

# **“Think Again: Choose Life-Choose WE” by Peter Bankson**

**February 16, 2014**

## **The 6th Sunday after the Epiphany**

I'm trying to give us a fresh way to look at the idea that the gate into the Realm of God is open to those who shift their focus from the American mantra of self-reliance to a commitment to working for the common good, from "ME" to "WE." This new life is the life of Call. As Frederick Buechner reminds us "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Living into that call is what I think it means to enter the City of God. Once we discover how to lay down our lives for our friends (or enemies as our Epiphany theme suggests) we discover that we really do have joy, peace and happiness in our souls.

Six weeks ago, as we began this season, I suggested that Epiphany is a time when we may suddenly see what has been right in front of us for a long time. An "epiphany" is a sudden manifestation of the meaning of something; a sudden intuitive realization, a big "Aha!" Our worship theme for this season suggests that it's an opportunity to re-think some tried-and-true understandings of the world we live in and the "we" who live in that world.

I suggested then that there are several things that might help us think again about how we can enter the Realm of God. As one very small part of the Body of Christ, we have a precious opportunity. We can choose to live differently, to risk sharing our paradoxical selves with each other in many different ways. Epiphany is a time of unexpected gifts, gifts that can help us think again. And, fresh thinking can help us find the road less traveled, where we can be on the Way together with Christ.

As she reflected on the Beatitudes two weeks ago, Deborah shared some strong images about mercy and kindness. She offered us an opportunity to think again about the familiar Beatitudes and observed that living in right relationships is key:

So, what does God need from us? Just what Micah told us: to live in right relationship with everyone around us, to live in right relationship with God, and to have some humility about our ability to do so.

Last Sunday Ken gave us some clear examples of choosing to live differently as he shared his reflections on what it means for us to hide our lights under a bushel. He observed that "you would be a rare Christian indeed if that light of yours were always visible on its lamp stand. We all have our

bushels, and each of us is the light of the world.”

As we choose to walk a different path, this season can be a time when we suddenly see what has been right in front of us for a long time, when we may be able to “think again.” I’m beginning to understand that, if I can just stay open to the mystery of Creation, and live into the tension of paradox, where “both and” is the nature of life, then joy, peace and happiness can be revealed in the most unexpected circumstances.

In this week’s Hebrew Scripture, we hear God giving us a choice: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days...” (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Even though we are proud, and overburdened, and broken we can choose life by finding an open gate into the City of God. But to do that we must think again about what it means to choose life: Since each of us is unique, there need to be many gates, and by the grace of God, there are. Depending on how we are broken, “choosing” will mean different things to each of us. And, if we are on the way with Christ the “life” we choose will be more about “WE” than about “ME.”

This week, in the spirit of the season, to “think again,” I’ve been looking at some alternative paths into the Realm of God. In Revelation we are given an image of the City of God set on a hill, with twelve gates into the city. If the Realm of God is close at hand, all around us, or even deep within us, how might we think again about finding the way in that is open to each of us, a way that is welcoming and inclusive?

This week’s readings give us a clear image of what I might call the “high path” into the City of God. It’s the path of obedience, the way in for those who are able to follow God’s commandments perfectly. This path is clearly marked. The Hebrew Scripture for this week gives us an overview of the path to the Obedience Gate: “If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. (Deuteronomy 30:16)

And the Gospel lays out a couple of sample specifics about forgiveness and fidelity: do not let your anger last through worship; mediate any disagreements before they go to court; and don’t even look at someone else with lust or longing.

If it were easy for us to follow God’s commandments perfectly, I think we would. But each of knows how we have sinned and fallen short, how we are fragile, earthen vessels. So, for a lot of us, the high path of strict obedience seems closed, if not blocked. We broken human beings need another way in. And, thanks be to God, there is more than one gate into the City.

