

“The Good News of Recommittment Season” by Dave Lloyd

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The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

I'm not a big fan of calling the lectionary's excerpt from the Hebrew Scriptures or the Epistle a "lesson." Sometimes the excerpt does instruct us but sometimes it's an invitation for us to engage with or even wrestle with God's word. But I really cringe when I hear a liturgist say the "Gospel lesson" because the gospel is never a lesson. It is always good news. That's what the word "gospel" means – good news.

So, as we begin recommittment season don't you feel excited by Luke's good news of Jesus' words that we just heard? We must hate our families and even our own lives to become disciples of Jesus! Hooray! We must pick up and carry our cross to follow him! Glory hallelujah! We must renounce all our possessions, not just declutter with Marie Kondo! Whoopee!

Today's passage is frequently called a "hard gospel." After our Learners and Teachers mission group discussion on this passage this week John Morris explored the Greek and found that there are two words in Greek for "hate." Luke used the word "miseo" (the root of "misogyny"), which was most often used when a comparison was implied; that is, "to hate your mother and father" might be a strong way of saying, "to prefer [something or someone else] over them," or "to hold less affection for them than for [the other thing]." To prefer Jesus over our families is still stronger than merely psychologically detaching from our parents and individuating ourselves from our siblings, spouses, and children. In Jesus' day, family is where one found his or her identity, and so to be told that they must prefer Jesus to their families must have been deeply shocking to his disciples. And who wants to be called by God to be a martyr? Who wants to be homeless and have nothing?

Yes, it's a hard story to be taken as good news, especially if we take it as a prescription for what we ought to do. Is there another way to read it? Yes, *descriptively* rather than *prescriptively*. Luke's gospel was written no earlier than 71 CE and many scholars date it between 90 and 110 CE. By this time Paul had completed his missionary journeys and his epistles. Roman persecution of Christians had resulted in the execution of three leaders of the Church: James – Jesus' brother and the head of the early Church in Jerusalem, Peter, and Paul. After Judean rebels had seized control of Jerusalem in 70 CE the Roman general Titus had besieged and sacked the city and, worst of all, destroyed the Second Temple, the lifeblood of the Jewish faith. Titus' legions slaughtered so many there that bodies were piled around the altar and blood poured down the Temple steps. Now Jewish synagogues had begun expelling the followers of Jesus' Way. So, when this part of Luke's gospel was read aloud in a Christian house church soon after it was written there would have been nodding heads, "That's exactly what happened. We've been following Jesus' Way and our families made us leave the synagogue. We follow Jesus'

Way and we get arrested and crucified. We follow Jesus' Way and we've lost all our possessions." Reading this passage descriptively may not make it good news, but it doesn't leave us feeling as if becoming Jesus' disciple is impossible. It's more like the feeling that being Jesus' disciple has cost me a lot but it's worth the cost.

Let's turn to Paul's letter to Philemon, a Christian leader in Colossae, owner of at least one slave – Onesimus – who had run away, possibly stealing some money as runaway slaves were wont to do. Somehow Onesimus met Paul. We don't know whether he had been arrested, met Paul in prison, and as a result became a Christian or whether he was already a Christian and having heard about Paul from his master Philemon, ran to Paul for help. In either case, by associating with Paul Onesimus had become a committed Christian with deep faith.

In the letter Paul complements Philemon several times for the love and affection (Philemon's name means "affectionate") that Philemon shows his fellow Christians in Colossae. Paul would like to keep Onesimus (whose name means "useful") with him as a fellow Christian worker but thinks it would be better to return him to Philemon. Paul is sending Onesimus – once useless to Philemon – back not to uphold Philemon's right as a slaveholder but humbly (and Paul's name means "small" or "humble") in hopes that Philemon would welcome Onesimus back affectionately not as a slave but as a brother in Christ. Paul notes that he could order Philemon to accept Onesimus as a free brother in Christ but he chooses to make Philemon decide. Paul adds that if Onesimus owes Philemon anything, Paul will repay it.

