

Taking refuge

Psalm 31:1-5 *In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.*

1 Peter 2:2-10 *...like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house....*

John 14:1-14 *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?*

To seek refuge means to look for a place...that is safe, a place we can rely on.

--Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

I want to reflect on the readings from the Psalms, the First Letter of Peter, and John's gospel. The theme is sounded in the psalm: "In you, O Lord, I seek refuge...be a rock of refuge for me." Seeking refuge in God is a major theme of the psalms. The psalmist feels hemmed in, stressed out, or under siege by enemies, either the outside or the inside kind. Life has become overwhelming and the psalmist is looking for help. The psalmist counts on God being a "place" of refuge, of safety, that our relationship with God offers us a shelter, a place of recovery, affirmation, and renewal of hope and strength.

The image of seeking refuge has become increasingly important for me. It wasn't always so. Earlier in life, I thought it meant running away from things that need to be faced. Christian faith as I saw it presented and practiced had promoted far too much running away from realities that called for deeper understanding and response—war, poverty, human sexuality, injustice, environmental destruction. There was too much emphasis on individual salvation, how we can get to heaven, and not enough on how we are to live here and now on God's earth. So I glossed over this "taking refuge" business.

My work with Zen Buddhism in more recent years has helped me see the deeper meaning of "taking refuge." There are "three jewels" of Buddhism: the Buddha—both the historical person and the living Buddha, much as we speak of the historical Jesus and the living Christ; the *dharma* or the way of truth, much as we might speak of the "Word of God"; and the *sangha* or the community that practices mindfulness and mindful living, much as we might view community of followers of Christ as it practices Christ's teachings and love. So the Buddhist says, "I take refuge in the Buddha, the one who shows me the way in this life. I take refuge in the Dharma, the way of understanding and love. I take refuge in the Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness." [The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching, Thich Nhat Hanh, p. 161] Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "To take refuge means to look for a place...that is safe, a place we can rely on." We take refuge not to escape but to become aware of life so that we live in a meaningful way. Taking refuge means touching the place within us that puts us in touch with who we really are and what life is really about.

Taking Refuge: The Inward Journey

So I began to see how important it is that we as people and a community of faith learn the value of taking refuge. We do so through what we call here the "inward journey" of prayer, both individually and together. Times of quietness, inner listening, reflection on our lives, meditating on scripture, and touching our relationship with God, other people, and the creation. Taking refuge IS a kind of withdrawal or retreating, not in order to run away from things but to stay centered in God and our true life. Our lives can become very frenetic and distracted. We become anxious, preoccupied, fearful, angry. In our desire to be conscientious people of faith, we tend to see all the things that are wrong or ugly about life around us or in us and pretty soon our inner life can become a swamp of frustration, discouragement, dissatisfaction, and feelings of being homeless or disconnected. Or as the psalm says later on, we begin to feel like a "city under siege."

Refuge, or retreat, becomes very important. We usually think of retreat as an extended time that we take, going to a beautiful and quiet place for longer periods of rest, silence, and prayer. But we don't have to wait until we can do that. We can take "little retreats" each day, right in the midst of our normal daily lives. Taking refuge in God can mean the hour we spend each day in silence, prayer, study, and reflection. It can also be moments throughout the day when we simply sit or walk quietly, breathe with awareness, come back into the present moment, and open our lives to God in prayer. We also take refuge together when we worship as a community. The place where the community of faith gathers for worship is called a "sanctuary," a holy and safe place, whether it is this simple chapel or the grandeur of a cathedral. It is a sacred place because we have devoted it to our communion with God. So we take refuge here together so that we remember who we are in God. We gather here to touch our true life.

Taking Refuge: The Community of Faith

This brings us to our life together. We also take refuge in God in and through the community of faith that practices prayer and the life of love that we know in Christ. It is our *sangha*, as the Buddhist would say. Our reading from 1 Peter speaks of the community of faith as a "spiritual house built of living stones." This image can be difficult to grasp. It is drawn from the image of Christ as the "stone that the builders rejected." Yet the rejected stone has been made the cornerstone or keystone, the one that holds it all together. So we have been gathered by God in Christ into a community, a sacred space and place and fellowship. We have been made a sacramental community, a community in and through which God can be known and touched. This community has the firmness and solidity of a stone building because each member is practicing the life of prayer and outward service. Yet it is living, full of life, because God's spirit is able to move in and through it.

Of course the church is a mixed bag. Sometimes we live God's love clearly and powerfully. Sometimes we are very faithful to the life God calls us to live. Sometimes we are forgiving, humble, and open to God's creative, leading spirit. But sometimes we are narrow, unloving, unforgiving, and stuck in our ways so that the spirit has no room to work. But even so, if we are a community that keeps directing its attention and efforts toward being a community of the living Christ, then we will be a community in which others and we ourselves can take refuge in God.

