

“Recommitting to Vulnerable Freedom” by David Lloyd

September 8, 2013

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost

I came of age during the great age of the ecumenical movement and it weighs heavily on my heart that there are many things that divide Christians. Among them are disagreements over the ways scripture should be used. In Seekers we've had sermons that discussed whether the apocalyptic passages in the Hebrew Scriptures (the book of Daniel) and in the New Testament (Revelation) should be interpreted primarily as prophetic with respect to future events – especially the Rapture and the Second Coming – or whether they were primarily intended to be inspirational to people undergoing religious persecution.

Another such disagreement concerns the New Testament gospels. Here in Seekers we have members of the congregation read the lectionary passages. Frequently (but not today) our liturgist announces that x person will read from the Hebrew Scriptures, y person will read from a New Testament epistle, and z person will “bring us the gospel lesson.” In fact, sometimes the epistle is a lesson. Usually it's an explication of Christian theology or detailed guidance and encouragement for congregational and individual life, as we heard today. But the word “gospel” means “good news” and good news isn't a lesson. Instead it's celebratory. Bring on the good news so we can party! I'd be happy for the liturgist to announce that z person will “bring us this week's good news.”

Today may not be one of those Sundays! Today's gospel hardly sounds like good news! Instead, it sounds like one of those

“hard teachings” of Jesus. And it’s even more daunting because today is the first Sunday of our Seekers’ recommitment season and the re-examination of our faith and belonging to this congregation that comes with that season. Here is Luke’s account:

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

This first verse doesn’t sound like good news. In fact, at first hearing it strikes me as not only bad news but also as overwhelmingly wrong! It is the opposite of everything we believe as Seekers! We believe that the Church is relational. We believe that we shouldn’t break connections between people; we should build connections between them. We should attempt to prevent hatred and discord. There are some among us who may have had good cause to hate one or both of their parents, their spouse, one or more of their siblings, and even their children, but we don’t think that we should actually have such hatred. When we hear that one of our congregation has suffered greatly from such a family relationship, we don’t encourage that person to hate their family member as a way of being a better Christian.

So something seems out of joint. One way to resolve this disconnect is to say that there was a mistake, an error in transcription. Jesus didn’t mean to say “hate” but by the time his teachings were written down 40 years after his death the original words were lost. Or that there was a copying error after the first scroll or codex was prepared. That may be true but we have no way of knowing. (Does that may you feel better?) But if we start down the road of believing that some of the passages of the gospels that we don’t like are erroneous, consistency seems to require us to be open to believing that some of the passages that we do like could also be erroneous for the same reasons.

Another way to resolve the challenge of this text is to see it as exaggeration for effect. This should be familiar to us since exaggeration frequently occurs in the gospels: "Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye," "If you had faith no bigger than a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and replanted in the sea,' and it would obey you." "How often am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? As many as seven times?" "I do not say seven times; I say seventy times." "If you only have faith and have no doubts, you need only say to this mountain, 'Be uplifted and hurled into the sea' and it will be done."

Or we could say that Jesus was trying to weed out those who were serious about committing to live according to his teachings from those who were sincerely interested but would be unable to continue when hard times came. Or we might say that Jesus was trying to dissuade the mere hangers-on, the ones who come to watch a protest march rather than to join in, the fence sitters, and the politicians who say, "Some say this and some say that but as for me I say that some say this and some say that."

Jesus' words are clear: living in the way God wants is so threatening to the standard culture of every age that a society confronted with the truth about itself will impose a cost on anyone who dares to present that truth. The recent spate of stories about the people who gave their lives within our lifetime to fight segregation should remind us of how steep the price can be. Broken relationships are always part of this cost.

Another way to look at it is that Jesus was merely being descriptive. There is something about this new way of living, this new way of relating to each other that is so precious that we want to give up everything for it. And our families are a reminder of everything that has held us back from fully

living into it. We can't believe that we ever valued our old familiar life and its petty concerns as much as we value this new way of living.

Jesus continued with an even harder verse: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." We would like to believe that Jesus didn't really mean live in a way that the authorities consider dangerously rebellious, that he didn't really invite us to live in a way that brings martyrdom. Maybe he just meant that everyone's life has some sorrow in it, the toils and tribulations, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and to just keep faith. This possible interpretation that minimizes the meaning of taking up one's cross has tempted Christians ever since Christianity became the official faith of the Roman Empire. But to Christians in locations where they were a minority faith this verse rang true because they were subject to arrest and execution, to murder and crippling injuries, to riot and destruction of their homes as their example of this new way of living exposed the injustices and inhumane practices of the dominant faith. Even today there are Christians in northern Nigeria and in China, in Iraq and Iran, in Egypt and India, and in in Syria and Lebanon who know all too well that living in obedience to Christ's teachings risks the 21st century's version of the cross.