Put yourself in Onesimus' place. Hasn't your commitment to follow Jesus' Way just become costly? Would you risk going back to your former owner, knowing that he had the legal right to have you whipped, burnt with iron, branded on your forehead or even executed? Would you beg Paul not to send you there? Would you run away again?

Put yourself in Philemon's place. Hasn't your commitment to follow Jesus' Way just become costly for you as well? Could you welcome Onesimus wholeheartedly as a brother in Christ? Would you enslave him again or have him executed? And if so, would Paul cast you out of his fellowship?

Put yourself in Paul's place. Isn't this another situation of where committing to follow Jesus' Way is costly for you too? There is only a one in three chance that Philemon will welcome Onesimus as a brother in Christ as you ask. Can you risk having Onesimus disappear forever? Can you risk Philemon re-enslaving him? If either of these happens, you will be a laughingstock among Gentiles and possibly among your fellow Christians.

Or put yourself in the congregation at Colossae when Philemon shares the letter from Paul that Onesimus brought. None of the gospels has been written yet, but perhaps you've heard a saying of Jesus about the cost of discipleship and you've heard something about Jesus' life and crucifixion. What would you think about committing to be a Christian? Is it worth the cost?

Our season of recommitment follows a tradition of Seekers Church ever since its formation as one of the congregations that emerged from the Church of the Saviour. The Church of the Saviour was an ecumenical church founded on the concept of integrity of membership. A worshipper was prepared for membership, first by completing six twelve-week classes in the school of Christian Living, which in the words of Elizabeth O'Connor was "a framework in which the Christian faith may be explored with seriousness. Within this framework a person must have the opportunity to know deep person-to-person relationships. He[She] must have opportunity in a community of acceptance and love to see himself[herself], to let go his[her] false saviours that he[she] may come to know the real Saviour."ⁱ

If you have recently begun worshipping with us, we hope you will sign up to take one of the two classes our mission group, Learners and Teachers, sponsors in the School for Christian Growth that begins this Tuesday. Taking a class is a good way to get to know people over table fellowship with the Tuesday evening vegetarian dinner and then in the class. Taking a class is not a hoop to jump through or an obstacle to getting deeper into Seekers. It's a mechanism to get deeper into our community life and we hope, deeper into the heart of Christ. Learners and Teachers takes this mission seriously. It's why we frequently choose to preach during the first few Sundays of the fall term of the School for Christian Growth, which coincides with recommitment season.

In the Church of the Saviour at some point after having taken classes in the School of Christian Living the worshipper felt God's call to join a specific mission group, a small group whose mission was to bring about God's realm in some aspect of contemporary life and to deepen the faith of its members. The mission group members learned about the integrity of membership through observance of the mission group's spiritual disciplines, submitting a weekly written spiritual report to the mission group's spiritual director, and learning how to conduct interaction within the mission group. Eventually the person sought to become a member of the church and prepared a short paper on what Christ meant to him/her, an account of his/her spiritual discipline(s) and how faithfully he/she has been following it/them, an account of the areas of his/her life that are unchristian and need help to be changed, and a statement of the specific task he/she is doing to follow his/her call. The applicant presented the paper to the church Council, which assigned a sponsor for him/her for a period of at least six weeks to prepare the applicant in more depth. During this time the applicant prepared a written spiritual autobiography that he/she read to the Council and then read the Commitment statement to the Council and congregation and was welcomed as a member.

Notice that the Church of the Saviour did not accept transfer of membership from another Christian congregation or accept membership by mere profession of faith. If that didn't make us unique, having an annual period where we reflected on our commitment and decided whether to recommit did. In the words of Elizabeth O'Connor

And so, in October of each year our members affirm anew that we belong to Christ and to one another. The period before recommitment is a time of re-examination, a time when we decide what our most basic belonging means after another year of pilgrimage. Are our roots deeper in God's life does the common life which we know in Christ mean more to us than a year ago? Are we willing to give ourselves to the fellowship at greater cost?

