

Time to go Dancing by Deborah SokoLove

Those of you who are Stewards and were present at last week's meeting know that I wasn't there. I didn't have a good excuse. I wasn't ill. I wasn't out of town. I didn't have a work-related event. I didn't have a family emergency. I was just, plain tired. Not so much physically tired, but tired of meetings, tired of obligations, tired of being around people, tired of doing what other people thought I should do, or even what I thought God thought I should do. In the previous week, since coming home from Silent Retreat, I had worked late on Monday night, been at School of Christian Living on Tuesday night, Celebration Circle on Wednesday night, and got to a Time and Space meeting late on Thursday after teaching my own class and then giving an extra lecture in another instructor's class. Then, on Friday, I went to hang a show of my own work at Middleton United Methodist Church, out past Frederick, and spent the evening working on a PowerPoint presentation about my art and life; on Saturday, I was here again, for a blessed hour of silence and then several hours of good, but intense discussion about commitment with the other members of CC; and on Sunday morning, back out to Middleton to give an artist's talk after attending their 11:00 worship service. Finally on my way home at 4:30 that afternoon, I knew that, while I technically could get to the Steward's meeting on time, being there would not be good news for me, and probably not for anyone else, either. Instead, Glen and I took some time to do a project together that we had been wanting to get to, but had not had time for because all of our other commitments. In that unplanned time, we talked and laughed and reconnected with a joy and freedom that I would not have felt if I had gone to that meeting.



It has occurred to me that there is some inconsistency between my actions last Sunday evening and my preaching about commitment today. After all, just last Saturday, I had signed the membership book, putting in writing my intention to recommit for another year of being a Steward, which includes regular attendance at Steward's meetings.

But one of the things we commit to is joy. When we say our vows, we say (among other things), "I will. . . [r]espond joyfully with my life, as the grace of God gives me freedom." And the relationship between joy and commitment is what I want to talk about this morning.

As I said, I attended church at Middleton last week, so I didn't hear Dave Lloyd preach on "[Recommitting to be the Body of Christ](#)," but I did read what he wrote on the web. In his sermon, he spoke of oaths and vows, and of God's us calling to transform the world and the church. He said,

Notice that this call isn't about pursuing one's own purposes. It's not about "following your bliss" in our culture's usual understanding. God may be calling me to a mission I don't particularly want to do or believe that I am equipped to do. (See the Book of Jonah.) I am perfectly willing to commit to be God's co-creator in bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth if I get to choose what tasks are involved, and at what cost. But if it is God who is choosing the mission for me, especially if it is something that doesn't appeal to me, and if it is God who sets the cost of that mission, I should be giving long and careful thought before I vow, "Yes, God, I am your servant. Send me.

Like Dave, I find the opportunity to renew my pledge to God and to this church each October to be a special and holy time.

One of the things that drew me to Church of the Saviour is the sense of vocation and deep, faithful dedication embodied in the original Commitment Statement, which I saw posted at Potter's House one day, long before I knew anything about Church of the Saviour or the connection between it and Potter's House. The promises embodied in that statement reminded me of the life vows taken by nuns and friars, binding them to a life of prayer and doing the work of God. It was thrilling to think that ordinary members of a church, living ordinary lives, might make such promises. Although the words we will say next week are different, I still understand them to bind me to a life of regular spiritual practice, including accountability to God and to others for how I live (or fail to live) in accordance with God's will.

But what does it mean to live in accordance with God's will? How do we know when we are helping to bring about God's realm? What is, as the saying goes, God's wonderful plan for your life?

In today's lectionary passage from the Hebrew Scriptures, we heard the beginning of Jeremiah's letter from Jerusalem, where he still remained, to the people who had been exiled from their homeland. In it, he puts forth not his own ideas, but the very command of God to those who have been taken to Babylon: build houses, plant gardens, marry, have children and grandchildren, and seek the welfare of the city in which you find yourself, for in its welfare, you will find your own. In other words, you are going to be there for a long, long time, so make the best of it.

