

“Tending the Vineyard” by Marjory Bankson

October 4, 2020



Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Recommitment season offers us a chance to think seriously about who we are, as individuals and as a community. It creates a yearly invitation for questioning our lives, pruning away what doesn't work, and attending to what does. It's an invitation to consciousness, clarity and choice.

At Seekers, it may also be a time for stepping out of a mission group or stepping into deeper commitment to the community, for examining our level of giving – and receiving – all in preparation for Recommitment Sunday on October 18.

Commitment isn't a popular word in our consumer culture. It means foregoing freedom on behalf of something that is more important. For some people, commitment seems limiting,

narrowing, binding or inhibiting. We prefer to keep our options open, our choices many. We expect to join something if we feel like it, and leave when we want to. Freedom of movement has become a mark of success and a sign of independence.

Unconsciously however, I think we actually value commitment. Younger people often hope for a marriage commitment at some time in the future. Older people actually do want someone to care whether they live or die. And I think we all hope there will be a place where we can be real, be honest, be accepted for who and what we are.

Many of us hoped that would be our extended biological family: parents, siblings, cousins, even our children. But if you are sitting here this morning, I suspect you have discovered that your biological family isn't quite enough. Your siblings have their own needs, their own opinions. They are not, in fact, fellow pilgrims for your spiritual journey in a conscious, intentional way.

At Seekers, we come to recommitment season as fellow pilgrims, learning how to love each other and how to receive God's love which is always present.

Those who have gone before us marked a clear path into this particular community. One moves from being a Sunday visitor, to taking a class or two in the School for Christian Growth – where we can get to know one another more intimately, even on zoom.

Taking a class might be your first taste of commitment, not just to doing the work of learning, but to the people you meet there AND to sharing your own spiritual quest. In the School, we discover a wide welcome for different experience and beliefs. If that is good news for you, then you might choose to become a Member of Seekers on Recommitment Sunday, because all we ask is that you want to be intentional about your

spiritual growth. There is no doctrinal requirement, no litmus test for orthodoxy here.

But something you might have missed in the handout for preparation is a single sentence on the second page. It reads: "when you are clear about your level of commitment, let your spiritual companion know of your decision...."

Wait. What? Your spiritual companion?

Yes, that's right. If you are thinking about becoming a Member, but you are not in a mission group, we suggest that you ask somebody to be a spiritual companion. You might spot such a person in a class at the School, or notice someone taking leadership in worship. We encourage all newcomers who are interested in pursuing membership here to ask someone for that kind of companionship. The purpose is simply that – to begin the inner work of finding language for the real questions of your faith journey. Or to continue a journey you began somewhere else.

For people who are in a mission group, that spiritual companion is your group's spiritual director, who is (you need to remember), simply a fellow pilgrim who has offered to accompany others with prayer and regular attention.

In our scripture readings for this week, we find the reason for these simple structures at Seekers. Exodus 20 outlines the ten commandments, which Jesus boiled down to two: how to "love God" and how to "love your neighbor." Loving God means putting nothing else in God's place, which gives us a guide for what we might need to confess each week: Have I made an idol of something near and obvious? Do I need to confess that AND seek to change my priorities? Or pray that I will want to do that?

Keeping the sabbath is the fulcrum in the ten commandments, a pause and place of rest and remembrance ... to remind us that we ourselves are not in charge of our lives. I see the next commandment, honoring our parents, as part of keeping the

sabbath.

Then we have a series of “thou shalt nots” which describe how to love your neighbor: don’t murder, steal, commit adultery, bear false witness (gossip) or covet what belongs to someone else. And when we remember that there are many ways to murder and steal, these guidelines also become the basis for examining our lives. Those are the things we might share with a spiritual companion, naming the things that get in the way of loving God and loving our neighbors.

This week’s gospel reading suggests the importance of intentional preparation, a vineyard prepared for abundant harvest. In Jesus’ pointed story, a wealthy owner has prepared a vineyard carefully: planted the crop, dug a winepress and erected a tower for surveillance. He obviously expects a rich harvest as a result of his work. And so do the tenants, who plot to keep the profits of a good harvest, killing first his servants, and then the son of the owner.

The obvious point is that his listeners are guilty of keeping the “profits” of commitment instead of honoring God, the implied owner. The less obvious point is the vineyard’s careful preparation which precedes an abundant harvest: tilling the soil, adding nutrients where needed, pruning the vines, tying them up to catch the sun. All of that work takes commitment and care which the owner has invested. At Seekers, we might say that the Stewards have made a commitment to care for the vineyard along with our conscious reliance on God’s presence for good weather and fruitfulness.

I am suggesting that Seekers can be that vineyard in your life. There are people called to till the soil in the School for Christian Growth; people called to structure our worship, week after week; people called to teach and preach because they care about your growth and mine.

There is another remarkable statement in the recommitment

handout. It says, "As our faith and trust deepen, every choice each of us makes changes all of us and affects the way we are present to the world around us."

What that means is that your choices and mine affect the whole. We already belong, whether we've made a public commitment or not. Your choice to attend a class, speak in Circle Time or give to our common budget affects the whole, and "recommitment" simply brings that into focus. It helps us be more conscious of our connections. We are a "body of Christ," whether we've made a decision to join or not – because this community functions with an ethos of belief in the mystical body, the spiritual connections that we already have. And, as a result, whatever choices you make impacts the whole.

The best place to calibrate this kind of impact is in a mission group. Our pattern has been to expect people to complete a couple of classes in the School before choosing a mission group BECAUSE a mission group requires a certain level of commitment. There's that word again.

IF you can show up and participate in two six-week classes, we trust that you will be able to enter the weekly or bi-weekly meeting of a mission group with enough self-awareness to learn and grow while doing the work of your group. If not, the season of recommitment is a good time to listen for God's call, shift your focus, and make a change in your commitments.

Mission groups do the real work of spiritual formation at Seekers. There you will probably notice someone that you admire and someone that you regularly tangle with. What I've noticed over the years is that the person I admire is probably carrying a gift that I need to claim in myself – it's something I haven't yet welcomed into my conscious realm of being. And the person who rubs me the wrong way is probably carrying something in me that I have rejected or hidden from myself – a shadow that she or he is carrying for me. The

mission group is always a place where we can learn more about loving one-another, and that's a different kind of freedom.

Commitment to the inward/outward journey of self-reflection and service with others is surely a lifelong path that will have seasons of plenty and seasons of scarcity, perhaps in different vineyards. Having a regular season of recommitment is one way of saying we trust the cycle of seasons, the wisdom of human experience, and the importance of a particular community to guide us into an unknown future. Preparing the vineyard is simply part of that process.

Thank God, we're in this together. Amen.