

October 3, 2004/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

The Faith of a Servant Community

Psalm 90 *Teach us to order our days rightly,
that we may enter the gate of wisdom.* [New English Bible]

2 Timothy 1:1-7 *...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice,
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

Luke 17:5-10 *So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do,
say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have
done.'*

It must seem strange for those of you visiting today to be here for such a celebration and not have Bev Cosby around, at least in the flesh. Be assured that the strangeness has been felt by this community of faith as it has struggled since Bev's death to move faithfully on and reaffirm its identity. Bev's presence in many ways defined the Church of the Covenant.

However, we remember that there are so many who have embodied the vision of Christian faith held by the Church of the Covenant. To miss Bev's presence is most understandable. But our broader purpose is to celebrate every life that has been part of this community's life and ministry. Having said that, we are here most of all to give thanks for what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do through this community and all everywhere who live the life of faith and trust, responding to the needs of the world.

Let us walk through our two readings for this morning and see what they might say to us about this life of faith on this anniversary day.

From Inherited to Lived Faith

Paul urges Timothy to rekindle the gift of faith and ministry that was instilled in him through Paul's ordination blessing. The laying on of hands empowers persons to live boldly and fully the love of God that we know in Christ. We celebrate fifty years of working with the vision that every person is called to and can indeed live that kind of life. This community has endeavored to be an "ordaining," laying-on-of-hands kind of community, empowering persons to follow the dreams and visions God puts in their hearts.

Timothy inherited the faith through his grandmother and mother. The faith we inherit through family or culture might be where we start, but it is not where we are to end up. It has to be rekindled. It has to be made our own. It has to be TODAY. It cannot be yesterday. It cannot be a second-hand or borrowed faith. It strives to be incarnated in each unique life. The kind of faith Paul is talking about is our coming alive in the present moment as persons belonging more and more to God in Christ.

Today we gratefully remember what we have received from the past. But memory is a mixed blessing. It can help us hold onto what is true and life giving, or it can wilt into nostalgia, a longing for and hanging onto the past. Today we

receive a legacy of faith from the past five decades. It is the vision of the life of faith as a dynamic engagement of our lives with the living God and the following of God's callings to live in ways that serve life. It is the understanding that faith means the LIFE OF FAITH, the life of discipleship to the living Christ, following him through the use of our unique gifts to touch the life of the world. This cannot be a borrowed or inherited faith. It seeks to be lived out in the present. The past reminds us who we are and are called to be. But the present is where we are to live and discover God's call sounding in our hearts.

Ordering Our Days: The Practice of Faith

Paul then tells Timothy that when he was ordained, he did not receive a timid or cowardly spirit. He received a powerful spirit, a loving spirit, a spirit of self-discipline. That is the spirit the Church of the Covenant has tried to receive and live by through the years. A spirit of power—God working in and through our lives in transforming ways as we open up our lives more and more to the will and movement of God. It is a spirit of love, the very nature of God—steadfast, redemptive, reconciling.

But all of this doesn't happen without self-discipline, without practice, without giving daily attention to this kind of life. The spiritual disciplines that have been at the core of membership in the Church of the Covenant are a means of keeping us rooted and grounded in God's grace and transforming love. They are not ends in themselves. They are not laws or regulations or marks of spiritual achievement. In the New English Bible, Psalm 90 reads this way: "Teach us to order our days rightly, that we may enter the gate of wisdom." Spiritual practices, or disciplines, are the ways we order our days, the ways we cherish, pay attention to, and live fully each moment and day as gifts from God, opportunities to express God's love in the world. This is the way we "number our days," counting each day as sacred in its blessings and opportunities for loving. Spiritual disciplines are, as Zen Buddhism would put it, the raft that takes us to the shore. We must not mistake the raft for the shore, the disciplines for the life of joy and self-abandon toward which they guide us.

Today is a day to rekindle this gift that is in us—faith as a life wholly given to God, opening itself more and more to the powerful love of God's spirit through the practices that keep us centered, focused, and attentive.

Faith: Not How Much but What Kind

The gospel reading from Luke takes us further into the meaning of faith as the life of faith. Jesus has just told the disciples that they will be held accountable for causing anyone to stumble in the path of life and faith. Then he tells them that they must forgive continually and forever everyone who offends them, who sins against them. You can almost hear the disciples gulp: How in the world are we going to do all that? In "Jaws," one of my all time favorite movies, Sheriff Brody sees the giant shark for the first time, in shock backs into the boat's cabin and says to Captain Quint: "We're going to need a bigger boat." The disciples are thinking: We're going to need a boatload of faith to do all of this. But Jesus calms them down. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could do things that seem impossible." It is important to know that in Greek, the word "if" has two uses. It can mean a situation that does not exist—"If I were a rich man..." as Teviah sings in

“Fiddler on the Roof.” Or it can mean a situation that does exist: “If you are an honest person (which I know you are) you would do this or that.” It is the second sense of “if” that is used here. “If you had faith (which I know you do) the size of a mustard seed....” It has the meaning of “since you have at least a little faith.” The kind of faith Jesus is talking about has nothing to do with amounts. It has to do with trusting God and acting on that trust. A little faith is as powerful as a whole bunch.

