

# “The ‘Legs’ of Faith” by Kate Cudlipp

Sermon by Kate Cudlipp

March 19, 2006

## The “Legs” of Faith

Many members of Seekers Church spent Friday night and Saturday morning at a retreat that focused on how this church is and is not creating the kind of community that embodies Christ’s good news to the world.

While we did not specifically refer to it, I believe our work on the retreat was informed by the following insight:

“We understand the Christian Church as the gathering of those who are committed to Christ and to one another in the living of a common life. We are following One who says, ‘You must set new norms for life so that people can see what life can be. Your primary vocation is to enter into covenant relationships with others who have also met this Christ – to be that new society into which others can be drawn.’” This was the reflection paragraph for last fall’s Recommitment liturgy and was drawn from Elizabeth O’Connor’s book, *Call to Commitment*.

Our liturgical theme for this Lenten season is “Re-Viewing the Covenant.” So what is the nature of the “covenant relationship” we have with others in this Christian community?

A booklet that was circulated in 1965 by the [Church of the Saviour](#), the “parent” of Seekers Church, contained the following statement: “From the earliest days of the church a core assumption has been that the greatest impact on the world comes about by small, committed and disciplined communities of people focused on outward mission, inward transformation, and loving, accountable community.”

When Seekers Church formed in 1976, it embraced the three “legs” of a Christian life: the inward journey, supported by daily spiritual practices; the outward journey of mission in the world; and a community of committed people who deepen their lives of faith together and hold each other accountable.

Our lectionary scriptures for today together give us a good biblical base for our “three-legged stool” of faith. Listen to the psalmist’s voice in the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm:

*Your law, Adonai, is perfect;*

*It refreshes the soul.*

*Your rule is to be trusted;*

*it gives wisdom to the naïve.*

*Your purposes O God, are right;*

*they gladden the heart.*

*Your command is clear;*

*it gives light to the eyes.*

*Your decrees are steadfast,*

*and all of them just.*

*They are more precious than gold,*

*than the purest of gold*

*And sweeter than honey,*

*than honey fresh from the comb.*

*In them your faithful people find instruction;*

*there is great reward in keeping them.*

*But who can detect one's own failings?*

*Forgive the misdeeds I don't even know about!*

*Keep your faithful one from presumption as well,*

*so that my faults never control me.*

*Then I will be blameless*

*and innocent of a grave error.*

*May the words of my mouth*

*and the thoughts of my heart*

*be pleasing in your sight, Adonai,*

*my rock and my redeemer!*

Isn't this passionate proclamation clearly the fruit of the psalmist's inner journey to a profoundly trusting relationship with God? Without an intentional inner journey, how would one know that there is a "rock and a redeemer"?

When we look at the first letter to the Corinthians, we see

Paul's certainty that community is a necessity if one is to have any hope of being faithful to Christ: "For while the Jews call for miracles and the Greeks look for wisdom, here we are preaching a Messiah nailed to a cross. To the Jews this is an obstacle they cannot get over, and to the Greeks it is madness-but to those who have been called, whether they are Jews or Greeks, Christ is the power and wisdom of God." (1Cor. 1: 22-24)

The "Jews and the Greeks" were the world in which the early Christians lived. Without a community, what chance would an individual have had to stand with Christ against the overwhelming weight of "prevailing wisdom"?

In the lesson from the Gospel of John, we see the outward journey writ large: "Making a whip out of cords, Jesus drove them all out of the Temple-even the cattle and sheep-and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, scattering the coins. Then he faced the pigeon-sellers: 'Take all this out of here! Stop turning God's house into a market!'" Without an outward journey, what difference does it make to the world that an individual or a community says it is committed to Christ?

Therefore, we have the three legs of faith: inner journey, community, outer journey.

At the Seekers Church retreat this weekend, we focused on the community "leg" of the faith "stool." We shared the ways that Seekers Church has been life giving to us, and we pray, to the wider world.

We also acknowledged and confessed the many ways we have hurt each other-have failed to see others as “precious children of God.” We recognized that our structures for inviting newer members into the heart of our life together are inadequate, and we saw that too often we do not support and may even discourage new initiatives and leadership within the community.

