

Sherri Alms: Unpacking the Camel

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[A number of poems by others were read as part of this sermon. These are referenced in **bold type**, but not included, here.]

I am living in the poem, **The Thread** by Denise Levertov. Some of you were at the New Year's Eve party where I said that I felt that the year then ahead of me would be a year of living outwardly, living into call, into the world. And sure enough, I am having just that kind of year, with a heart-changing trip to El Salvador and Guatemala in the spring; the life-changing AIDS Bicycle Ride in June; a crisis in my work life that forced me to renew and redefine my commitment to what I do for a living; and a deep and serious conflict with two friends that left me shaken and unsure about relationship with others and about community in particular but forced me to think about how I want to live in this world.

All of that said, all of these events come and gone and the year on the wane, I still cannot tell you, for sure, to what I am being called. I only know that I have a thread pulling at me and I feel bound to follow where it leads. So this sermon that you are hearing today as some of us recommit to this community is not, as I thought sermons on this day should be, a sermon full of answers. No, it is a sermon full of questions. Rather than being a sermon about belonging, it is a sermon about loss and grief.

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to

inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said, "*You lack one thing; go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*" When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

I may not look the part, but I am that rich young man. I am at the beginning of some journey to a destination yet unknown, maybe forever unknowable. Like him, I am shocked and grieving at what is required of me. I signed up to preach this sermon on a sort of whim, with a few vague ideas about what I might say. However, as the time approached, nothing was coming to me and I was truly panicked about what I would do when the time came to stand up here. Therefore, I took my writer's block to Celebration Circle, and they volunteered to throw around ideas during one of our meetings. Okay, it was just last Wednesday and just in time, I might add.

We did, as we always do, our sharing at the beginning of the meeting, and I talked about a thread in my life recently that has taken up much of my heart and mind. My other mission group is Sophia's Roundtable. When the time came to bat around ideas, Peter said, "Well, it is Sophia's you should preach about." I have to tell you I could not think of anything I would have rather preached about less. It would have to be very personal and it would be, as I have said, a sermon full of questions not answers. I am an oldest child – I like to give answers. However, as soon as he said it, I knew he was right, knew that this was what I had to do.

Some of you know that before I came here, I was with Potter's

House Church and while there, I joined Sophia's Roundtable, a mission group devoted to feminist theology and the introduction of gender-inclusive language to the Potter's House Church, no mean feat. By the time I came into the group, however, our focus was beginning to change and we began to look inward at our own selves as well as at the soul of the group. We evolved naturally and easily, though not without conflict and problems, into what we now call a women's spirituality group.

Nevertheless, I do not think that name does justice to who we are and to what the group has done for me. Before I go further, you should know that there are five of us in the group, which has been in existence for about 11 years. Emmy Lu Daly, who comes here to Seekers as well, is one of the five. The other members are Dottie Bockstiegel, Meade Jones and Rebecca Sears, who was a founding member. I have been part of the group for about six years, and Meade is our newest member. Individually, these women are phenomenal. As a group, we are a force to be reckoned with.

However, it is not our outward power, not what we do, but who we are as a group that is the force. For we have worked hard and long over the years I have been with the group to become family to each other, to be sisters in every spiritual and emotional sense. We have seen Meade through her first son's babyhood and now through the birth of her second son. We have watched her struggle with call, career and motherhood. We have seen Emmy Lu through her job with L'Arche, through the loss of Krygma, a drama group that was deeply meaningful and fulfilling for her and we have watched as she faces aging with grace and power. We have seen Dottie continue a life that wears me out even to observe as she works at L'Arche, a community for mentally challenged adults, where she is a rock of faith, compassion, and strength. We have seen Rebecca move into her call as a pastoral counselor, blossoming and bearing much fruit. We have also walked with her through the end of

her marriage and the transition to a new kind of life with her daughter.

What has awed me the most though is what the group has done for me. You all did not know me when I entered the group but I was a depressed and scared person just beginning several years of therapy that included an even severer bout with depression. I was not who I was supposed to be. I am a **huge** person, full of passion with a loud laugh, a big temper and a generous and welcoming nature. I enjoy relationship with all kinds of people and I love life. I take emotional risks and put my self out into the world. This is who I am now. Then, I was small, a person hiding behind my eyes, afraid of what everyone else thought of me, afraid to be whom I was. I thought of myself as a very small, pale child hiding deep somewhere inside my body. I took refuge in my apartment, in my books, in writing. I dated almost not at all. had only a few friends and I was in a job that was financially fulfilling and promising for an ambitious Republican but not the right one for me. I was scared, confused and even considered suicide sometimes when I thought my life might continue like that forever. It is hard to believe now that I felt that way – it seems like all of that happened to another person.

As I worked at therapy, and it was work, I began to see what I was doing as a journey through black water, through swamp, through dark dark night and deep deep forest. Moreover, it was a slow journey that involved wrong turns, going backwards, and standing still for months at a time. However, as I walked, as I rested, as I hit walls and could not move, I always had light with me. When God was just an abstraction, when I struggled to pray, when I swore at God, the light stayed. Moreover, its most obvious, most constant manifestation, besides some close friends, was Sophia's Roundtable. Every week, every Monday night, they held me as I unraveled my life. They listened in profound silence to my sharing of darkness and despair, and they loved me back into life.

