

Sherrì Alms: What It Means to Be Kissed by God

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“Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: “To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.”

“...Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

This is not the sermon I set out to preach but then again that always happens to me. When I finally settle down in silence to prepare the sermon, God often tells me what I do not want to hear. Mostly, I want to preach from a place of power, to tell all of you what I know and what you need to understand. But God does come to me when I give space for the holy presence and the voice I hear tells me that I must speak to you of my questions, my doubts, and my weaknesses. I’m rarely happy about this.

Wisdom calls. I heed that voice and it speaks to me of hope in

times of hopelessness, love in the face of misunderstanding, and courage in the depths of fear. Wisdom calls and bids me to love as I am loved. It is God's greatest commandment and the hardest. It is the commandment that undergirds this community here as it undergirded the disciples in their room on the day of Pentecost. Seekers is in the same unknown place as that ancient band of followers was, looking to a future that is dimly seen and barely felt at best. We are making our way down a new road with Sonya's departure, with leaving this home where we began as a community. And we are leaving not just a physical space but an emotional one too, from being tied however loosely to Church of the Saviour to standing as ourselves, Seekers.

Adrienne Rich wrote a long poem called *Transcendental Etude*. One of the stanzas goes like this:

*But there come times—perhaps this is one of them—
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;
when we have to pull back from the incantations,
rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly,
and disenthral ourselves, bestow
ourselves to silence, or a severer listening, cleansed
of oratory, formulas, choruses, laments, static
crowding the wires. We cut the wires,
find ourselves in free-fall, as if
our true home were the undimensional
solitudes, the rift*

in the Great Nebula.

No one who survives to speak

new language, has avoided this:

the cutting-away of an old force that held her

rooted to an old ground

the pitch of utter loneliness

where she herself and all creation

seem equally dispersed, weightless, her being a cry

to which no echo comes or can ever come.

Here, I think, is where Seekers is at the moment, in a sort of free-fall. With that frightening free-fall comes all the things that are difficult and hard. Conflict, anger, hurt, disappointment. It is what some among us call the shadow side. What I call a big pain in the neck. But truly it is more a pain in the heart.

We have lost one who we loved dearly, who knew us individually and corporately, who could smooth out the differences and bring us together, who could call on us to be our best and do more than we ever actually bargained to do. We have bought a building in a new community and committed ourselves to that location, only to find that making a headquarters there will cost many times more than we thought it would.

As we have moved through these events, as the ripples have spread, we have also wrestled naturally enough with who we are

and what that means. What do we ask of Stewards? What do we ask of those who are not ready to make the stewards' commitment? What is our call? Is it different from that which it has always been—to be church? Does the fact that we are spending so much money on a building mean that we have to be about something more than being church? What if we move into that building, that headquarters created just for us and none of the visions we have brought up, have dreamed, turn into reality? What if the financial questions turn into financial hardships? What if the spats that happen here and there, now and then turn into deeper, uglier divisions?

To type out these questions, to give them a physicality on the page was difficult for me. Let me tell you why. It was because Seekers is home to me. It is the place, as another poet said of home, where, when you knock, they have to let you in. It is not just a church and not just a community. It is both. I realized this with some surprise when I came to Carl Benson's memorial service. When I heard that he had died, I realized that it was critical for me to not only come to the memorial service but to help with it in the ways that I could. But Carl Benson was not someone who was known to me. I met him once or twice here at Seekers and talked to him on the phone when I called for Emily. So why suddenly was it so clear that I needed to be here for his service?

Because Seekers is home to me, and Emily, Carl's wife, is family to me. Though I knew that I had committed to this place as my spiritual home, it was not until Carl's death that I realized in my gut, in my heart what that meant. And to be honest, "home" is a word with positive and negative connotations for me certainly and I should think for most of us. As that poet said, home is the place where they **have** to let you in. In other words, they may not want to let you in,

they may wish you really hadn't come home at all. And you may be standing on the doorstep because that is the last place you could knock and you did it not so much willingly as desperately.

Home is where the heart is. That sounds like such a nice Hallmark sentiment. But I've always thought of love as fierce and demanding far more than I've considered it a nice thing. Where you find love, you find conflict. When you love something, you bring to it all your passion, all your beliefs in what is right and good. And inevitably the person, family or community that you love has other ideas about what is right and good.

What then does it mean, this thing we call home? And specifically what does it mean in the context of a spiritual community? When I have spiritual questions, I frequently look to poetry for the answers and often that poetry is found in the Bible itself. Besides the obvious, I find whole books to be prose poems, parables that read sweetly and resound long in the heart and mind. Today's reading from Proverbs is, of course, a perfect example of Biblical poetry. Like music swimming through a rock cliff and making a way, poetry opens a channel to Wisdom, the Spirit, that third person in what theologians call the Trinity. For me, the Spirit is answer, vision, hope in a hopeless situation, world or event. It is poetry that often brings the Spirit home to me.

