

“Taking Commitment Seriously” by Deborah Sokolove

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Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

What do you take seriously? Do you take the Bible seriously? Or is it just a bunch of once-upon-a-time stories that you can take or leave, depending on your mood? Do you take God seriously? Who or what is this God that created the earth “while all the choruses of morning stars sang and the heavenly court shouted for joy” [Job 38:7] and yet is somehow closer than our very breath? Do you take your spiritual life seriously? Do you think of your spiritual life as not just whether you pray, journal, and read scripture, but also how those practices affect your relationships with others, your ability to forgive, your sense of gratitude, your sense of joy? What do you take seriously?

Last Sunday, Jackie invited us to take seriously the notion that walking in darkness is a spiritual path. We need darkness, she reminded us, in order to be able to see the light.

Job certainly didn’t want to see it that way. When we first meet Job, he is a rich man, with many flocks and servants and ten grown-up children: three daughters and seven sons. One day, as we heard two weeks ago, God mentions Job to Satan – which in Hebrew means something like “adversary” or someone who puts stumbling blocks in our way – praising him as “unlike anyone else in the world” [1:8]. It’s almost as if God wants Satan to test Job’s supposed virtue, and Satan obliges. By the end of the first chapter, raiders have carried off all of his flocks and herds and killed all but two of his servants, and all ten of his children have died in a terrible

windstorm while they were celebration together in the house of the oldest. And as if that weren't enough, by the tenth verse of the second chapter, Job is covered with painful boils from head to foot and his wife is scolding him out the the depths of her own grief and pain.

After many chapters of so-called comfort from his clueless friends, Job challenges God to tell him what he has done wrong. Listing his virtues, he says, I don't look at other women with lust, I don't tell lies, I'm fair to my servants, I take care of widows and orphans and anyone in need, I don't curse my enemies, I offer hospitality to travelers. And as if all that weren't enough, he says, I take good care of the environment, vowing "If my land cries out against me, or its furrows weep together— if I ate of its bounty without recompense, or gave its laborers reason to complain — let weeds flourish where once was wheat; let thistle take over the barley field!"[Job 31:38-40]

It is clear that Job takes his spiritual disciplines seriously. In fact, the list sounds a lot like some of the promises we just made — you know —

- Care for the whole of creation, beginning with the natural environment;
- Foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor;
- Work for the ending of all war, public and private;

But doing everything right can only get us so far. Despite Job's —and our — good works, sometimes everything just goes wrong. We lose our possessions. We lose our jobs. Our children get into trouble or fall ill and nothing we can do seems to help them. We get cancer. We get old, our knees and hips wear out, our sight and hearing begin to fail. We fall into depression, and the world around us looks as dark as the deepest winter night, even when the sun is shining on a perfect autumn day.

And so it is with a sinking heart that I read today's Gospel passage from Mark. As we've just heard, Zebedee's two sons, James and John, ask Jesus if they can sit next to him when he comes into his glory (whatever that means!). The other disciples are beside themselves that they would even ask, and Jesus says, "Can you drink the cup I will drink or be baptized in the same baptism as I?"[Mark 10:38] And when they assure him that they can, he agrees that indeed they will, but even so he can't promise what they ask. Instead, he says, "whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. The Promised One has come not to be served, but to serve." [Mark 10:43-45]

Yikes! Cold comfort here! Is Jesus really saying, You get to work hard, to drink a bitter cup, and even to die a painful death, and I can't promise you any reward at all? Is he really saying that no matter how tired I am, no matter how discouraged, no matter how many commitments are being asked of me, my role is to put my own needs aside and serve others? Just as Jesus quite literally pours out his life-blood for others, am I to spend every moment of every day giving to others and ignoring my own needs? My mind reels! How can that be good news? I don't want to be weighed down by the unending needs of others, let alone their expectations! Too often, trying to live a life of service feels like falling into a deep, dark pit, with no exit and no hope of relief. How is this Good News?

Well, the good news is that, elsewhere in scripture, we are given a different understanding of what pouring out our lives for others might mean. In Matthew's telling of the Gospel, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who labor and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Here you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." [Matthew 11:28-30] And again, in Matthew 5:14-16, we are told, "You are the light of the world. ... let your light shine before others." When we pour out our lives as light, the deep, dark pit dissolves into a radiant vision of the Realm of God.

Last week, I experienced two such moments of miraculous grace which reminded me why I and so many of my friends take seriously our commitment to God's calling on us to pour out our lives as artists.

On Monday, a project that I have been working on for the past several months came to glorious fruition. Last March, one of Wesley's development officers came to me saying that the President of the seminary wanted to put a physical, permanent "something" to honor our biggest donors in the entry way to the classroom building in which I work. Immediately, I thought of a donor tree, but not the kind that most organizations can order up from a catalog. After all, I am the Director of the Center for the Arts and Religion; and trees are the central subject in the artwork of Amy Gray, who also happens to be our Program Administrator, as well as featuring prominently in much of my own work. So Amy and I dreamed up a 11' x7' redbud tree on which each heart-shaped leaf would bear the name of one of the donors.

While both of us are experienced artists in a variety of media, and both have made large, temporary installations in a variety of worship and gallery spaces, neither

of us had ever worked with a fabricator to make something both big and permanent. Over the ensuing weeks, I learned what to say (and what not to say!) to people in the donor-tree and art-fabrication industries, mostly to find out that what we had in mind would cost about twice the budget I had off-handedly tossed off to the seminary administration. Finally, in desperation, I called a colleague at the Catholic University School of Architecture, who connected me to the director of the fabrication lab, Davide Prete. Davide is an artist in his own right, coming from a family of sculptors in Italy. And with an estimate conveniently just under budget, he became our third collaborator.