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These days before recommitment Sunday bring into the open many repressed reservations and resistances. It is a time of pain and of healing, a season in which we try with brutal honesty to examine anew our original commitment to Christ.^{[ii](#)}

Elizabeth O'Connor wrote this in 1963. By the time Sharon and I came to the Church of the Saviour, some things had changed. And over the years until Gordon Cosby's death, other aspects continued to change.

Seekers Church was formed in 1976 and over time we have changed too. We have sought to address the human need for belonging by creating a commitment statement for worshippers who are not yet ready to commit themselves to Christ or to this expression of the Body of Christ. How has this affected the way we view integrity of membership? We no longer view ourselves as ecumenical, a church that sees itself as called to healing the divisions among the world's churches. Instead, we now see ourselves only as a progressive church. We claim to be welcoming and inclusive and we use gender inclusive and

non-hierarchical language in our worship and in our mission groups. Do we welcome those with different political views and those for whom gendered and hierarchical language has brought them into deeper intimacy with God? One of Marjory Bankson's gifts to us has been to help us see and explore the primacy of God's call on each of our lives. I fear we sometimes trivialize that gift when we choose not to do a small but necessary task for our Body of Christ, such as loading or emptying the dishwasher, excusing ourselves by saying, "I'm not called to do that."

The call to commitment to Christ is a call to servanthood, but servanthood strikes us as un-American. We believe we all are created equal and all should have equal rights to freedom and liberty. To willingly subjugate ourselves to another's control – even if that other is God – feels counter-cultural, almost treasonous. And what's more, the call to commitment to Christ is to be part of the Body of Christ, and some of us in that Body are not too loveable.

Commitment links to accountability. Accountability can seem negative, as if it means only that we are to give a periodic account of our shortcomings. But accountability means that we share good news – the gospel – along with bad news, a progress report of our pilgrimage, as it were. That is what our mission groups are about: a place to review our spiritual pilgrimage through a weekly spiritual report and through speaking aloud to the group. Sometimes accountability is joyous, as we describe the places in our lives where God has given us grace this week. And since every member of the mission group is committed to the mission, it is a place where we have the absolute right to ask the other members of the mission group to share our joy and to ask for support, for help, and for forgiveness as we seek to co-create one little aspect of God's Kingdom. I am responsible for helping Marjory, Marcia, Jacqie, Glenn, and John on their spiritual journeys as they are for helping me on mine, for sharing their joys as well as sharing

their struggles and sorrows as they share in my joys, struggles and sorrows.

I am perfectly willing to commit to be God's co-creator in bringing about God's shalom on earth if I get to choose what tasks are involved, and at what cost. But if it is God who is choosing the mission for me, especially if it is something that doesn't appeal to me, and if it is God who sets the cost of that mission, I should be giving long and careful thought before I vow, "Yes, God, I am your servant. Send me."

These six weeks are an opportunity to reflect on our commitment to Christ: to ask hard questions about our commitment and to rejoice in our faithfulness as well as acknowledge our shortcomings in living out our commitment. And these weeks are an opportunity to reflect on our commitment to this local Body of Christ, this community of lovable and unlovable Christians, to ask hard questions about it and to rejoice in our faithfulness as well as acknowledge our shortcomings in living out our commitment to this congregation.

We might consider recommitment Sunday next month as the gospel, because it is such good news that almost everyone, men, women, youths, and children, chooses to recommit to Christ and this Body of Christ. I suggest that we seriously consider recommitment season as the gospel, because the really good news is that we find God and find ourselves in wrestling with the hard questions Jesus poses.

[ⁱ](#) O'Connor, Elizabeth. Call to Commitment. New York: Harper & Row, 1963, p. 25

[ⁱⁱ](#) Ibid, pp. 37-38.