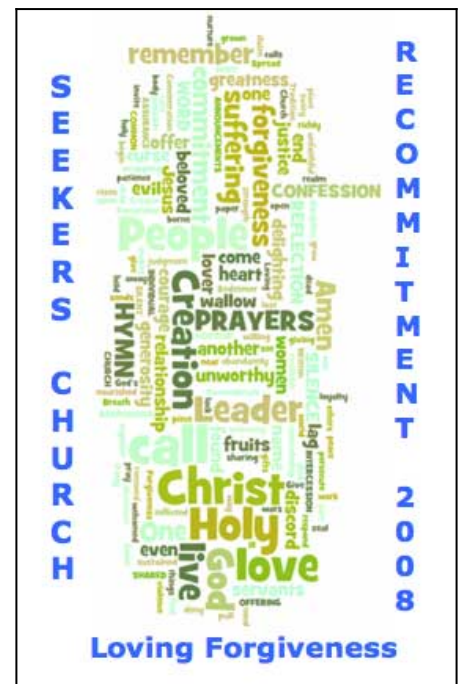


"Commitment and Sin" by Marjory Bankson

"Commitment and Sin" by Marjory Bankson



September 7, 2008

Matthew 18:15-20 *If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone...for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

Romans 13:8-14 *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

Today begins our recommitment season, which will come to

fruition on Recommitment Sunday the third week of October – when it will be time for each one of us to decide whether to claim our membership in Seekers. For us, it's a season of reflection and examination that leads toward the commitment statement which is printed on the inside of the bulletin. You can also see the similarity and differences between the member's statement and the additional elements of the Steward's commitment to care for the health of Seekers.

There are two classes in the School of Christian Living, which begins on Tuesday evening, that could help you do that reflection with others. One is focused on our outward journey together as "care for the whole of creation," and the other is more about our inward journey: "The Semi-secrets of Seekers." I hope you will join one or the other class for the next six weeks, which is exactly the duration of Recommitment season.

1. Interaction is Essential

Recommitment has to begin with an initial commitment. What I want to speak about today is the connection between commitment and sin, but don't get your hopes up about juicy stories.

In this passage from Matthew, Jesus assures his disciples that wherever two or three gather in his name, he will be there in spirit. The point is not about size, but about the promise of his presence where there is interaction "in his name." There is clearly something, according to Matthew, about his presence being needed to unbind our hearts, to clear the air and open the way to forgiveness.

In the Romans text, Paul says that loving one another is the highest calling, the fulfillment of Jewish Law. And in the Matthew text, we glimpse the reality—that we cannot hope to love one another without conflict or without sin.

In Jesus' day, sin was pretty easy to identify. It meant breaking one of the ten commandments or the myriad applications that temple authorities had identified. Most of

us would have trouble getting past the first commandment – to have no other gods before God.

We remember that one of the major tensions around Jesus was the question of whether he could be the Messiah if he didn't keep the Sabbath in traditional ways, or keep the cleansing rituals that religious Jews observed. As Jesus reached out to sinners and tax collectors and unclean women, there were many who accused him of sinful behaviour.

Nevertheless, Matthew has a pretty straightforward way of dealing with sin:

- you confront the sinner privately;
- if that fails, take a witness with you;
- if that doesn't produce a change in behaviour, you share it with the whole church;
- and if that doesn't work, you shut them out of the fellowship.

In the story that follows this one in Matthew, Peter asks how many times that process should be applied and Jesus answers, "Seventy times seven." In other words, there isn't a limit. Dealing with the reality of sin in the body of Christ seems to be something that Matthew recognized and confronted head-on. Sin and forgiveness go together for those who gather "in the name of Jesus."

Repentance was effective because sin was a matter of doing something wrong. Guilt could be absolved with a sacrifice. Misdeeds could be made right with atonement. God's covenant relationship with the Jewish people meant that repentance would always restore one's relationship with God. Recognizing sin depended on their shared covenant, not on the system of laws. I think that was the essence of Jesus' ministry – the good news that everybody was included and not just a special

few who could afford to meet all the permutations of the Temple Law.

