

October 26, 2003  
Season after Pentecost  
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## Taste and See

Psalm 34      *O taste and see that the Lord is good;  
happy are those who take refuge in God.*

Verse 8 of Psalm 34 has this compelling call: “O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God.” The whole psalm seems to orbit around those words, like the planets around the sun. Just before that verse, the psalmist says: “Look to God, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.” All living things turn to the sun for their very life, including us human beings. Psalm 34 is a call to taste and see and live in the radiant goodness of God. That’s what we’re made for. That’s who we really are. That’s how we awaken to life.

At the close of our recent silent retreat, we shared over lunch out of our time of silence. Curtis Harper shared that he had been sitting in one of the chairs on the lawn and felt a chill as the morning shade came over him. He had not brought his jacket, so he moved more and more toward the sun for warmth. Just like the flower, he said, that turns to the sun. And the psalmist says that we become radiant, we come alive, we become truly ourselves, when we turn toward God.

“O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God.” Another translation is this: “Find out for yourself that God is good.” Find out for yourself about God. Make faith truly your own, rooted in your own experience, your own life, and your relationship with God and the world. We have to do this ourselves. We can’t borrow the life of faith. Having persons who inspire us is good, but we cannot live off of their faith. The life of faith seeks to be born uniquely in each of us. The psalmist calls us to discover for ourselves that God is good, and is confident that if we venture out in that direction, we will find the truth of it.

The psalmist is not calling us to a “religious” life but to life as true human beings, as God made us to be. Tasting and seeing God’s goodness can be understood quite literally. Tasting our food, our drink. Letting our senses open up to receive what the creation offers, mediating to us God’s blessings, God’s goodness. Seeing the wonder of everything around us, and the wonder of each person. This is not seeing the world through “rose-colored glasses.” It is seeing the world as it really is—God’s good creation. The psalmist wants us to wake up to our senses, physical and spiritual.

Matthew Fox, in his very important book Original Blessing, reminds us that the theme of all scripture is not “original sin” but “original blessing.” Life is blessed by God. We are blessed by God. That is our true identity. Humility is central to this life of blessing. But humility doesn’t mean what the “original sin” mindset thinks—that we need to hate ourselves, deny our bodies and senses, and carry on some kind of warfare against our physical being. Humility is rooted in the word *humus*, meaning “of the earth.” “The opposite of arrogance,” says Fox, “is indeed humility—but not the decadent humility of denying one’s gifts and uniqueness. Rather, the healthy humility of remaining true and close to the earth and the things of the earth.” (Fox, p. 61) Taste and see that God is good! Find out for yourself that God is good!

How do we find out for ourselves, how do we taste and see that God is good? By doing our own spiritual work. This is why the Church of the Covenant offers a specific structure for membership. It is not to make things harder for people. It is to provide a very old and proven approach to Christian life—the life of spiritual practice. The disciplines of prayer, worship, stewardship, loving relationships, and mission are not laws to be obeyed or rungs on a ladder of spiritual achievement. These are minimal spiritual practices that enable us to find out for ourselves, in our own lives, God’s reality and goodness. They are the means by which we can turn our lives toward the sun of God’s goodness, by which we can awaken our physical and spiritual senses to taste and see God’s goodness. A spiritually disciplined life is simply a concrete way we respond to the psalmist’s invitation to taste and see God’s goodness, an invitation echoed in Christ’s call to follow him into new life.

When we begin to give time each day to quietness, inner listening, prayer, reading and reflecting on scripture or other spiritual writings, writing in our journals the thoughts, experiences, and feelings that are part of our lives, then we begin to feel ourselves turning toward the sun, awakening to God’s graciousness and love. When we begin to practice financial giving, working toward a tithe of all that God has given us, we begin to find a joyful generosity awakening in us. We start to become stewards of our whole life—time, relationships, energy, materiality. When we commit to regular worship with our community of faith and to loving relationships, we grow beyond our own needs, our own demands for how life should be, and become part of a community of God’s love known in Christ. When we move out in that particular mission or ministry to which we feel called and for which we are gifted, touching the world and other people’s lives with compassion, then we find God leading us step by step, providing what we need to keep moving toward the fulfillment of that call, that vision.

When we began to respond to God’s call to establish the Festival Center as a community center in the neighborhood of the Western Hotel, we didn’t know that we would find God’s goodness in a young boy named Shvon. He showed up one day while we were working and helped Ron Elliott clean up the garden. He’s a musician and an artist, and has taken a special interest in the Festival Center. And we didn’t know that the Center would become a place where a group of aspiring contractors from the inner city would begin to meet to explore becoming a cooperative so that they can help each other improve their working situations. Yes, it’s been a lot of hard work and a good bit of anxiousness, and there’s more to come. But when we follow God’s call and vision, when we move out to discover for ourselves God’s goodness, we surely do find it and most often in ways we never expected.