These strong, vital, headstrong women gave me role models for what my life could be. I have a fabulous mother who is a friend and guide for me but her life and choices could not have been more different from mine. I needed women like Emmy Lu, Dottie, Rebecca and Meade in my life. My mother could not hold my grief, my despair, my anger but Sophia's could and did. In addition, when I became the loud, bossy person I am today, they held that too, which is not easy in a group full of headstrong women.

They have been family and community, the face of God when I couldn't imagine what God looked like, the reality of love when I wasn't sure anyone could ever love me if I let myself be who I was. They gave life to **Wild Geese**, a poem by Mary Oliver. They gave me a place in the family of things; they gave me shelter when I despaired, and they reassured me that I did not have to crawl around on my knees forever. They did what is not ever simple, and what is not ever easy, they loved.

Today I tell you that I am going to leave this group of beautiful women, move out of that safe sanctuary. "Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, '**How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!**' Moreover, the disciples were perplexed at these words. However, Jesus said to them again, '**Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.**'" Sophia's Roundtable has been a source of wealth for me, the emotional wealth of being loved and feeling safe. However, the thread that tugs at me is tugging me to go to new places. One of the places where I feel I need to go is here, to Seekers. I came here about three years ago and made the commitment to stewardship about a year-and-a-half ago. Nevertheless, it is only recently that I feel have begun to put my feet down, to shake the dust off my sandals and say that I will stay a while. Moreover, I believe

that staying here is a part of my call. However, it scares me to commit to making this community my spiritual home because this is still a place where I am not known and where I do not fully know each of you. In addition, I think that as long as Sophia's is my spiritual base, the heart of my life, I will not be able to be fully present here. Beyond that, I do hear the whispers of a call to something yet unknown. And though I am filled with deep grief at leaving Sophia's, though I cannot yet say I am sure it is the right thing, the voice is whispering there too that it is time to venture out from that safe home of the heart, no matter how hard the leave-taking may be.

Last Wednesday, when we were talking about this sermon, we talked about the reading. I love that image of the camel going through the eye of the needle because it is so descriptive. However, Peter gave me another image to think about. He told us that the eye of the needle to which Jesus referred is a gate built into an old city wall. Travelers enter by the gate. The inhabitants of the city purposely built the gate as a very narrow one so that the camels carrying the travelers' belongings would have to be unpacked, making it difficult for strangers to just sneak in with pack animals.

I carry that image to you today for this Recommitment Sunday. As I ready myself to fully commit to this community, commit to whatever thread this is that tugs at me, I am being asked to unpack. When I first began thinking about the reading, I thought I might talk about how, as we recommit, we must unpack emotions like pride, fear and envy. Now though I think that what we are often asking to unpack and leave behind is that which we most love. As Peter says to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything to follow you."

It is only by leaving behind what we love, what we often think we need that we can find the good news in our life, that we find ourselves last, alone and scared, but ready to go on that journey God calls us to. One of the scariest things I ever did

was to commit to go on the AIDS Ride. All during training, I had upset stomachs and crying jags. I was so petrified of the physical testing, of pushing those limits because I was sure there was no way I could do it, and if I could not do it, I did not want to go. The night before the first day of riding, I got three hours of sleep and kept poor Sheri Bergen awake most of the night as well. Nevertheless, I got on my bike the next morning and took off through Raleigh with 2,000 other riders and I was fine. I knew what I had to do and I did it. In one sense, I failed because I did not ride every mile but I certainly made the journey I needed to make. With the help of several of you, and you know who you are, I faced my fear and I overcame it.

It is that to which Jesus calls us, to face our deepest fears as we go about our calls in life, our commitments to faith and justice, our beliefs in who we are and how we want our lives to be. It is for that reason that we come here today, to pledge to take the first step on this faith journey, a first step we take every year as we make a commitment or a recommitment. Moreover, we must spend time each year thinking about the camel that trudges along behind us, laden with our precious possessions. "What will I leave behind?" "What do I need to go through that gate?" Some years, like the rich young man, we go away grieving because we are not ready yet. Others, we join Jesus and that fully human group of disciples, going where we need to go, filled with both grief and joy.

May Sarton wrote a poem, well several, actually about death and loss. Moreover, the poem, **All Souls**, is definitely about the dead and how they stay with us. However, it also speaks to me of how, once intertwined with another, once emotionally bound, whether you part through death or some other means, you can never be unparted.

Therefore, while I leave and mourn this group of women, this family of the soul, I carry them with me, tucked up under my heart.

*"Dear child, what has been once so interwoven cannot be
raveled nor the gift ungiven."*

*Now the dead move through all of us still glowing,
Mother and child, lover and lover mated,
Are wound and bound together and enflowing.
What has been plaited cannot be unplaited –
Only the strands grow richer with each loss."*

They are each of them and corporately woven into my soul. Their blessing and their love are like the blessing written on a scroll and tucked into a mezuzah outside a Jewish home. Only in this case, the mezuzah is attached to my heart and the blessing is so wide and so deep that the only home for it is my soul.

I do not leave these women easily to make my home fully here with you. I still struggle with whether it is the right thing to do. However, I feel that thread, that voice of God calling me to bring my self fully here and so I recommit today with a whole if mourning heart.