2. Monastic Vows

As the church evolved over time, and being Christian became synonymous with being a Roman citizen during Constantine's rule, smaller groups of believers sought to live out the biblical mandate to love one another as Jesus loved his disciples. They recognized that the temptations of secular life were very strong and so, to separate themselves from the surrounding culture, they adopted monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Some of those religious orders have lasted nearly a thousand years—as small, enclosed, committed "bodies of Christ," carried along through time by ordinary people who lived simple but extraordinary lives. They took sin seriously and practiced internal repentance and restitution, but like the Gospel of Matthew, nobody expected ordinary people to practice this kind of radical love.

Over time, the notion of sin has eroded. I remember reading a provocative book by Karl Menninger, one of the founders of the famous Menninger clinic, titled "Whatever Became of Sin?" As I recall, he suggested that sin implies a shared belief about the nature of community – agreement on a common set of beliefs and values.

Today that has largely disappeared from our modern society. Instead, we substitute laws and haul each other into court – or shoot first if we are young and violent – or we simply leave the place where our feelings get hurt, where we feel overlooked or disrespected. There is no common consensus about the gods we worship or the core values we want to keep. Individualism has become the highest value. In fact, if you listen to the current political debates, it would be hard to identify a core of shared values. We can't even agree on the sanctity of life itself.

An understanding of sin, and therefore an understanding of forgiveness, depends upon trusting someone or something beyond ourselves. I believe that's what Jesus meant when he said "where two or three gather in my name, I will be there with them."

When we recognize a greater call, a deeper value in our life together, we can recognize sin – and practice forgiveness. Guilt doesn't have to be a lifetime burden. Shame isn't a lifetime sentence of fear and doubt about our right to be. Oddly enough, sin and forgiveness go together, and commitment seems to be the key.

3. Commitment...and recommitment

More than sixty years ago, Gordon and Mary Cosby founded Church of the Saviour on the premise that ordinary people were capable of making a deep and costly commitment to Jesus Christ, knowing (as the Jewish people did in Jesus' day), that God's covenant is greater than any sin. For the Cosbys, the call to commitment was a personal response to God's creative love.

From the very beginning of Church of the Saviour, the School of Christian Living was a place where everyone could be equipped with language and experience to think theologically about their life together and their ministries in the world. It was a place where people could experience the reality of a committed community – if only for a short time. Every year, Gordon asked all members to examine their commitment in order to keep it fresh and intentional. The season of Recommitment (which our bulletin highlights) began there, on the third Sunday of October, in 1947.

When Seekers formed out of CoS in 1976, we adopted the practice of yearly recommitment. And our School of Christian Living continues to be a place where each of us can learn more about living within a culture of commitment here at Seekers,

even though our larger culture tells us all the time that we are in this life alone—that success depends upon winning whatever "game" we are engaged in, and that we'd better not admit to any faults or weaknesses or somebody will take advantage of us. Individualism, entitlement and talk about "my rights" undercuts our sense of connection and common good.

As I pondered the meaning of the scriptures assigned for this week, and wondered about Seekers being a small body of people committed to following Jesus and learning to love one another, it occurred to me that we also have our version of those ancient monastic vows – to poverty, chastity and obedience. If you look at the membership statement on the inside of your bulletin cover, I believe we can summarize our commitment to three slightly different vows – to **generosity, faithfulness** and **surrender** of our atomistic aloneness.

At Seekers, we do not pretend to be a monastic community. But our membership commitment is strong and clear as a standard against which to recognize sin. Then, when we fall short (as we surely will), we have made a commitment to stay engaged. When our feelings get hurt, or we feel shunned or marginalized, to ask ourselves whether it is God's way of getting our attention or whether it is truly a sin that needs to be addressed as Matthew suggests – by direct confrontation, by asking a third party along as a witness, and then by sharing your grievance with the whole church.

Commitment, and recommitment, create a community in which our souls can grow and thrive.

Last night, Garrison Keillor made an interesting remark about the folksinger, Helen Schneyer. He said, "She didn't believe in Jesus, but she loved him."

That could be said of our membership statement as well. It is not a trinitarian statement of belief. It is, instead, a pledge to put the life and ministry of Jesus into practice. To

love him in action.

And recommitment as a member of Seekers is an expression of your intention to turn your face toward Jesus along with others in this community, particularly toward the "two or three" that God has brought close to you for your instruction.

May God bless each of us during this season of recommitment, as we wrestle with the idols and false gods that distract us from the soulwork that is ours to do.

Amen.