Over the summer, Amy and I made several trips across town to confer with Davide, who delighted showed us samples of patina for the brass, heart-shaped leaves; shared his struggles with figuring out how to attach them to the branches; and demonstrated the big, noisy computer-controlled machinery, recently acquired by his department, that would cut out the intricate tree-form from cabinet-grade birch plywood.

Finally, the big day arrived! On Monday afternoon, Davide arrived with his sculptor father and brother – conveniently visiting him from their hometown in Italy – to install our donor tree. And Amy and I couldn't stop grinning. This artwork, which began with Amy's simple pencil sketch, now was real, and looked almost exactly like the digital visualization which I had worked up so many months before. And, as if God had planned it, the President of the seminary happened to be meeting with some important guests in the room next door to where the installation was taking place. While the noisy drilling did interrupt their conversation, he was clearly pleased with what we had made, blessing it with a smile nearly as wide as our own.

The next day brought another moment of almost blinding light. On Tuesday afternoon, I had the enormous privilege to attend one of the several events surrounding the dedication of new chapel at Virginia Theological Seminary. As some of you may recall, their 130-year-old chapel burned down four years ago. Instead of rebuilding a facsimile, they hired the Dean of the Yale School of Architecture, Robert A.M. Stern, to design a new space that fits into the existing aesthetic of the institution and carries echoes of the deeper history of the Church Universal, while being sensitive to contemporary understandings of best liturgical practice and flexible enough to serve many different community needs. The resulting building is both beautiful and practical, flooded with light, acoustically resonant, and unobtrusively fitted with excellent audio/visual technology.

The event that I attended was a very high-church Choral Evensong that focused on the arts without ever explicitly saying so. First of all, and with no comment at all other than its presence, there was the glorious musical offering of a well-trained choir and an expertly-played, brand-new organ, filling our hearts and minds with angelic harmonies. A less-common part of the service was the blessing of the eight, great bells in the bell tower above us, which we witnessed through the magic of video, projected onto four different walls of the worship space, positioned so that everyone could see no matter where they were sitting. The cameras expertly caught the sheer physicality of the bell-ringers, tugging forcefully on the ropes and being pulled onto their tiptoes by the weight of the bells. There was an audible gasp from the congregation as the last note pealed, and each massive bell stood upside down, resting on its yoke, mouth open to the sky. As the bulletin for the service noted, "We are in the Immanuel Chapel. Immanuel—God with us—is the central claim that Christians make about Jesus. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, you can see God. ...we recognize the truth of the Incarnation in the blessing of the bells, which sound forth the Good News to the world around us."

The next two moments of the service were even more remarkable. After the first reading, the Archbishop of Canterbury and several other dignitaries walked toward the south transept, led by acolytes carrying lit candles; the thurifer energetically swinging incense everywhere; and another acolyte carrying a simple yet elegant, dark, metal cross. The procession stopped momentarily so that Olga Shalamova and her husband and fellow iconographer, my friend Philip Davydov, could join them for, as the bulletin put it, "The Dedication of the Icon of the Incarnation, commissioned of Olga Shalamova." And we read, "At this Evensong, we recognize the truth of the Incarnation in the Icon of the Incarnation; in this icon you can see the extraordinary miracle of God being born of a woman."

After more processing, singing, and spreading clouds of incense, the Archbishop and his entourage moved outside through the north transept, this time with my friend Peggy Parker and her husband Bruce, for the "The Dedication of the sculpture Mary as Prophet, commissioned of Margaret Adams Parker." Again, the liturgy declared, "At this Evensong, we recognize the truth of the Incarnation in the sculpture of Mary as Prophet—a young teenager who carries the Eternal Word and is prompted to share the world-changing message in the Magnificat." After the blessing, the Archbishop turned back to take another long look at the sculpture he had just blessed before hurrying to catch up with the procession that had begun to head back inside without him.

As I marveled at this astonishing affirmation of my friends' devotion to their calling as artists, it was as though the darkest reaches of my heart were filled with light.

In today's reading from Job, God says, "who is this that darkens counsel with words without understanding?" or, as our translation this morning put it, "who is this obscuring my plans with such ignorant words?" After God's long, impassioned, poetic description of mountain lions and peacock tails, leviathan and stardust, Job replies,

I know you can do anything;

no plan of yours can be opposed successfully.

You said, "Who is this darkening counsel without knowledge?"

I have indeed spoken about things I didn't understand,

wonders beyond my comprehension.

You said, "Listen and I will speak;

I will question you and you will inform me."

My ears had heard about you,

but now my eyes have seen you.

Therefore, I relent and find comfort

on dust and ashes." [Job 2:1-6 Common English Bible]

Job, it seems, has seen the light. Even though, as we are repeatedly told throughout his story, Job was a good, upright person, he was missing something important. In all of his work and careful adherence to the rules, even all of his prayers on behalf of his partying children, he was missing the glory of God.

So maybe Jesus isn't saying, You will have to work hard, drink a bitter cup, and die a painful death, and even then I can't promise you any reward at all. Maybe he's saying, You get to pour out your life as a light to those who live in darkness. And even though it will sometimes be more painful than we think we can bear; or as dirty

and messy as making mud pies in a pigsty; or as dangerous as dancing in the dark on the edge of a cliff; when we take God seriously, when we make of our lives an offering and a dedication to God, those around us will see sparks flying from our fingertips, and the radiance of God will shine in our faces. When we take seriously our commitment to be the Light of the World, we will no longer darken counsel without knowledge. Instead, all the choruses of morning stars will sing and the heavenly court will shout for joy.