One interesting image for us here in Seekers Church is our communion chalice. I put it on the altar table today to remind us of three things:

1. Like so many other elements of our life together as a family of faith, the chalice reminds us that we have a lot to say about how we choose to live our lives as part of the Body of Christ. We are a do-it-yourself congregation, and each one of us has pain to bear, and gifts to share, not only with each other but with the wider world.
2. Even though it has been broken and repaired (several times) this chalice still does what it is called to do: it holds the fruit of the vine that we share whenever we celebrate communion as a reminder of God's call to pour ourselves out for the healing of the world: Broken and whole all at once.
3. Around the base it says, "Choose Life." Marjory reminded me that when she made our chalice back in the 70s she chose to put that on our chalice to remind us of this passage from Deuteronomy, that God offers us the opportunity to CHOOSE life.

So, what "gates" into the City of God have I been considering this week? I've been thinking of them as Obedience, Mercy and Skill. We have some pretty good ideas about what it takes to enter the City of God through these gates, but I think there's more to learn.

#### *Obedience Gate*

In my vision, the sign over the Obedience Gate says "God's Word is Law." When I'm on the path to this gate I'm committed to doing my best. But there's a demon sitting on my shoulder whispering in my ear "Good Boy! You are earning your way into Heaven." More often than I like to admit, that demon is wearing a Boy Scout uniform. When I've done well and no-one notices, he says "O Peter, you are SO faithful!" But when someone points out some place where things aren't going right, another voice rises up from deep inside with a cry that makes the Psalmists smile: "How long, O Lord, how long must I carry this load before I've earned my way in?" My demon says, "Try harder!" But the truth is, I'll never "earn" my way in, because I'm one of those fragile earthen vessels, broken by a lifetime of dutiful imperfection.

As I get closer to the Obedience Gate, I begin to see that there is a small sign on the doorpost. It's still a bit out of focus for me, but I think it says something like "God loves you. Set down your burdens and come on in."

But I've been carrying those burdens for so long that my own sense of identity is built on them. Being burdened is a major identifying mark of who I am. In fact, to me the burdens look even bigger than the failures. Letting go of that part of my identity is a challenge. But as I confess my broken efforts to follow God's commandments, I am opened to receive God's reconciling love, and I experience deep joy. The Obedience gate is open to all who, with humility and contrition, are on the Way with Christ.

#### *Mercy Gate*

After the Hebrew Scriptures for this week that seem to shut the Obedience Gate for a lot of us, the Gospel offers another

gate. It doesn't have quite as many bright lights around it, and there aren't as many reporters with News Hour cameras there waiting for stories about folks trying to prove how perfect they are.

The Mercy Gate is just to the left of the Obedience Gate. This one has a well-trodden path leading to it, and there seem to be a lot more ordinary people on the path. The sign across the top says "Love Your Neighbor." I think this is the one Deborah spoke of two weeks ago when she said, "So, what does God need from us? ... to live in right relationship with everyone around us, to live in right relationship with God, and to have some humility about our ability to do so."

When I see myself on the path to this gate, I hear another demon walking beside me, reaching out to the crowd gathered along the path. This one looks a lot like Mother Teresa, or like what I think Mother Teresa should have looked like, simply dressed, with no apparent regard for her own needs. My Mother Teresa demon is coaching me to tell all who will listen something like, "Oh you poor thing. I'm so glad I can help. I'm thankful that I can relieve your suffering. Here, take this. What more do you need, or want?" Turning her gaze on me, my prideful demon says "Aren't you so thankful that you can be so helpful to those in need?"

As we get closer to the gate, I notice that there is a security checkpoint just before the entrance. The attendants are dressed in white and sporting something on their backs that look like small wings. They are asking all who seek to enter by the Mercy Gate to open their hearts and put all their good works into a well-used gray bin so they can be put through the pride scanner. Any good works I try to bring on board to feed my ego will not be permitted. And the full body scanner checks for pride that may still be hidden in my heart. I know I won't get through this one with my self-identity intact.

