

“The Good News of Transformation” by Brenda Seat



Trinity

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We have an interesting set of texts this morning to work with:

We have Naaman complaining because what he was asked to do was too easy.

We have Paul writing to the church in Galatia, saying, “sow

from the Spirit so that the harvest is of the Spirit," explaining that it is an inner transformation which is the goal in following Jesus, not anything we do outwardly to our bodies.

And in Luke, Jesus gives his disciples instructions on how to carry the good news to all who will listen. Jesus tells his disciples to proclaim to all who will listen, "The kin-dom of God has come near to you!"

In 1985, Keith and I attended Church of the Saviour in downtown DC for the first time. I would like to say it was a transformative experience, but it was not. It was complicated and somewhat of a disappointment. Based on a recommendation we received that day, The next time we came we attended a Seekers service. Again, I wish I could say it was transformative, but it was not. But there was something. Something that drew us in. Something that made me feel like it was a safe place to explore what little faith I had left.

In the years that followed, Keith and I kept coming back, kept taking classes in the School of Christian Growth, moved into mission groups, became members of Stewards, and eventually, in 2002, I joined the Servant Leadership Team (SLT). In the meantime, we lived our lives, went to work and raised two daughters.

I think what drew us in was the willingness of people to listen and offer insights, and how they invited each of us to use our skills and gifts to help continue and contribute to the ongoing creation of this church.

I found this fascinating. All the churches I had any experience with were pretty top down. You were invited to help, but it was not about creating, rather it was sustaining what was already there.

As Sonya, one of our founders, kept reminding us, theology is not immutable, but constantly evolving. What we did, in worship, in liturgy, in Steward's meetings, in mission groups, in the classes in the School for Christian Growth, in our work, with family and friends, and in nature is all theology. Each moment is a chance for us to do the work of theology. Because theology is the work of understanding the nature of God. We are constantly engaging and trying to understand the vastness of who God is.

When we are engaged in this work, when we try to understand the vastness of God's nature, we need people who are willing to be a part of that journey. We need people to help us, because theology is not something you can do on your own. It must be a collaborative project.

When people ask me why I go to church, why I bother to be a part of an institution that is so broken, this is my answer. Without exposure to what others think or understand about God, I am blind. How easy it would be if we all went into our rooms and studied and defined God in our own limited understanding. I am pretty sure that we would all emerge with a God that looked pretty similar to ourselves. No. The pursuit of God, the pursuit of understanding God is something that must be done with others. It is absolutely vital in fact that we get maximum exposure to many different ideas, many different perspectives, and many different understandings. But that can also be chaotic. The Church has tried many different ways to rein in the chaos. Traditionally, the Church used a creed or some kind of statement of faith to rein in the exuberance of those who wanted to follow Christ.

But Church of the Saviour was different. Gordon Cosby, one of its founders, became skeptical of denominations, creeds and statements of faith. As a chaplain during WW II, he encountered Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and even atheists on the battlefield. He realized how profoundly limiting all these divisions were and

he wanted something that could be bigger, larger and freer, where instead of clergy and theologians and denominations defining who God is, we could all work together to understand God.

But there was still the question of how to contain the chaos which that might bring. The answer was commitment. To join and be a part of a community that would explore the nature of God you had to commit to be a part of that community of faith, to be collaborative, to agree to doing certain disciplines, to stay engaged even when it was hard, and to work out your and our theology together with others. Initially, the commitment was pretty high and onerous. As time has gone on, the commitment has changed and evolved, but is still very central to and a core part of who we are at Seekers.

I think what draws people to Church of the Saviour and Seekers is that it is transformative. Although initially my encounter was not promising, over time it has been transformative. Evidently that transformation has been clearly visible to others as well because I have recently gotten several cards acknowledging my retirement from SLT, and a couple of them specifically mentioned how they have seen a noticeable change or transformation in me over the last 20 years! This is of course another benefit of living in a community where you are visible and committed – it keeps you humble!

Like the church in Galatia, we too struggle with what is important, what we should value and keep. The struggle is real, but we might want to reframe it with this question. What is it that helps us understand God and transforms us? In Galatia they thought that a physical sign, like circumcision, would help them identify themselves as people who followed God. But Paul says no, it is the inward transformation that counts, not any physical sign. This was radical at the time. Two thousand years later we act like of course that is the right way to look at things, but imagine hearing a transformative message about a man named Jesus who was a part

of a whole culture and tribe. The natural instinct would be to become as fully as possible the person you were trying to follow. For a man, that would include circumcision. So Paul saying no, you don't need to do that, is truly a radical departure and yet falls in line with the trajectory of the whole Bible. As God reveals themselves to the people of Israel, we begin to notice how God specifies how to worship them. From the beginning God was clear that no images should be made – rather God spoke through the cloud of fire, in the burning bush and in the stillness. Over time as people understood God and God's love for creation, animal sacrifices were also rejected. So, in this passage, Paul draws another line saying God wants our inner transformation, not some outward manifestation on our bodies.