Being part of a community that practices taking refuge in God is essential to our spiritual growth and maturity. There is no perfect community. It is important that we start with the one we have, recognizing that our community, in all its weakness and imperfection, is the very community God has created, called together to be a "house of living stones," a sacramental community of God's love in Christ.

Taking refuge in the community of faith means being with others who are practicing taking refuge in God. When we are such a community, we have a place where we experience the perfect love of God through the imperfect acceptance and understanding of others. We are with others whose own discipline or practice encourages us in ours. We have others who hold us accountable for continuing our practice of prayer, self-understanding, and the identifying and use of our gifts for the enrichment of life around us. This is especially important when we go through difficult or spiritually dry times and want to just give it up, which we all do. Being part of such a community gives us the solidity, the refuge we need to go deeper. Such a community also provides an environment in which God's spirit can move. It is a house of living stones.

Taking Refuge: Christ, the Way

In all of this, we are taking refuge in God through Christ. In John's gospel, Jesus says that he is going ahead of the disciples in order to prepare rooms, or dwelling places, in God's house for them. We might think that this means only life after death. But Jesus in John's gospel speaks a lot about "dwelling"—God dwells with him, he dwells with God, and his disciples by dwelling in him dwell also with God and God with them. I call this "interdwelling." It is the interdwelling of God with us and us with God, and us with one another, all in and through Christ. Jesus did not mean that we dwell with God only after we die. We dwell with God right now, in this life. It is our refuge.

You know the way to where I am going, Jesus says. Thomas responds, How can we know the way? Jesus answers, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know God. You have seen me, so you have seen what it is like when God dwells fully in us and we in God. So we can say as Christians, I take refuge in Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, the life. By staying close to him, we find our true life, what Jesus calls "eternal life." And it is both now and forever.

This passage has become problematic. It is used by some Christians to say that Christianity is superior to other religions. Christ is the ONLY way to God. This view has justified intolerance, an unwillingness to learn from others, and violence, the very opposite of Christ's spirit. This kind of "one way" thinking is also intolerant of other Christians who have different, more open views. Furthermore, such a view ignores places in the gospels where Jesus himself affirms all who are seeking to do God's will, whether they are following him or not (e.g. Mark 3:31-35).

It helps to know that when John wrote his gospel, there were controversies going on within the Christian community. There were some we might call "enthusiasts." They got off on the Holy Spirit stuff and thought that's all you need. Emotionalism and religious ecstasy was their thing. John in his gospel might well have wanted to present Jesus in a way that counter-balanced this movement. The spirit is important, yes, but Christ himself is foremost—his life, teachings, and spirit. The spirit's work is to help us understand and live the new life we have in Christ.

So John may be trying to reel in these enthusiasts by saying, look, Jesus himself is the way, the truth, the life. You can't go flying off into space. We're supposed to be living in a whole new way, and the only way we can do that is to pay attention to Jesus as the incarnate Word of God. In him we see and receive what it means to live as we are meant to live, trusting and taking refuge in God in every aspect of our lives. Jesus is saying to his disciples and to us that when we take refuge in God through him, we find our dwelling place. It is our true home that we can touch and live out of right here and now. This refuge, this dwelling place is also forever.

Last week I visited a friend who is in the last days of this life. It was a difficult visit, yet also remarkable in its richness and depth. He is saying goodbye, which is of course very painful, especially with his family and close friends. But he is also saying goodbye to his music making, his garden raising, and his woodworking, to all of his life of struggles and of love. I was deeply touched, however, by the spirit in which he is doing this. He is able to express in a warm and open-hearted way his feelings and appreciations for those who have been part of his life. At the same time, there is a freedom he has found to let go. After my visit I had the lingering impression that he has found this refuge in himself, this dwelling place at a whole new depth. The peace that he now has, that enables him to let go of even his closest loved ones, comes from a relationship with God, with life that is becoming even more real, that is being more fully opened up for him. Christ, in whom we can find our dwelling place, our refuge with God now, has also assured us that it is also a forever kind of place.

As much as I used to think that taking refuge was a flight from real life, I now think that taking refuge in God, in Christ, in the community of faith is an important way of understanding what we call the spiritual life. It is seeking refuge in what is good and true, in who we really are and are made to be. It is seeking refuge in what is most real, our true identity as children of the living God. And if our seeking refuge in God is humble, sincere, and courageous, then the God whom we meet, the Christ whose spirit we share, the community whose life encourages us will enable and strengthen us to live as those who have something life giving to offer. We will live as people of compassion, peace, justice, and love. We will come to understand in some small way the astounding thing that Jesus said to his first disciples—You will do even greater things than I have done. You will do it where you are, in your own time and places and relationships, in the circumstances and needs that are part of your life in the present moment. And as we live this life of seeking refuge in God, we will touch in ourselves a kind of fearlessness in our living and in our dying.