But there is hope! Just beyond the pride scanner there's a small room with a sign on the door that says "Chapel: All travelers who confess their sins here are free to enter the Realm of God. The good news here is that as we learn to be humbly helpful in meeting the needs of others, we find strength flowing in, and we are open to the thanks of others, including those in need. There is a deep sense of peace in those who enter by the Mercy Gate.

#### *Skill Gate*

There is a third gate. Off to the right, on the other side of the Obedience Gate, is another way into the Realm of God, the Skill Gate. As I look at the crowd heading for that gate, I see a different kind of people here. There are two guys in bib overalls nearby, walking confidently, heads up, talking loudly. They look like they know what they're doing. One says to the other, "See this hammer? It's my favorite tool, and boy, do I know how to use it. When I see something that needs to be fixed, I grab my hammer and get to work. For me, every problem is just like a nail: a few well-placed blows and you're good to go!"

Although I think I have more than one favorite tool in my

belt, I know the feeling. So often, my sense of self is tied tightly to the confidence that "I can fix that." And when I can't figure out how to reset the piano, even after half an hour of fiddling and a quick look at the manual, I feel like a failure even though I've never played an electronic piano in my life.

Our confession this Epiphany season admits that "We are a people of outward compliance and inward deception." When I think I know the answer, I figure that adds to my "frequent helper" miles, and might even move me closer to the front of the line here at the Skill Gate. The epiphany here is that I'm deceiving myself whenever I think that I'm earning my salvation by doing good works. Good works flow out of God's love, not the other way around.

As this line of very competent people snakes around the corner and heads for the gate, I see that the Skill Gate seems to have sunk into the slush. It seems to be in bad shape. There are so many braces and patches holding it together, so many efforts to keep it open that have been nailed on by so many people who knew just what to do to fix it that it looks like it's only about as high as this altar table. Everyone who wants to enter the Realm of God through this Skill Gate will have to drop their tools and enter on their hands and knees. Apparently, most of these skillful people count on themselves so much that they have a hard time putting their heads together to come up with a solution that will be good for everyone.

The sign above the gate says, in bright Gold letters, "Experienced Practitioners." That makes me wonder whether I'm qualified or not. What kind of experience? What kind of skills will get me in? The little demon engineer on my shoulder says, "You don't know what you're doing! Who do you think you are?" Sadly, this looks like one of those all-too-familiar places where the inward concentration on "I can fix this" gets in the way of "How can we work this out together?"

But as Deborah reminded us a couple weeks ago, the key here is living in right relationships and having some humility about our ability to do so. I think those right relationships include the readiness to work together rather than needing to have all the answers. I know that isn't easy, but every time Celebration Circle digs into preparing for a new worship season here and we tear open each other's prayers, I am reminded that four heads are better than one, and the results are much better for our collaboration. Thank God we're in this together.

Looking at the Skill Gate, it seems to me that as God helps us shift from "ME" to "WE" in offering our skills, we experience community in an exciting way, and we are opened to a deep happiness.

### Choosing Life

How do we enter and live our lives in the City of God? How do we shift from where we are to this focus on the common good? I think that a lot of this epiphany is recognizing that there's a deeper truth to the gratitude we express when we say "Thank God we're all in this together."

It's more than simply being thankful for being in community. It's also the recognition of a deeper shift away from the classic American cultural mantra that the only way to succeed in life is to concentrate on "number one," to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. In that view, the only way to succeed is to fight my way to the top so I can win. The Winter Olympics does a lot to reinforce that kind of competitive commitment to personal excellence. In fact, until this year's introduction of a "team" event in skating, just about the only "we" elements of the Winter Games were pairs skating, hockey and the bobsled competition. Not much emphasis on "we" there! Oh, I know, we're all rooting for "our" athletes, hoping we can beat "them" to the podium for a medal, but that's not the kind of WE I have in mind.

