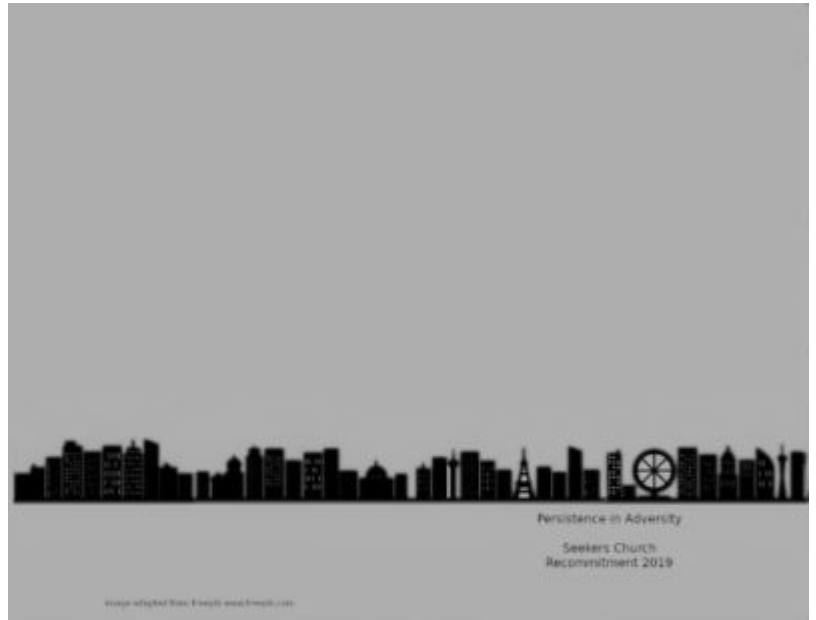


“What is Written on Your Heart?” by Deborah Sokolove

**October 20,
2019**



Recommitment Sunday for Church of the Saviour Communities

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

I often preach during the recommitment season. As a follower of Jesus Christ and a member of a 12 Step fellowship, I recommit to turn my life and will over to God pretty much every day—indeed, sometimes multiple times every day. But I don't think as often about my commitment to Seekers Church, so this season is an opportunity to reflect on what I am committing to as a member and a Steward in this community.

This is an important day in the life of this body, so when I signed up to preach today, I had not bothered to look at the readings because I knew it was Recommitment Sunday and that was what mattered. So I nearly laughed out loud when I finally did open the lectionary and discovered that the selections were like a giant wink from God. In the Gospel passage, Jesus

tells a story about a person whose faithfulness in her pursuit of justice can be a model for us all. While that is pertinent, if you want to know what I've been thinking about the widow and the corrupt judge, you can read today's [Inward/Outward](#). This morning at Seekers, I'm going to talk about the Jeremiah passage, which talks about God's renewed covenant with the Israelites.

On the brink of exile, Jeremiah relays the good news of God's promise that someday there will be an end to the anguish and suffering of the Israelites at the hands of their imperial neighbors. Not only that, but even the consequences for sin will change. No longer, God says, will the sins of the parents be visited on their offspring to the the third and fourth generations, as we read read in [Deuteronomy 5:9](#); no longer will the children's teeth be set on edge because the parents have eaten sour grapes. Instead, only the one who has done the wrong thing will have to suffer the consequences. Each generation, God promises, will have to answer only for their own misdeeds.

As I think about how industrialization and pollution have created changes to the climate that will have major effects on generations to come; how the ongoing ripples from slavery and Jim Crow continue to impoverish and oppress the descendants of enslaved persons; and how alcoholism or other addictions create havoc for the children and grandchildren of addicts, even if they themselves never succumb to the temptations of substance abuse, I find myself yearning for this time in which God's promise will come true. Unfortunately, as we discover in so many areas, the slate is not yet clean. Every generation has to live with the results of decisions of those who came before, both for better and for worse.