Actually, I think that God, through Jeremiah, is saying more than that. "Making the best of it" implies a certain hopeless resignation, a tone of "well, if this is how it has to be,

then this is how it has to be," a joyless acquiescence to the inevitable. It seems to me that God was calling the people not to joyless acquiescence, but to full and joyful lives. In telling them pray on behalf of the place where they found themselves in exile, Jeremiah was assuring them that God had not been left behind in Jerusalem, but rather had gone with them to Babylon. By telling them to seek the welfare of this alien city, God was calling them to see themselves as connected to it, the goodness of their lives integrally related to the goodness of the lives of the people around them. If the houses that they built were ugly, their gardens tangled plots of weeds, their marriages full of rancor, and their children and grandchildren sullen and angry, then neither they nor the city would thrive. If they fed themselves the poison of rebellion and regret, both they and the city would suffer. If they maintained a dogged commitment to Jerusalem, rather than opening themselves to the possibilities of the new place, nothing good would come of it. On the other hand, if—despite their sadness about the homes and lives they had left behind—they took pleasure in their houses and gardens, celebrated their weddings with delight, and greeted the birth of children with hope and joy, and prayed that everyone else would have similar opportunities for joy, both they and the city would not only prosper, but begin to resemble the City of God.

We, too, are called to seek the welfare of the city, to help bring about the City of God in whatever place we find ourselves. By city, of course, I do not mean just Washington, DC, but rather the entire creation, with which we are integrally connected. We are called to act with fairness and compassion in all our dealings and to encourage these qualities in all with whom we come into contact; to work towards the end of war and violence, in our private lives and in the public sphere; and to worship God and bear witness to God's presence in the world and in all of our relationships.

These are generalities, of course. Each of us is called to live them out in individual ways, according to the gifts and opportunities and challenges that God gives us; according to the way that we have heard God's word for our lives; according to God's specific call on each of our lives. And it seems to me that God wants more than joyless acquiescence as we live them out. God wants us to find joy in our commitments, and if we cannot, then perhaps we have misunderstood God's call. If our task is to help to bring about the City of God, which is characterized by peace and love and joy, I can't believe that we are to do it through suffering.

Notice, I didn't say "pain." Like a number of other folks here, I have been participating in Jesse's class on The Sacred Circle of Life and Death. More than once, Jesse has made the point that, in life, pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. In other words, as long as we live in physical bodies, we are subject to pain. We hit our fingers with hammers, we stub our toes, we get toothache or arthritis or sciatica or cancer. Loved ones withdraw their love or leave us by dying; we lose our jobs; our new cars get dinged; we get beaten up and robbed; we are subject to death. All around us, people live with pain, and if we are at all sensitive, their pain spills over and becomes our own. We can't change any of that. Pain is an inevitable part of being alive.

Suffering, however, is something else. Suffering is what twists our minds, hardens our hearts, and keeps us from experiencing the love of God, of knowing that God is with us even in the pain. Suffering is something that we do with our pain, a way of interpreting pain as punishment, as evil, as beyond bearing. Suffering is what we inflict on others, as a way to dull our own pain. Suffering is gritting our teeth, getting the job done, keeping our commitment, even when it doesn't bring us any joy at all, and isn't likely to help anyone else, either. Suffering makes us angry, bitter, so wrapped up in ourselves that we become incapable of

compassion. Suffering is the refusal of comfort, the refusal of love, the refusal of joy, which, if we open ourselves to it, can come to us even in the midst of pain.

But how can we be joyful in a world that is so full of pain and need? In a recent contribution to the Church of the Saviour blog, Inward/Outward, Kayla McClurg asks just this question. She notes that in her growing sense of heavy responsibility towards all the troubles of the world, she began to lose any sense of joy or wonder. Instead of being God's joyful hands and feet in the world, she became a slave of anxiety. You may have read the whole piece, but her opening words bear repeating:

I'm not sure when the full and complete responsibility for the world's welfare transferred from God to me—it happened so gradually. I just thought my growing heaviness of spirit was the natural progress of things—that I, like any caring and conscientious adult, had to take on more and more responsibility for myself and others and become more and more helpful to God. You know, God's hands and feet in the world. I don't recall signing on for anything more than this, but awhile back I began to notice a creeping anxiety winding its way through my life. Somewhere, somehow, I seemed to have moved from being God's increasingly responsible helper to being, well, God.