We ended the retreat with a commitment to grow in our trust of God, ourselves, and each other, and we agreed to continue to work with our excellent outside facilitator, Linnea Nilsen Capshaw, to develop next steps in reviewing and remembering our covenant with God and each other.

Building up the community is critical to following Christ. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in their book, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, describe true Christian communities as signs of what God intends for all creation. They say that the true church “knows that its most credible form of witness (and the most ‘effective’ thing it can do for the world) is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith, a place where God is forming a family out of strangers.”

Therefore, this hard work of learning how to welcome the stranger and love one another-*really* love one another-is worth it not only for ourselves but also for its potential to change the world.

However, being a faithful community, on its own, will not

change the world, and that is why there is the third leg to the life of faith: the outward journey. At this moment in my life, the outward journey clamors for attention from my spirit.

Six of us who are in the Gospel of Mark class in the School of Christian Living went to hear Marcus Borg last Tuesday. He talked about his and John Dominic Crossan's book, *The Last Week*, a commentary on the story of Holy Week in the Gospel of Mark.

In his lecture, he described the two processions that entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: the procession that entered from the east, led by Jesus on a donkey, and the Roman procession, led by Pontius Pilate, which entered the city from the west. The Romans were coming to Jerusalem from their posh digs in a city on the Mediterranean coast, to bolster the troops already there in case of trouble during the Passover celebration.

The Roman procession was a real show of power: foot soldiers, cavalry, banners, drums, leather armor. The Jesus procession was a ragtag crowd of peasants, waving palms and throwing their cloaks on the road in front of their Messiah.

Borg described the Roman empire-the domination system of that time-where 1-2% of the population controlled 50-60% of the means of production and where those in power claimed that their authority was "the will of God."

At the end of his talk, Borg said that the events of Holy Week

challenge Christians to reflect on which of the two processions-the Jesus procession or the imperial procession-we are in as individuals, as congregations, and as a nation. He also suggested that while the question evangelicals ask, "Have you accepted Jesus as your *personal* Lord and Savior?" is important, so is a second question: "Have you accepted Jesus as your *political* Lord and Savior?"

Sitting in that audience I couldn't escape the vague distress I feel each day as I read the newspaper, see the messages that come across my computer screen, and hear from my partner, Carole, what is happening in the United States Senate. I have begun to feel that I live in a privileged enclave that is trying to fortify itself against assaults from without and within with massive shows of force and claims of moral rightness.

I live in this enclave, this "new" Jerusalem. Which procession am I in?

I was a little surprised to find myself choosing to be arrested last December in the organized protest of a national budget that cut taxes for the wealthy and support for those in need. I did not believe that arrest would change the course of events, but it was one small opportunity to get off the sidelines where I perennially sit and say "No!" to something wrong.

I am not an activist, as those of you who know me can testify. Instead, I pray that others will somehow make things different. I lament the absence of leaders to take us in a new

and better direction. The political scene is so rife with self-interest and cynicism that I see little hope in elections.

What is an aspiring follower of Christ to do?

That is my question for us this morning. I do not have the answer. I know that part of the answer is being the kind of community that lives a different way, being that “new society into which others can be drawn,” as Elizabeth O’Connor puts it.

I also believe that, as Letty Russell said in her book, *Church in the Round*, “The measure of the adequacy of the life of the church is how it is connected to those on the margin.”

Seekers Church is connected to those on the margins in many ways. However, just as we recognize we have further to go to be that “new society” internally, we must also recognize we have much more to do to throw our lot in with those in the Jesus procession. Speaking for myself, I confess that I do not yet understand at my core that my well-being is inextricably tied into the well-being of “the least of these.” I can “do for,” but I am not yet willing to “join with.” I have a long way to go. Will you travel with me?

Inner journey, community, outer journey-all are essential to a life in Christ.



Will you take a moment to look at the cross in front of you, breathe in, breathe out and re-view your unique covenant with God?

Will you look around you at each other and at our altar, with its tokens of the members of this community, giving thanks for the companions on your journey and re-viewing your covenant to help make this community part of that "new society into which others may be drawn"?

Finally, will you look out the windows of this sanctuary, reflect on what you know is going on in our world, and re-view your covenant to witness to the current reality of, and future possibility for, the reign of justice and love in all creation?

May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and our actions in the world be pleasing in your sight, oh God, our rock and our redeemer.