Indeed, the people that received Jeremiah's prophecy were reaping the disastrous results of their leaders' repeated rejection of policies of justice and peace. Most of us

probably don't like to think about God punishing entire nations for the bad behavior of their leaders, but disaster of one kind or another really is the natural consequence of years and years of irresponsible, self-serving policies. Unfortunately, usually the people who suffer are generally not the people who make those policies. That was as true in Jeremiah's day as it is in ours.

But Jeremiah says on God's behalf that things are going to change. God will make a new covenant directly with each individual. This new covenant, Jeremiah tells us, will be not be carved on stone tablets, nor even laboriously written on parchment scrolls. It will not come down from a mountain top carried by a charismatic leader. Rather, this new covenant will be written on each person's heart. In this new arrangement, each person will come to know and do the will of God, which—as another prophet reminds us—is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly. Or, as Jesus put it, to love God and neighbor as ourselves, to live according to what God has written on our hearts.

The approach of Recommitment Sunday here at Seekers, as in all the Church of the Saviour communities, is a yearly opportunity to examine what is written on our hearts. Most of you, I hope, have spent an hour in silence and prayer, either in this room or in some other quiet place, looking into what is written on your heart about continuing to participate in this expression of the Body of Christ. In the silence of Dayspring a couple of weeks ago, I looked into my own heart, with the help of the questions found on the insert that has been in the worship bulletins all season. Here are the answers that I found.

1. What things have changed in my personal life this year?

The biggest change in my life this year is that I retired from my work as Director of the Center for the Arts and Religion and Professor of Art and Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary, where I worked in various capacities for twenty-five

years. That is by far the longest time that I have spent employed at any one place, as my previous work life was very spotty. After having my first child at 17, I spent many years as a housewife and mother, and many other years in the gig economy long before that term was invented. I've worked as waitress and seamstress, as bank teller and filing clerk, as data entry operator and computer system manager, as designer and weaver and curator and teacher. And, as you may imagine, between all those jobs I've been unemployed a lot.

But retirement is different than homemaking or unemployment. As a stay-at-home mom, most of my days were spent taking care of little children, and my economic security depended on the man I was married to. When I was single and the children were a little older, most of my time was spent either working at a job or looking for another one, and worrying that I would never find one. More important than how I spent my time, however, was a constant, nagging sense that I wasn't pulling my weight unless I was working long hours, doing more and sleeping less than anyone around me, putting myself and my needs last after taking care of everyone else. Somehow, the law written on my heart in those days was one of constant self-sacrifice and hard work.

Now, as a retired person, I am beginning to notice a new, more generous and humane law being written on my heart. With a basic income assured by Social Security and a small pension, I no longer feel defensive about earning my keep or justifying my economic existence. I am finding a new rhythm to my days that does not depend on the demands of office hours or filling other people's needs. For the first time in my life, most of my time is my own, and that feels very good. I no longer have to fit my physical, emotional, and spiritual needs into the edges and corners of other people's expectations. Rather, I am free for the first time in my life to find out what I truly need. And it turns out that I need very little other than quiet solitude, connection with those I love, and the

awareness that I am loved and forgiven even if I do nothing at all but breathe.

2. Where at Seekers do I feel restless? Bored? Excited? What does that suggest?

More than ever, Seekers continues to be at the center of my social and spiritual life. Even though my contemplative nature often feels out of step with the activist invitations to participate in this or that demonstration, march, campaign, training, or other visible manifestation of commitment to social justice, my heart sings when I know that others are doing this important work. Even though I feel happier and safer on city streets than I do on trails in the natural world, and cannot get excited about camping trips or even gardening, I am careful about my use of natural resources and do what I can to reduce my contribution to climate change. I am grateful that so many Seekers work for the kinds of change that will make the world a better place and glad that we are all in this together—even (or especially) when my part is often more encourager than doer.

3. How do I relate to mission groups at Seekers Church?

It may come as a surprise to learn that there is a long tradition at Seekers that no one should belong to more than one mission group at a time. Mission group membership is a big commitment. Belonging to a mission group is not simply a matter of showing up to meetings for a couple of hours every week or two. For most mission groups, there is real work to be done between meetings that requires time and attention that might otherwise be spent with friends and loved ones; pursuing private interests; or simply relaxing with a movie, a book, or watching the world go by from the front porch.

