

Sandra Miller: Time for Reflection

Seekers Church

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Time for Reflection

It has been a challenge for me to work with this week's lectionary passages. I read them often for weeks, and each time I felt like I was fishing in the wrong stream and wondering why I had signed up to preach. What could I hang a first Sunday of our [recommitment season](#) word on?

The Exodus passage is hard. It is hard for me personally because growing up as a Jew the Passover story is not just about survival, but also of being the chosen people. Now that I have chosen to follow Christ, I am reminded of the price I paid with my choice, and there has never been a bone in my body that would wish all of the first born of any perceived enemy to be slain while I was passed over because I was special. I do not believe I am any more or less special than any other of God's amazing creations. Paul's epistle to love your neighbor as yourself confirms my belief, and aren't the Egyptians my neighbors on this extraordinary planet of God's making?

It was a temptation to be bogged down in the final words of the epistle, which admonish against giving in to the pleasures of the flesh. It is well and good to warn of the evils of hedonism, but the gift of our bodies with all of their senses of smell, sight, and touch would be so much the poorer for being deprived of the scent of roses, the vision in a work of art, or the gentle touch of a lover by being so narrowly

focused on proclaiming the word to the exclusion of everything else. Fortunately, I get to avoid this conflict by rationalizing that the warning was to those whose only pleasure was spreading Christ's word in a world far removed in time and place from mine. I believe that I can pleasurably spread the word of God while still making provision for the flesh, and indeed by taking advantage of the pleasures of the flesh, which can include hard physical labor in the service of others and making mad, passionate love.

Then there is the passage from Matthew with instructions about what to do if a member of the church sins against me, and even more harshly instructs me to treat an unrepentant offender as my enemy. Even if I could imagine another Seeker doing more than exhibiting their feet of clay, how do these instructions fit with the golden rule, or the lesson of the epistle we read last week: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The notion of overcoming evil with good appeals to me, but that by doing so is the equivalent of heaping coals on the heads of evildoers is rather, hmm barbaric. My faith in Christ spins the passage into an injunction to model my best behavior in the hope that evildoers will see or hear something that gives them pause for thought, and better yet, reason for repentance, whether they are members of Seekers, members of the whole Body of Christ, or non-Christians.

Where does any of this leave us, me, in light of the havoc that Katrina wracked on Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, the needless deaths in Iraq of Shiite pilgrims (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/01/international/middleeast/01iraq.html>), and the continuing murder of women in Guatemala (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2099-1740992_1,00.html)? All week I have walked around with a heavy feeling. Certainly, helplessness is a component. Groping for hope is

increasingly difficult. There is indeed suffering in the land beyond this week's horrific news, as in the Jimmy Cliff song heard as our prelude.

Wednesday night during sharing in Celebration Circle, I made a comment about my fear that some preachers would glom onto the event of rising waters and release a torrent of words about hellfire and damnation. That may very well be happening, but that kind of news is intentionally outside my normal circle of newsgathering. So imagine my surprise when missives by Rabbis Arthur Waskow and Michael Lerner came zipping into my email inbox with similar messages.

I would like to read you some abbreviated, edited excerpts from a courageously written article by Rabbi Lerner entitled *Katrina, God and Social Morality* (http://www.tikkun.org/rabbi_lerner/news_item.2005-09-01.4546664556):

It did not have to happen [in New Orleans]. Moreover, it did not have to result in so many deaths and social chaos.

But this is a classic case of the law of karma, or what the Torah warns of environmental disaster unless we create a just society:

- *Environmentalists are making a strong case that the escalated number and ferocity of earthquakes is a direct product of global warming, caused in large part by the reliance on fossil fuels. The persistent refusal of the U.S. to join the nations of the world in implementing the Kyoto Accords emission limits, and to impose serious pollution restrictions on the cars being sold in the US, is a major factor in global warming.*
- *The development for housing and commercial purposes combined with massive oil and gas investments destroyed the natural protections from storms that the coastal wetlands had previously provided.*

- Funds that were specifically allocated for New Orleans which could have been used in rebuilding levees and for storm protection were cut from the federal budget so that President Bush could use those funds to wage the war in Iraq.