I turn again to Adrienne Rich and her poem called *For Memory*. This poem, as you will hear in a moment, is obviously a reply to a lover, a response to something painful in their relationship. But there is a common denominator I am finding in community, family and lover. That denominator is intimacy,

which brings with it the gamut of emotion from fear to comfort.

For Memory

Old words: trust fidelity

Nothing new yet to take their place.

I rake leaves, clear the lawn, October grass

painfully green beneath the gold

and in this silent labor thoughts of you

start up

I hear your voice disloyalty betrayal

stinging the wires

I stuff the old leaves into sacks

and still they fall and still

I see my work undone

One shivering rain swept afternoon

and the whole job to be done over

I can't know what you know

unless you tell me

*there are gashes in our understandings
of this world*

We came together in a common

fury of direction

barely mentioning the difference

(what drew our finest hairs

to fire

the deep difficult troughs

unvoiced)

I fell through a basement railing

the first day of school and cut my forehead open—

did I ever tell you? More than forty years

and I still remember smelling my own blood

like the smell of a new schoolbook

And did you ever tell me

how your mother called you in from play

and from whom? To what? These atoms filmed by ordinary dust

that common life we each and all bent out of orbit from

to which we must return simply to say

this is where I came from

this is what I knew

The past is not a husk yet change goes on

*Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out
under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers
of light, the fields of dark—
freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine
remembering. Putting together, inch by inch
the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.*

When I first came to Church of the Saviour at Potter's House, people told me you have to read Elizabeth O'Connor; you have to read Henri Nouwen and on and on went the list. Hand me a novel and I'm lost by dinnertime. Hand me a book of poetry and I may forget to eat. But I'm usually not as enthralled by nonfiction and I often have a hard time with books that use prose to talk about spiritual matters. It is poetry, with its metaphors and subtlety, that grabs me, shakes me, and stays with me far more than any other kind of learning.

So, here comes a true confession, I didn't read those recommended books unless required by a class. Don't get me wrong—when I did read them, I often found great wisdom in them. I still think about and learn from Parker Palmer's retelling of the parable of the loaves and fishes. He explained it as a parable about the way people thought. Did they think in terms of abundance or scarcity? The miracle was not in a magical multiplication of fish and bread but in the change that Jesus wrought in people's hearts so that they

could share the very little they have, let go of selfishness and fear to live into abundance and trust.

But mostly I did not read the Church of the Saviour "canon." I learned about community the hard way, which is, alas, the way I learn so many things. I lived in it; I made all the mistakes I might have avoided with a thorough reading of, say, Elizabeth O'Connor. But now that I have lived my way well into what community means, what it gives and what it takes away, I find myself hungry to read what Elizabeth O'Connor has to say. I think too that I am drawn to her in particular because she epitomizes the Church of the Saviour and describes its history and being so well. As we prepare to leave this place, I want to make sure I know what we are leaving and to metaphorically pack up what is important to take with us on our journey to a new home.

Oddly enough what I have been reading in a *Call to Commitment* echoes in many ways what Adrienne Rich was saying in *For Memory*.

We know about love in this fellowship because here we find it embodied in a way that we have not experienced in other places. Here, when there is a need, there is always a person to symbolize the God who is ever present. But darker reasons taught us of love. We found within ourselves envy and strife and jealousy and division. Inside, our little worlds were often in shambles because we knew not how to love. We saw what this did to us and what it did to the fellowship.

Before we had touched this church, most of us had

chosen our friends on the basis of personal appeal, or because of common interests, or because of what another person did for us. Maybe we found them entertaining, or charming, or stimulating. When they stepped on our egos, or crossed our wills, or too often offended, we dropped them from our list. If we did not say aloud, we thought to ourselves, "If that's the way he is, I'll have nothing to do with him," and we chose a new friend. Now we were bound to a brother for time and beyond time. We resisted this kind of commitment, but the call to commitment sounded nonetheless and we knew there was only one Reconciler for that which was irreconcilable between us and a brother.

The bright and the dull, those who were attractive and those who repelled, those who delighted and those who stirred sleeping prejudices, the evil and the innocent, enemy and friend, we stood before them all with the command, "Thou shalt love." Our faint response was a judgment, not upon others but upon ourselves. Before the gates of heaven we who could not love were the unlovables. The appeal was to the mercy of God. But if the cross depicted the kind of love that we were called to, it also said that there was forgiveness.