What does "Choose Life" mean for me? As I head into my 76<sup>th</sup> year of life in a couple weeks, I'm hearing more advice from others that I should choose to slow down, take it easy, take care of myself. I appreciate your care and concern. But sometimes it causes me to wonder if I still have too much of my identity tied up in being skillful, merciful and obedient. These days I'm trying to learn ever more deeply how to let go and let God, so that I can understand, in a deeper way, that it is God's love that welcomes me to God's table of love and forgiveness, not my work that earns me a place at the table.

At the core of my sense of call for the past 25 years as a member of our Servant Leadership Team has been the commitment to help us do what needs to be done without having to do it all myself. I still believe that is central to my call, but I can see how easy it is for my little inner demons to hold tight to obedience, and mercy, and skill. When it comes to humility, mine seems to have an aroma of outward compliance but inner deception. Holy One, forgive me.

I know full well, and I am deeply thankful that I am not alone in choosing this "WE" kind of life. When I look around, I see a lot that we are already doing to give our lives to support the common good.

After worship this morning Cynthia will be leading a gathering where we will decide how to give away \$60,000 of our offerings to two dozen different missions and ministries where we have active connections. Next month we will have a similar gathering to decide on giving \$50,000 of our offering to international missions and ministries. That support, plus the support we provide for other partners means that more than half of what we offer to God through Seekers Church goes out to help other missions and ministries where we have active connections. That's a BIG "WE" kind of commitment.

Beyond that, as members we've made a commitment to care for the whole of God's Creation. It's worth reminding ourselves here of that commitment:

As a member of this church, I will deepen my relationships in this local expression of the Body of Christ, sharing my gifts from God with others who worship with Seekers Church, and in the wider world. I will:

- *Nurture my relationship with God and Seekers Church through spiritual disciplines;*
- *Care for the whole of creation, including the natural environment;*
- *Foster justice and be in solidarity with the poor;*
- *Work for the end of all war, both public and private; and*
- *Respond joyfully with my life, as the grace of God gives me freedom.*

From the sermons, spiritual reports and conversations I hear, we're working for the common good in more ways than all of us know about. Think about yourself. Think about those around you in this sanctuary. Think about the stories we heard this morning about connecting over the offering of a care pack, and Larry's prayer of thanks for the generosity of those in a 12-step meeting reaching out past racial differences. Remember all that you, and they, are doing to live out God's call to serve the common good, the wider WE through our commitment here.

We're doing a lot, but I think the place where we tend to get stuck is when our performance doesn't match our standards, when the little demons sitting on our shoulders start in on us, challenging our self-identity in the face of our imperfection, emphasizing the "broken" more than the "whole" in "broken and whole all at once."

### Conclusion

The good news is that, since we're all in this together, we can help each other think differently and make the small choices that move toward a wider "WE." I see a lesson in each of the gates into the City of God that I described today.

First, as we confess our broken efforts to follow God's commandments, we are opened to receive God's reconciling love, and experience deep joy. The Obedience gate is open to all those, who are on the Way with Christ with humility and contrition.

Second, as we learn to be humbly helpful in meeting the needs of others, we find strength flowing in and we are open to the thanks of others, including those in need. There is a deep sense of peace in those who enter by the Mercy Gate.

And third, as God helps us shift from "ME" to "WE" in offering our skills, we experience community in an exciting way, and we are opened to a deep happiness. This new life is the life of Call. As Frederick Buechner reminds us "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Living into that call is what I think it means to enter the City of God. Sometimes it's easy to feel the deep hunger out there. But there are other times when deep joy gets buried in a snowdrift of too much "stuff." Through it all, God offers us a balance that we can recognize and reach out for.

Once we discover how to lay down our lives for our friends (or

enemies, as our Epiphany theme suggests) we discover that we really do have joy, peace and happiness on our souls. In response to our Hebrew Scripture reading for this week, I say "Chose Life: Choose WE." Amen.