And yet, the law of karma or Torah doesn't work on a one to one basis, delivering "just rewards" to those who have been directly involved in causing evil, as Job noted in the Bible and as we can note watching global warming play out. The terrible truth is that it is the **poor**, the **most vulnerable**, who are the first to suffer. The wealthy built their homes on higher ground, had better information, more insurance, and more avenues of escape. Whether it is in facing the rising waters in Bangladesh or Malaysia or Louisiana and Mississippi, it is going to be "the least among us" who will suffer most immediately. This is why it is inappropriate to blame the victim: because the way the world has been created, the consequences of past social injustice, war and ecological irresponsibility come to a whole planet—because from the cosmic perspective we are one, we are all interdependent – and those who suffer most are often not even those who are most culpable.

When some Christian fundamentalists talk about these as signs of the impending doom of the planet, they are laughed off as irrational cranks. But nevertheless, their perception that we are living at "the end of time" can't be dismissed by those of us who know that the life support systems of this planet are increasingly "in danger" if politics continues the way it has been going, with politicians in **both** parties capitulating regularly to the ethos of selfishness and materialism that is sustained by our corporate plunderers but is validated by the votes of ordinary citizens.

Yet the fundamentalist message is deeply misleading also, because it seems to suggest that all this is out of our hands, part of some divine scheme. But it is not. The

*biblical version is quite different from what they say; it insists that the choice between life and death is in our hands. After laying out the consequences of abandoning a path of justice and righteousness, the Torah makes it clear that it is up to us. **Choose Life**, it tells us. That choosing of life means transforming our social system in ways that neither Democrats nor Republicans have yet been willing to consider-toward a new bottom line of love and caring, kindness and generosity, ethical and ecological responsibility, and awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe replacing a narrow utilitarian approach to Nature.*

*For me, this is a prayerful moment, entering the period just before the Jewish High Holidays, realizing that the Jewish tradition of taking ten days of reflection, repentance and atonement is so badly needed not just by Jews but by everyone on the planet. I hope we can find a way to build this practice among secular as well as religious people, because America, indeed the whole world, so badly needs to **stop** and reflect, repent, and atone, and find a new way, a new path, and return to the deepest truths of love, kindness, generosity, non-violence and peace.*

While I do not agree with some of Rabbi Lerner's phrasing or language, I do agree with his message. Celebration Circle had a little chuckle in the midst of our grief over current events that our liturgical theme was no longer [Swimming to the Other Side](#), but Rabbi Lerner's last line is exactly what that liturgy, and the current one is about. We must find a new path. Forging a new path is both dangerous and courageous.

During Recommitment season, we enter a process of reflection, not unlike the Jewish High Holy Days, that culminates in renewing our commitment to God through Jesus Christ, by affirming our membership in Seekers. In six weeks, those of us who have decided to recommit will recite together our [commitment statement](#):

I am Seeker. I come today to affirm my relationship with this Christian community in the tradition of Church of the Saviour, linked with the people of God through the ages.

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.*

Our commitment statement gives me structure for my reflections. Michael Lerner's article gives me structure for my reflections. My life at Joseph's House gives me another. My life in this community gives me yet another. In addition, my love of Guatemala and her people gives me yet another. I hope each of you have some framework that helps you to reflect. Perhaps it is your commitment to Christ and parenthood, as it is for the Holmes' family who are making the courageous decision to leave Seekers where they are known and loved to find a church that can offer Andy and Karen more than we can. Explore your relationship to God, deepen your relationship to Christ, look at how the message of the death and resurrection plays out in your life. Ask yourselves what you feel able to do in light of your commitment and in the face of the needs of the world. Maybe it's sending money to the Red Cross, maybe it's taking the Metro instead of driving to work, maybe it's saving water with shorter showers, maybe it's taking some political action you've been meaning to take but haven't,

maybe it's going to Guatemala to help build a school, or maybe it's praying like you've never prayed before. I will pray for each of you.

Amen