These things have a way of sneaking up on you. And before you know it, you're in charge of everything. ["Worry and Wonder," October 6, 2007]

Trapped in a life of anxiety and over-commitment, Kayla could not see how her fragile self could contribute to God's plan. While hard work can be exhilarating, sometimes it is defeating and debilitating. Asking whether her poor performance is a reflection on God, she continues,

Anxiety imprisons me in the trap of taking myself too

seriously, seeing only through the lens of my own beggarly existence. Worry blocks me from noticing God's special fondness for mystery and the weaving of wonder in and through the pain, in slow languid strokes.

Kayla tells us that she rediscovered a sense of proportion by remembering the vastness of the ocean or the "yawning bright night sky." Contemplating the immensity of creation, she can, even in her pain and weariness, open herself to grace and carry it back into the tasks to which God has called her.

Of course, it is relatively easy for me, with all my advantages and privilege, to say that suffering is optional, that I am called to joy, that I can simply follow Kayla's lead and let seashores and starlight lead me back to joy. While I carry my own physical and emotional scars from a complicated life, I have access to good doctors and therapists, I can go to retreats and classes, I can make use of self-help books and other resources, I have the support of a loving and understanding community. So I do not want to minimize the very real pain of anyone who has been abused or oppressed or has lost loved ones and livelihoods to war, to flood, to famine, or other disasters. It is clear to me that no one chooses suffering consciously, and I do not want in any way even to seem to blaming the victims who suffer their entire lives from the wounds that have been inflicted upon them. The pain of all these things is real, the distress is very great.

This is where grace comes in. We have all heard of people—or perhaps even known them—who live with unremitting pain, but somehow manage to spread hope and joy to all around them. I think, for instance, of Miz Shirley, in Pearlington, Mississippi. Although doctors misdiagnosed an infection for so long that she nearly lost her leg and she still walks with a cane; although her house was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina and she still is living in a cramped trailer two years later; although her husband is away for long periods because there is

no work for him in Pearlinton, she continually thanks God for her many blessings, and devotes her life to helping others get the financial assistance that they need to rebuild their own lives. Where another person would be bitter, she is grateful. Miz Shirley, with none of my advantages of education, money, or privilege, teaches me that even in extreme situations, pain is inevitable, but—by the grace of God—suffering is optional. Like Miz Shirley, I am only able to respond joyfully with my life as the grace of God gives me freedom.

With God's grace, I can come to live in joy, even as my pain continues unabated. But sometimes, I reject that grace, and not only I, but those around me, suffer from that rejection. In her little book, *Art and Soul*, the painter Audrey Flack writes,

Art can be: joyous, exciting, life-enhancing, fun-packed, insight-provoking, exalting.

Art can be: terrifying, frenetic, devastating, deadening, life-draining, mean-spirited, illusion-shattering.

When art is mostly all of the first category, it means the go-ahead signal is on. When art is mainly of the second category, it's time to go dancing.[p. 61]

For a long time, I kept those words over the table in my studio, reminding me to give myself to my work, but also to take a break when my back was threatening to go into spasm, or my hand could no longer control the paintbrush, or my family was beginning to wonder if I ever would have time for a conversation, let alone dinner. It was a reminder that my commitment to art could twist my soul as well as my body, poison my relationships, and make the world an uglier, harder place regardless of any high-minded ideas about the goodness of art. When that happens, it is time to leave the studio, and do something that will allow me to rediscover my joy in art, in life, in the world. It is that joy—not my commitment to

art—that will make the world a better place.

It seems to me that what Flack says about art can just as easily be said about any of our commitments, even (or especially) our commitment to a life of faith. Like art, commitment can be joyous, exciting, life-enhancing, fun-packed, insight-provoking, exalting. Commitment can also can be terrifying, frenetic, devastating, deadening, life-draining, mean-spirited, illusion-shattering.

When commitment is mostly in the first category, our burden is light, we feel we can work tirelessly, and others are eager to join us in building houses and planting gardens in the City of God. When commitment is mainly of the second category, it might be time to examine our lives, to see if we are hearing God's call as God intends for us. Or maybe it is just time to go dancing, to accept the grace that God freely offers to us, so that we can come back refreshed and renewed. Then, filled with the joy that passes human understanding, we can continue to dance our way through the hard work and, yes, the pain, that is an inevitable part of our life on earth.

Next Sunday, I will commit to respond joyfully with my life to seeking the welfare of the city in whatever way is given to me to do so, for joy is the hallmark of the City of God. Since I can only do that with God's grace, I guess that, every now and then, it will be time to go dancing!