Jesus invited the crowd to think seriously about the cost of discipleship as Bonhoeffer said, using a metaphor of building a tower or starting a war.

And then Jesus concluded, "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." Well that just has to be wrong! Living that way would force a person to live on the margins; to risk the loss of autonomy and capacity, prestige, and friends; to risk the possibility that one can never achieve one's dreams. Living that way is living in a freedom of vulnerability but seems downright un-American!

As Sharon and I age, we are not consciously trying to live out Jesus' command to give up our possessions, but we are trying to collect fewer things, to clean out our closets and storage areas more frequently and more rigorously, giving away or trashing things we have not used at least once within the past two years. And yet each of us holds onto things we do not need and do not use – old photos that we don't view, old books that we don't read, clothes we rarely wear or have never worn, toys and other mementos we've kept since childhood. Right now we are planning a small addition to relocate our powder room as a way of expanding our family room. We are already envisioning the new flat screen TV, sofa, recliner, and other furniture and looking at colors of tile for the new bathroom and mud room. If giving up all of our possessions and the desire for nice possessions is a test of our discipleship we have failed big time. I daresay that we are not alone in this. From time to time Pat Conover prods the Seekers Stewards into wrestling with whether to change the standard in our spiritual discipline of financial giving. I suspect that one of the reasons that we haven't changed it yet is that we fear the vulnerability of losing our wealth of possessions.

As if that isn't enough, as Sharon and I age we are increasingly confronted with the difficult truth that at some point we are likely to be unable to care for ourselves and will need a home aide and/or assisted living and/or a nursing home. At that point our daughters will sell our home and almost everything in it. We will not only give up almost of our possessions but as we diminish we will give up a most of our autonomy and probably most of our dignity. We will gain the ability to live in vulnerability, but it is an undesired one and it doesn't appear to have much freedom in it. I have much to learn from the elders of our congregation – Emily, Emmy Lu, Muriel, and Fern – about living in vulnerable freedom in old age.

In the latest issue of *The Christian Century**, Shaunna K.

Hannan wrote a reflection on this lectionary. She described her “complicated relationship with things.” She thinks she lives simply, aware of how she uses money, walking rather than taking a taxi, and being frugal. Yet she sees that she has more possessions in one room than many people have in their whole house. She goes on to say,

Why is it that I cannot give up my possessions even when I know that this is what discipleship requires?...I have begun my walk of discipleship knowing that I can never do what is required if I am to truly follow Jesus. My fear is too great. I fall short. I cannot release myself from my possessions. In other words, I need Jesus. This realization changes how I read the rest of the gospel. If I see myself as the tax collector, the sinner or the lost sheep, I hear Jesus' words differently, and this makes all the difference...[This is a] call to vulnerable freedom. It is good to know that when God calls disciples, God can work with anyone who responds – with our good intentions, our unwillingness and our renewed commitments to rethink our relationship to our possessions.

I found her reflection to be timely for me. Today is the first Sunday of our annual Seekers recommitment season. From today until the third Sunday of October, in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour, from which Seekers Church sprang, we are invited to reflect on our commitment to this local expression of the Body of Christ and to decide whether we will recommit for another year to the following Seekers Church member's commitment statement:

As a member of this church, I will deepen my relationships in this local expression of the Body of Christ, sharing my gifts from God with others who worship with Seekers Church, and in the wider world. I will:

- *Nurture my relationship with God and Seekers Church through spiritual disciplines;*

- *Care for the whole of creation, including the natural environment;*
- *Foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor;*
- *Work for the end of all war, both public and private; and*
- *Respond joyfully with my life, as the grace of God gives me freedom.*

As I reflect on these words, I have to admit that Rev. Hannan's self-assessment is also mine: I too have begun my walk of discipleship knowing that I can never do what is required if I am to truly follow Jesus. Like hers, my fear is too great. Like her, I fall short. Yes, I share my gifts with others – frequently with a generous spirit but all too frequently with a begrudging one. Yes, I believe in practicing spiritual disciplines – but I am not always faithful in practicing them. In fact, it is probably more accurate to say I am inconsistent, practicing some more than others. Yes, I care for the whole of creation when I think about it – but far too often I exploit it casually, unthinkingly. Yes, I believe in fostering justice, and live in solidarity with those who are without means – so long as I don't have to give up all my possessions. Yes, I will work for the end of all war – but I am willing to have young men and women risk their lives to safeguard my life and that of my family. Yes, I will respond joyfully with my life – when I am not too weighed down by the cares of the world.

But in this recommitment season, I also concur with her recognition that she needs Jesus. I need Jesus, too, and for the same reason: I am a tax collector, I am a sinner, I am a lost sheep. I need Jesus' call to live in vulnerable freedom.

*"Living the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary," *Christian Century*, Sept. 4, 2013, p. 20.