In the preceding chapter, she quotes Gordon Cosby saying, "Our mission is to be able to say convincingly, to another person, 'I love you and I always will.'" To love someone, to commit to another person, or in Seekers case, to a community, is to say those words and to mean them. That's the rub—to mean it. Because loving someone in a committed relationship or loving those others in community means loving them through the every day trials and tribulations and also through times of extraordinary crisis and difficulty. It means loving them even if you don't particularly like them. It means seeing god in

them as they see god in you. But to see god in someone else, you have to believe that god lives within you as well, that you are loved by god. That is the truly difficult task we are given—to love ourselves.

It is when we come home to ourselves, to the knowledge that god loves us as we are, that our stumbles and falls are only reasons for god to pick us up and love us the more; that is when we can begin to love another. And that is why we gather here as community—to learn how to love ourselves as we learn how to love others.

[I stood before you last October](#) and told you that I was ready to truly put my feet down here in this community, to make it my spiritual home. Now I stand before you some eight months later to say the honeymoon is over. Now I have to live in the daily life, the life that calls for difficult decisions, for taking stands that may cause conflict, may make me unpopular. I am not only wrong; I have to acknowledge I am wrong. I have to fight my desire to leave when things get tough, to turn my back on those who make me angry, to shun them.

Yuck. It's just not fun. When times are dark, when there is conflict, I turn to the disciples, that little band of contrary, often annoying and oh so thick-headed people that Jesus loved. I turn to them because I'm certain Jesus would describe me as I have just described them. Lately, as Celebration Circle discusses emotional issues in our group as well as potentially divisive theological issues, as Stewards grapples with who we are and whether we should spend a boatload of money on a new home, I often feel dark and hopeless. The disciples and I have become great friends. I love that often misdirected, stubborn band.

So I've taken a new look at the Pentecost story we read last week. I've been thinking about those tongues of flame, as of fire, that settled on the heads of each of the people gathered in one place, much as we Seekers often gather here in this sanctuary and in other places in this building. We traditionally think of those flames as marks of the Spirit, god's way of saying "I have called you by name, you are mine." And certainly that is what the writer of Acts was saying in his account.

But thanks to Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth O'Connor, I've begun to think of those flames not only as marks of call but also as the kiss of god upon their foreheads, god's way of saying I love you now and I always will. God let them see those flames on each other's heads so they could each know the other was God's beloved.

What I want as I move forward with this community is to see the flames on each of your heads, to see god's kiss on your foreheads. But it isn't enough for me or any of us just to see the mark on others, we have to feel the kiss of God ourselves, know deeply and well that God loves me as she loves the other. So when I see that mark on you, I want to reflect it back to you so that you know you are loved by God. I want to be a mirror.

How do I do that? Perhaps I can by listening for the small still voice of God that calls in the day and in the night. It says listen, I love you and this is what I have for you to do. We hear that voice when we heed those disciplines Peter spoke about several weeks ago, when we joyfully give over space in

our lives to know what it is god wants us to do. To know we are loved, we must know the one who loves us. We find god in ourselves and without in the faces of our community and in the wider world, both human and non-human.

When we can believe in god's love, when we stop to really hear what god has to say, we don't, as Elizabeth O'Connor says, have to fight for standing room in the universe because we understand that we are loved as we are. Does this mean that we will not have conflict or hard times? Of course it does not. Does it mean that we will always come to agreement with others in the community? That all Seekers decisions will be ones that all of us embrace? Uh, no. But when we do hear the voice of God, when we see the spirit's kiss on another's face, we choose to continue holding hands despite the darkness, despite our own anger and discomfort. We choose to stay and work things out. We hold the tension between what we think and what someone else thinks.

Parker Palmer found a miracle not in the physical but in the metaphysical and that's where I find the miracle of Pentecost as well. When the disciples went out speaking their own languages and were suddenly understood by people who spoke all kinds of languages, I believe the common denominator was love. Not the kind of love that says "I'm okay, you're okay" but the kind of love that demands our attention, that makes us hungry and thirsty to know god, that keeps us coming back in spite of conflict, in spite of hard times, the kind of love that makes us willing to be mirrors one for the other, to listen deeply to that which we would rather not hear, the kind of love that forms the backbone of Church of the Saviour, that underpins what we are about in the world.

What I find so inviting in the poem I shared with you by Adrienne Rich, *For Memory*, is the paradox contained in the stanza at the end.

The past is not a husk yet change goes on

*Freedom. It isn't once, to walk out
under the Milky Way, feeling the rivers
of light, the fields of dark—
freedom is daily, prose-bound, routine
remembering. Putting together, inch by inch
the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.*

Freedom in this way of thinking is very much bound by the commitment to know another, to be with another through every day. I think of community that same way—that through our dailiness, through our willingness to engage the thorny issues, our shadow selves, our sins and shortcomings, to love each other in spite of those shortcomings, in spite of the differences between is indeed to put together inch by inch the starry worlds. And when we do, the spirit dwells among us and God's love overflows our hearts and spills out to the wider world.