At the Festival Center children’s program a week ago, we were making play dough. Josh Doswell, one of the children, placed a tiny drop of food coloring in the mixture he had put together. In no time the tiny dot of red had spread throughout the dough. That’s what Jesus is talking about. Faith is not about believing certain things about Jesus or God or anything else. Faith is trusting God and putting that trust into action. And it doesn’t matter how much you think you’ve got or where you start. If it’s giving 15 minutes each day to silence and prayer and reading scripture, that’s where you start. If it’s taking one little step toward living out that dream you think maybe God has put into your heart, that vision and call to give in some way to life, to people, to this world, then you take that little tiny step. Then you take the next one, and the next. That’s how the kingdom comes—in us and in the world—by miniscule mustard seeds and little bits of leaven.

This is the kind of faith that has given birth to the various ministries of the Church of the Covenant. It is the faith that moves from our heads to our hearts, from “beliefs” to the ways we live in the world. The power comes from starting where we are, with whatever bit of faith we have. It comes from opening up places here and there in our lives until our whole lives become resonant to God and God’s call. The way big things happen is only by faithfulness to small things. And there is no small thing when it comes to living out our faith. One of the most important things about this church and largely the reason I came here is that in this vision of faith there is no such thing as success or failure. The only “failure,” if we can call it that, is to not take those faithful steps that lead to God and God’s kingdom, as little as they may seem to us.

Doing What We’re Supposed to Do

Then Jesus seems to change the subject. It has to do with the innermost attitude and motivation of the disciples. Jesus offers a kind of parable. The slave who comes in from laboring all day in the field does not expect to be served by the master. Instead, he serves the master his dinner and then when that’s done, the dishes washed and put away, the slave eats his meal. The story at first offends our sensitivities. We feel sorry for the slave and think maybe Jesus is being a bit hard-hearted.

While I was in seminary I worked a couple of summers for Kaye’s Uncle Sonny housing burley tobacco in central Kentucky. It was the hardest, heaviest, hottest physical work I had ever done. We started at 7:00 a.m. and finally broke for lunch at noon. We would go sit in the shade of massive old trees and be treated to sumptuous meals served up by Aunt Juanita and other women—fried chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes, pies, iced tea. Now that’s the way you ought to be treated when you work so hard!

Not so with you, my disciples, says Jesus. The servant keeps serving and when the work is done, says, “I’ve only done what I’m supposed to do.” Jesus is

saying in a dramatic way something about our relationship with him and with God. It has the nature of servanthood. And servanthood is who we are when we follow Christ. It is not something we do now and then in order to feel good about ourselves, to impress people, or to receive gratitude. Those are traps that only keep us anxious and unhappy, for we are still caught up in the self. The servant never “finishes” being servant. And the joy of the servant is found in serving. The joy of Christian life is not found in what others think of us or the achievements we rack up or anything else. It is the life itself, because it is REAL life, life that knows that only in serving do we find our true identities as human beings.

It is sometimes said that there is “something special” about the Church of the Covenant. That is probably true. But this can also be a trap. Jesus is not about our being “special” but our being who we are really made to be. He is not interested in spiritual heroes or extraordinary human beings. He just wants us to discover and live out of who God really made us to be. Loving others should not be extraordinary. Concern for justice should not be extraordinary. Speaking for peace and denouncing all violence should not be extraordinary. Forgiveness of self and others should not be extraordinary. Humbly using the gifts God has given each of us as channels of God’s spirit and power is not extraordinary. Caring for those who are lonely, poor, sick, forgotten, excluded, powerless—these are not “special” things, but what God considers ordinary for the human family.

Let me share a piece of Chinese wisdom from the fifth century BCE:
In the age when life on earth was full, no one paid any special attention to worthy persons, nor did they single out the person of ability. Rulers were simply the highest branches on the tree, and the people were like deer in the woods. They were honest and righteous without realizing that they were “doing their duty.” They loved each other and did not know that this was “love of neighbor.” They deceived no one yet they did not know that they were “persons to be trusted.” They were reliable and did not know that this was “good faith.” They lived freely together giving and taking, and did not know that they were generous. For this reason their deeds have not been narrated. They made no history. [The Way of Chuang Tzu, by Thomas Merton, p. 76]

“We have only done what we were supposed to do.” This spiritual attitude is not false humility but the recognition of our place in the whole scope of reality. It is recognizing in Christ our true humanity and the ordering of our lives so that this true self blossoms and grows in us. It is not about being spiritual heroes or trying to achieve great things. It doesn’t happen that way, but through the small steps we take toward the kind of faith that puts into practice the love of God. If we keep our focus on that, being as honest, real, and true as we can be, relying completely on God’s grace and power, then we will continue to be the Church of the Covenant. We will discover in our time that deepest of joys that comes from saying, as the New English Bible puts it, “We are servants and deserve no credit; we have only done our duty.” It is the joy of selflessness that comes from the ever-dawning reign of God in our lives, the joy the psalmist spoke of: “Satisfy us every morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad every day of our lives.”