As we wrestle with changes within our own community, I hope we can think about what our traditions or practices mean. Do they support and encourage inner transformation or are they just rote things that we follow because we have always done so? Getting to the essence of these things helps to open up our understandings. Our goal is to create a community of faith where we wrestle with and try to understand the nature of God. We want to promote those things that help us do that and to let go of the things that get in the way.

I love the story of Naaman. Powerful and respected, he becomes seriously ill with a disease that is incurable, which will ostracize him from everyone he knows and loves, and from which he will die a lingering and painful death. If ever there was a story that brought home the transient nature of power and wealth, this is it. In fact, he is so powerless that he has to get advice from an enslaved girl! How diminished and pathetic is that? But the nature of power and wealth is that it warps our sense of ourselves. Although this disease has taught him that he is in fact powerless, and cannot control anything, he gets bent out of shape when Elisha doesn't show him the proper respect. In a snit, he almost turns away from the one thing

that might save him. Until another lowly servant says, Come on big guy. If you had to give all your money away or crawl on your belly over hot coals, you would have done it. But because it was easy, you won't? All you have to do is give it a try.

Transformation is often about doing the next thing, taking the next step. But we sure do resist it, don't we? We like our illusions of power and control and taking those steps, doing the next thing, is often where those illusions get shattered. It is not really the doing of the thing or taking the next step that we resist, but it is the illusion that we have created for ourselves that we want to protect. That was what Naaman was doing. Elisha didn't come to greet him or show the proper respect. He knew that people would hear about this and talk about it. Naaman the great and powerful, listening to some podunk prophet that never even showed up, and per the prophet's instructions Naaman dipped himself in some inferior foreign river seven times. He could just see the chryon as it inched its way across the CNN news broadcast. It was a publicity nightmare!

What are you resisting? What illusion are you trying to protect?

After 20 years on SLT, I have gotten pretty good at sussing out the times when illusion is getting in the way of true transformation. I have seen it over and over again. One of the ways I identify this is by asking the question, "Do you want to be healed?"

Part of the reason I am retiring was that I could see the ways in which I was resisting change or did not have the energy to do the work that such a change would call forth. It became clear to me that if we want Seekers to thrive and grow with new energy on into the future, with new ideas and new life, then I needed to set my role down. After 20 years, shadows get cast, well-worn grooves of doing things keep us on the path but make it difficult to change lanes or enter into new

territory. I do not say this with any regret or bitterness but with anticipation and joy. I look forward to what comes next.

But the issues that the story of Naaman raises are valid for Seekers too. What are the illusions that we carry about ourselves that are keeping us from being healed and transformed? Do we in fact want to be healed?

Finally, we come to the story in Luke where Jesus sends out the seventy to proclaim the good news.

First Jesus said to go out two by two, and told them to approach people saying, "Peace be unto this house." They came in peace, were grounded in peace, and proclaimed peace.

Secondly, they were to proclaim, "The kin-dom of God has come near to you." They were to do this without assessing whether people wanted to hear this good news or not, whether they were open to it or not; the important thing was that the good news be proclaimed and that it was accessible to everyone, not just those who were likely to click and share or join a FB page. No, it was to EVERYONE!

Third, if the people were not interested in this message, they were to move on. They were not to coerce, threaten or impose their message, but rather move on. I often thought that the instruction to shake the dust off their feet was a negative gesture, as if the dust of those who were not interested was somehow contaminated, but one of the commentators I read had a different take: shaking the dust off their feet was a way for the disciples to let go, to not let the rejection weigh on them, or to analyze ad infinitum why someone didn't want to listen to the good news. I think that might be the healthier way to see this. We all know, all too well, the cost of wondering why some people come to Seekers and some people leave.

And finally, Jesus cautions the seventy to not get too big headed about what they were able to do through the power of

the Holy Spirit. Instead, he wanted them to focus on their identity, or as once commentator put it, "being named, claimed and made new in Christ." (Schifferdecker, 2022)

What is the message of peace that we could bring to the world? How do we let people know the kin-dom of God is here right now?

I recently came across a quote by Walter Brueggemann that caught my attention. He said: "The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair."

As I was writing this sermon, I envisioned using our front windows at Seekers to share our articulations of the good news. Brueggemann's quote is just one articulation. What might we come up with? It might be fun to work on this together, in mission groups or individually, and have the Outreach Mission Group (OMG) gather these messages together and display them in the front windows of the church to share with the world. What is the peace that we bring? What is *good* about the good news of Jesus?

As we consider our next steps in engaging with this broken and troubled world, I cannot think of a better set of guidelines than what Luke records for us to follow.

Go into the world, supporting each other as you do so. Proclaim a message of peace to anyone you come in contact with. Tell them that God's kin-dom is near and engage with them if they are interested, and if not move on. And never, ever forget that we are "named, claimed and made new in Christ."

Let it be so!

Amen.