But what about this business of “taking refuge in God?” The psalmist says that those who take refuge in God are happy. We tend to be super-serious Christians, always sensitive to the suffering of the world, taking on more and more responsibility for fixing the world or others’ lives. Happiness is not something we tend to see as befitting the serious life of discipleship. And the idea of taking refuge sounds a whole lot to us like escapism and withdrawing from life.

I believe that unless we can find this happiness the psalmist is talking about, unless we learn to take refuge in God, we do little good for the world, other people, or ourselves. If we cannot root ourselves in God’s goodness, if we cannot touch the joy that comes from God’s love, then we will be crushed by the grim realities of life, by the enormity of violence, greed, or indifference we try to confront. We will only become hopeless and obsessed people who only talk about trusting God.

Jesus talked about happiness. The Beatitudes can be translated, “Happy are the poor in spirit...Happy are those who mourn...Happy are the meek...” and so forth. Being blessed and being happy is the same thing. It is the inward condition and spirit of those who are tasting and seeing the goodness of God, those who are taking refuge in God. As we find out for ourselves that God is good, as our sense of God’s presence and reality grows fuller and fuller, we begin to live with hope, with peace, and with a sustained compassion. This is the happiness the psalmist and Jesus were talking about.

This is what it means to take refuge in God. It sounds like hiding out from life. But it isn’t. Taking refuge in God means finding our security in God alone. It means that when we are so over-extended or overwhelmed, when we are so afraid of failure or that our efforts will come to nothing, when we feel that we are “losing ourselves,” we can go back to God and our relationship with God. We can re-enter the sheltering love of God that enfolds, embraces, heals us. Yes, it may be a withdrawal. When I first began taking regular times of retreat, I realized that it is perfectly fine to go away from everything and regain our inner peace and the healing of our spirits. As soon as I would arrive at the Sisters of Loretto, the place of retreat closest to my soul, I could feel the relief in my soul. I could begin to see how out of focus my life had become, how I had stopped tasting and seeing God’s goodness. Retreat is a time for re-turning to the sun of God’s goodness by taking refuge in God. It can be an hour, a day, or a week. It doesn’t matter when, where or how long. What matters is that we take refuge in God so that we touch again who we really are, God’s beloved daughters and sons living in God’s good creation.

We also take refuge in God in worship together and in our life as a community of faith. When we are with others—children, young people, and adults—who are practicing prayer and seeking in their lives to follow Christ, then we are surrounded by a fellowship of encouragement. Here we must look carefully at what we call in this church “accountability.” This means that not only do we invite persons to take on spiritual disciplines or practices that help them turn toward God, root their lives in God, but we also need to help each other with those practices and be open to receiving such help when we need it. But this can be misunderstood and not practiced the right way. Accountability is not about pulling each other up and taking one another to task for shortcomings. It is about encouragement and support. If we interpret accountability as “checking up on one another” or making judgments about another’s efforts, then we create an atmosphere of heaviness and perfectionism. No. We hold one another accountable by encouraging each other, by listening sympathetically, by sharing honestly our own struggles to work with spiritual disciplines. The community of faith is a community that itself is taking refuge in God through prayer and mission. The very fact that we are all and each working on this in our own ways is the encouragement we need. What is the best way to create an atmosphere of accountability, in which every person grows in spiritual depth and maturity? It is by each of us working with our own spiritual lives to the best of our ability—honestly, humbly, sincerely, but joyfully. When I swim at the YMCA, my swimming is much better, smoother, more enjoyable, when there is someone swimming in the lane next to me. This is not competition; it is community of practice. If I am flagging in my daily time of prayer, study, and centering, I am helped most by someone in whom I see this practice bearing fruit. The best way to encourage others is to work honestly and sincerely with our own life of faith in a community of practice.

More than anything else, however, the community of faith is a refuge because of the love that is present in it, the very love of Christ. And this love is always merciful,

compassionate, and forgiving. In this community I experience the unconditional love that is at the heart of the universe and my own life—God’s own steadfast love and mercy. It is in this goodness of God that I can take refuge, in a community that keeps that love, embodied in Christ himself, at the center of its consciousness and its life.

Taste and see that God is good. Find out for yourself. Work each day with those practices that can awaken your physical and spiritual senses to God.

Find the deep happiness that comes from taking refuge in God, from really trusting God and rooting your life in God. Enter into and help create the community of Christ, through which all can take refuge in God.

If we are on this path, this journey, then we will be persons and a community who make a real difference in the world.