

The Fruits of Repentance by Marjory Zoet Bankson

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Text: Luke 3:7-18:

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance..."

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Traditionally, Advent is the season of waiting for Christ—idealized by quiet days and candles lit each week— even as we madly try to get everything ready for Christmas with family. [Last week](#), Kjersten Priddy reversed that tradition with her fine sermon about ministry at N Street Village. If I can summarize her message, it was this: "Slow down! Wait for Christmas. And prepare for Christ!"

Repentance

Preparing for Christ took a particularly terrifying form for me this week. The Gospel reading for today is another thundering sermon from John the Baptist. Frankly, I like the other scriptures assigned for this day better than the Gospel text. I cringe when John cries out "You brood of vipers!" And I feel secretly guilty about the several coats that I have hanging in my closet when I hear him say to the crowd "If you have two coats, give one away, and if you have food, do likewise."

John's message has always made me feel guilty because I know that, as Americans, we all stand in this story with the rich and powerful... even if we don't feel that way most days. I have to confess that I've never liked John's voice very much during this season of winter waiting and preparation.

But this year I noticed something different in John's message. After railing away at the temple authorities, John seems oddly gentle and specific when the crowd asks him "What then shall **we** do?" To the soldiers, he says "Don't misuse your power over others," and to the tax collector, he said "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

John was speaking to a crowd of people who basically had no rights under Roman rule. They were reminded every day that they had no freedom, no value except for what they could produce or extort from others. Life for all of them tended to be "nasty, brutish and short."

But when John called them to repentance, he was calling them to a **new consciousness**, a new freedom to act justly and fairly within the realm of their authority, to be generous – even if they had very little. This year, John's voice invited me to look again at the whole matter of repentance.

In years of listening to John the Baptist during Advent, **I had confused repentance with guilt** and blame. When the people ask what they should do in response to John's call for repentance, he doesn't blame or shame them at all. He simply gives them specific actions related to the particular circumstances of their lives. Exercise your power judiciously. Share what you

have with those in need. Take responsibility for your actions. Confess your sins. Trust God and love your neighbor.

As I pondered John's emphasis on fairness and justice, it dawned on me that **repentance is the mark of a free man or woman**. Repentance means taking responsibility for my actions. It means asking forgiveness. It means making restitution. Repentance actually means turning toward others, acknowledging our differences, and doing what we can to mend our ways. Repentance implies freedom and dignity in relationship with others who also matter. Then I noticed that John begins his sermon with this startling phrase: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." It made me wonder – what are the fruits of repentance? That's the title of this sermon: "The Fruits of Repentance."

The Book

I come today with an attitude of repentance and responsibility for the story of Seekers' first thirty years which I have finally finished. Was it hubris to think that I could write this book? Or was it call? Or was I simply a good choice at the time? I am feeling shy and vulnerable about bringing it today, on this Third Sunday of Advent, because I know that some of you will be disappointed or angry about what I have or haven't included. Some will be surprised and delighted. Some won't care; it is past history. But I am standing here naked, with this book in my hand, knowing full well that it's not the whole story. It's the best I can do right now.

Five years ago, the Stewards blessed my willingness to write the story of Seekers. Sonya left me her papers when she moved. I gathered other materials from early members, had a complete record of minutes from Stewards meetings, and interviewed many

of you, thinking I could complete the task within a year. But frankly, I lost my heart for the work as we wandered in the desert between our old home on Massachusetts Avenue, and this new location. Construction delays took a toll on our spirits. Our children grew up and left. New people joined and others moved away; some felt the call to Stewards and others chose not to recommit. Time passed. And I myself resisted the call to be Seekers Church in this new location. Gradually, people stopped asking me about the manuscript. I set it aside and did other things, waiting for the Spirit to stir in me again.

What I did not recognize five years ago was that Seekers Church was the in the process of completing one call and beginning another. While we were located at 2025 Mass. Avenue, in the headquarters building of Church of the Saviour, we established our **identity** as a church and set down some basic structures – the shape of this particular body of Christ, with its particular sinews, ligaments and features. Now our emerging round of call is to discover the **particular work** of Seekers in the world. Although I've written about that process – about how a call comes quietly, in the midst of endings and grief and powerful unconscious patterns from old structures – I did not see it clearly for Seekers because I was too involved in it myself.

I see now that once we moved, we shifted from **resistance** into the neutral zone of the call cycle, in which new efforts struggled with old habits. We thought that families would come because we had been so family-friendly before. We hoped the building would magically take care of itself. We thought that space alone would birth to new ministries by Seekers. The neutral period in the cycle of call is a mixture of endings and beginnings, of deaths and births. Although there have been preachers who named that process, because of our open pulpit

there was no consistent voice to tell us the story or place it in a biblical context. Our structures make it hard to see the process.

But looking back, I see that the Spirit has been at work in this fragile earthen vessel. Each week in worship, lectionary readings have taken us through the larger story of God's love and responsiveness. The liturgy has called us to repentance – to take responsibility for our freedom, to know ourselves as God's people in the world, to celebrate the moments of grace when the untamable wildness of God has touched this community with grace. Worship, the School, and Spirit Guides held us in the larger story while we shifted from one call to another.

After my mother's death a year ago, I picked up my work on the story of Seekers Church again, thinking I would end it with the move. It seemed logical to me, because I felt competent to tell the story of Seekers at 2025 Mass. Avenue, but I did not feel able to interpret what was happening here. "Somebody else will have to do that," I thought. Still, I kept praying and writing...working my way through the written materials, making notes, developing a chronology. Last spring, I put the manuscript out to 10 readers-both old-timers and new comers. They urged me to make it more personal and group the data more topically, while still keeping the chronological flow. I still thought I would end with the move, although the readers questioned me about that. Wasn't there a better stopping place on this side of the threshold? I didn't know, so I kept writing and praying.

