others and stewards of God's creation.

Notice that this call isn't about pursuing one's own purposes. It's not about "following your bliss" in our culture's usual understanding. God may be calling me to a mission I don't particularly want to do or believe that I am equipped to do. (See the Book of Jonah.) I am perfectly willing to commit to be God's co-creator in bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth if I get to choose what tasks are involved, and at what cost. But if it is God who is choosing the mission for me, especially if it is something that doesn't appeal to me, and if it is God who sets the cost of that mission, I should be giving long and careful thought before I vow, "Yes, God, I am your servant. Send me."

Moreover, the call to commitment is a call to servanthood, and servanthood strikes us as un-American. We live in the land where all are supposed to be created equal, where we all have the right to pursue our own happiness. To willingly subjugate myself to another's control – even if that other is God – feels counter-cultural, almost treasonous. And what's more, the commitment is to be part of the Body of Christ, and some of us in that Body are not too loveable.

Commitment" links to "accountability." Now, part of our American ethos of "liberty" makes accountability seem negative, as if it means only that we are to give a periodic account of our shortcomings. But accountability means that we give the good news along with the bad news, a progress report, as it were. That is what our mission groups are about: a place where we are given the opportunity to present the travelogue of our spiritual pilgrimage through a weekly spiritual report and through speaking aloud to the group. Sometimes accountability is joyous, as we describe the places in our lives where God has given us grace this week. And since every member of the mission group is equally committed to the mission, it is a place where we have the absolute right to ask the other members of the mission group for support, for help, and for forgiveness as we seek to co-create one little aspect of God's Kingdom. I am responsible for helping Marjory, Anna, and Jacqie on their spiritual journeys as they are for helping me on mine, for sharing their joys as well as sharing their sorrows as they share in my joys and sorrows.

To be truthful, many Christians are not very good at accepting a call to servanthood, not very good at making and honoring commitments to God (and to each other), and very

reluctant to undergo mutual accountability. I'm including myself here. The fact that I am in Seekers does not exempt me. Those Christians who are good at servanthood, commitments, and accountability are the ones we call saints and martyrs. I think of Mother Theresa, full of doubt and the silence of God, yet persisting in honoring her commitment to the poor and marginalized of the earth. And today's passage in Luke's gospel tells us that we won't get special recognition from our Heavenly Master for doing our duty as servants, which seems a bit unfair. If we're going to do something un-American, at the least we should get special approval from God.

I have believe commitment is a weighty thing. It is weighty in that it is important: it has eternal consequences for our souls. But, although weighty, it doesn't have to be grim or onerous. Today's excerpt from Paul's second letter to Timothy can give us guidance as we make our commitment, when we hold our lives in our hands: we stir the embers of the gift of God, the Holy Spirit, which inspires strength, love, and self-discipline, into a flame that will burn brightly. For it is God who brought us salvation and called us to a dedicated life, not for any merit of ours but of God's own purpose and own grace.

That salvation came through Jesus. Let us live by faith and love which is ours in Christ Jesus. Let us commit to be and to become what we are: his Body.