Most important, however, a mission group is a place of accountability and pastoral care, where we learn to give and receive forgiveness, look after other members when they are in

spiritual or physical distress, and learn to love them as Jesus loves each one of us. In mission groups, I learn to love people whom I might not otherwise choose to love, to allow their lives to be written on my heart. Sometimes, I don't know if my heart is big enough to love all the people in even one mission group, but I keep trying.

Despite knowing this, I have been a member of both Celebration Circle and Time & Space mission groups for well over ten years. After spending some time in the now-defunct Artists Mission Group and then Learners and Teachers, I joined Celebration Circle around 1995, as I believed (then and now) that worship is the heart of a Christian congregation. Worship is where we are formed as people of faith, returning week after week to be nourished in communal prayer, song, and story so that we can go out in strength and courage as the Body of Christ, pouring out our lives for a world full of heartbreak and need. I knew, then and now, that Celebration Circle was the mission group to which I am called to use my gifts, knowledge, and talents to help Seekers continue to be a place where tradition and innovation are equally valued, where inclusive language and visible participation of all members of the community demonstrate the astonishing welcome that God offers to all.

However, after Seekers moved to this building about fifteen years ago, we began to realize that we needed someone to keep track of who was using what room when, to be a connection between our outside users and Seekers as a whole, and to make sure that things that broke got fixed. After a lot of discussion about whether it was best to have a new mission group take on these tasks or to hire someone to do them, I remember saying at a Stewards meeting that we needed both. Since managing a building this size is more work than any volunteer (or even group of volunteers) should be expected to take on, we needed to pay someone to do at least some of that work. And since that person should not be expected to do it

without prayerful support, a mission group should be created whose call would be to offer that backup to whoever took the job.

Of course, since having both a mission group and a paid building manager was my idea—and one of our traditions is that we don't come up with good ideas for other people to do—I, along with Peter, Keith, Glen, and John became the founding members of the Time & Space mission group. Alas, in upholding one tradition, I seem to have broken another, as I was and continue to be unwilling to leave Celebration Circle in order to be part of Time & Space. I have actually tried to leave T&S, once taking an extended leave of absence. Since I have no talent or aptitude (or even much interest) in building maintenance, it seemed logical to leave. But the other members are written so deeply on my heart that I can't seem to stay away. For some time now, I've been the moderator and note taker, and the others seem to value that service to the group. Other than that, my sense of call to T&S, now as it was in the beginning, is to prayerfully support Katie as the building manager.

So here I am, a long-term member of two mission groups whose members I am called to love and serve as Jesus loves me. I continue to learn things about myself and others (often multiple times), and know that I am a better person for it. I heartily recommend that everyone who isn't already in a mission group make a commitment to join one (only one!), and allow its members to be written deeply on your heart.

**4. Are there things I would like to try? Experiment with?
Who might encourage that?**

Perhaps the most important thing that I would like to try is the ability to say "no" to things that make my heart sink. No matter how worthy the cause, how interesting the participants, how important the result, if my heart sinks—rather than sings—I am beginning to understand that whatever it is, it is

not for me.

This is not to say that I will not do things out of a sense of duty rather than call. As Dave reminded us recently, no one is really called to empty the dishwashers, but it needs to be done anyway. Sometimes, we just have to do what we have to do, even if our hearts sink when we contemplate what that will cost in time and energy. And I am called to that, as well, because commitment to the ongoing life of Seekers Church means—among other things—doing my share of the chores that make our common life possible.

As for encouragement, I hope that all of you will encourage me as I practice discerning the difference between when I should say “yes” and when I need to say “no” as we walk together in our journey of faith. Wherever that journey takes me, I am very certain that another year of commitment to living as a member of the Body of Christ as it is expressed in Seekers Church is written on my heart. What is written on yours?