Five Gifts

Then, a pattern of **gifts** began to emerge from the maze of data I had collected. I believe these five things are special gifts

which Seekers must bear into the world. It is the **light** we have been given to share. It is our **work** together.

The **first** is our emphasis on **call** – and God as the caller. Most churches have a mission statement and a strategic plan. Seekers formed around a call to support and equip **everyone** for ministry in daily life. Our weekly worship is designed to be a container in which God's call can resonate through our prayers, singing, movement, scripture and teaching stories. God's call enlivens this body, where we are **all** part of the flesh and blood, the aliveness here. We believe that God has a call for each one of us – at each stage of life. And regular repentance keeps us connected and humble. It wasn't your judgment that I feared so much. My own inner critic made this book, this call, nearly impossible to complete!

The **second** gift is the boney skeleton of this body of Christ – our mission group structure. Mission groups aren't just another group to belong to. They are the primary place of belonging and decision-making in Seekers. Mission groups are the place where, week after week, we practice confession and accountability; where we deal with power issues and projections; where we experience being known and loved **in spite of** our differences. Repentance is essential in mission groups! The reason we ask people to complete two classes in the School before joining a mission group is that these aren't just committees by another name. They aren't therapy groups either. In January, I think there's going to be a bulletin board display in the back hall which will describe the different groups and list the names of people in them, to encourage a season of exploration if you've ever thought you might like to try one out. Mission groups are the bones of this body.

The **third** gift that I noticed in Seekers story is the faithfulness of Stewards over time – not so much as individuals, but as a collective source of strength and resilience. In 1976, Seekers started with 19 Stewards – who made a commitment to Christ that would be lived out by giving generously of themselves through this community. Today, there are still 19 Stewards, but only Muriel and Emily were part of the initial group. Everyone else is new! There is a list of Stewards by year in the Appendix. I'm perhaps most proud of putting that together in one place! The Servant-Leadership Team comes from that circle of Stewards. Repentance is a discipline that helps the Stewards stay flexible and attached when we do it. In many ways, Stewards are like ligaments, attached to the bones, holding them together.

The **fourth** gift is the freedom to choose in or out. That was not something I expected to see in this culture of call and commitment, and yet it fits with what I said earlier about repentance. Taking responsibility for our own actions, for deepening our spiritual lives in the company of others and growing toward God requires both clarity and charity (as Pat said in his sermon several weeks ago). Seekers can remain a healthy body of Christ because the parts are genuinely free to move toward deeper commitment when that call is strong and clear, and to step back into a place of less connection when one call is being completed and another has not yet begun. Our freedom to choose in or out is the fourth gift of Seekers, but it takes courage all around. Our feelings get involved. Old patterns prevail. We grieve when others move on. That's where structures and patterns help to hold us together.

Finally, I have come to see this building as a crucible for

our work in the world. A crucible is sturdy and can withstand heat or grinding without being destroyed in the process. It's a container for transformation! The discipline of staying together while we wandered in the desert without a single strong leader (like Moses) has matured many of us. We've had to grow up. Give up our wish – dreams for somebody else to save us or tell us what to do. Many of us gave money and extra time to bring this building into being – because we were called by God to extend ourselves that way. Others have been nurtured by Growing Edge funds to explore a creative possibility, or encouraged to try something here that they wouldn't have dreamed of doing first for pay.

I've had to repent of my own fears that buying a building would absorb all of our assets and stifle our generosity. In my research, I found that Seekers had allocated 25% of its first budget (in 1976) for space, and then divided the remainder between inreach and outreach. Inreach then was mostly staff salaries. In 2006, we spent only 28% of our budgeted expenditures on the building, because we are able to offset loan costs and building expenses with rental income. Outreach to others claimed 29% of our total budget of \$245,000...an amazing level of giving when you consider the size of this congregation. I see now that the money we spent on renovating this building is also an investment in God's dream for us, undergirding our Ministry of Place.

From these five "gifts" – emphasis on call for **all**, mission group bones, Stewardly sinews, freedom to choose in or out, and the building itself – I began to see our work in this place. It's something about Seekers being **a crucible for nurturing call** – individual "callings", collective offerings, and the outreach of other groups which are using this building. **The crucible is not only this building, but it is**

the ethos which provides a culture of encouragement, of blessing and affirming what God is doing through us now. We don't have to invent it all to claim it as our call!

Now I see that the **fruits of repentance** for Seekers might simply be for us to look around and notice the calls that are percolating among us. It is for us to bless them with ribbons and responsibility. It is for us to trust the gifts among us. It is for us to act with clarity and charity toward one another.

In our stewardship of the building, we need to charge a fair price but not extort money from those who could pay more. This is a **do-it-together kind of church**. Repentance means you will have to step forward when God's call comes to you, and let go of perfection in favor of responsiveness.

Repentance for me specifically means standing here with a blemished book. I'm not completely happy with the print job. And a gremlin slipped in one page with my handwriting on it, but I think it will be a useful record of who and what and how we got to this point. The book ends at the beginning of Advent this year! These will be for sale after worship at the cost of printing. I am willing to take your additions and corrections by email until Epiphany, January 6. Then I will do a final clean copy "for the library" and call it done (I am anxious to move the 10 boxes of papers and sundry notebooks out of my office so others can have access to these files).

Let me close with these words from the Apostle Paul to his community in Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let

your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.