

May 1, 2005/Sixth Sunday of Easter/David L. Edwards

## Practicing Faith

Acts 17:22-31 ...*so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him... though indeed God is not far from each one of us.*

John 14:15-24 "*They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them... and we will come to them and make our home with them.*"

Last week I spoke about the community of faith as a place of refuge in which we find, nourish, and deepen our relationship with God. This morning I want to go more deeply into the importance of being the kind of faith community we are and have felt called to be, a community committed to a spiritually disciplined life. Commitment to a spiritually disciplined life is not for the sake of being disciplined or committed. It is for growing deeper in our relationship with God and God's love and purposes.

I came across an image that is very helpful in understanding the role of spiritual discipline or practice in our lives. The word used in Catholic vowed communities is "rule." For instance, the Benedictine Order has the Rule of St. Benedict. It contains guidelines and practices basic to the kind of life that community wants to live. For us here, our "rule" is "Our Covenant One with Another" which people commit to when they become Covenant Members. Our "rule" is the way each of us, Covenant Members or not, gives our life some kind of spiritual framework on a daily basis—prayer, study, service to others, and so forth. The word "rule" comes from the Latin and Greek word *trellis* [Benedict's Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict, New York: Riverhead Books, 2001]. A trellis is a framework made for a vine or plant to grow on. In the garden of the Festival Center are two such trellises. Lovely antique roses grow upon those trellises. If not for the trellis, the vines would go all over the place, this way and that, getting trampled and uncared for. The trellis makes it possible for the beauty of the rose to blossom, flourish, and be enjoyed by everyone.

So a spiritual rule is a framework of practices we take on so that our lives deepen and flourish. Being aware and living out of our spiritual center is the most important work of our lives. It gives our lives coherence and fruitfulness. The fact that as a human family we are not living in this way shows itself in the destructive and indulgent patterns of life that dominate our society today. We can't live a truly meaningful, beneficial, and upbuilding life without practices that help our lives to grow in that direction. We expect to be disciplined in other areas of life—caring for our bodies, handling our finances, performing our jobs, learning a skill. In the most important area of life, the spiritual, we also need discipline, practices, a framework—a trellis.

Spiritual practices do not limit or cramp us. They are not laws to be woodenly performed. They are not the opposite of freedom but the way we find true freedom. When we give our lives a supportive framework, and we do it not for the sake of the disciplines themselves but in order to love God, then we experience an authentic unfolding of our lives. The Buddhist would say that we must remember that the raft is not the shore. We use the raft to get us to the other shore, but we must not mistake the raft for the shore. If we remember this, we will keep a right view about spiritual disciplines.

Today's gospel reading is a portion of Jesus' farewell words to his disciples. Jesus says three things: 1) if we love him, we will keep his commandments; 2) he will give us the Spirit, the Advocate, to help us; and 3) practicing his commandments is the way we make room for God and Christ to fill our lives, to make their home in us.

*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* The spiritual life, with its framework of spiritual practices, is our way of loving Christ by keeping his commandments. My theology professor in

seminary told us that theology is the way we love God with our minds. This was good news to me, for I had always loved my theological studies and seldom found them drudgery. Kaye has often made fun of me for my bedtime reading—not novels but things like Tillich’s Systematic Theology or Bonhoeffer’s Ethics! Love is an invigorating motivation. We devote ourselves to the spiritual life in order to love God with our whole lives. “Our Covenant One with Another” says that we do this in order to make God’s will dominant in our lives. I think that is okay, but too joyless unless we say also that God’s will is that we love—love God, others, ourselves, the creation. It makes all the difference in the world when we see our lives as opportunities for loving God. This replaces the joyless motivations of guilt, legalism, or obligation with something that can bring deep happiness and joy, even when the going is rough.

When we make life a matter of loving God, everything changes. We are coming from a place of freedom and passion, eagerness and creativity. Even the mundane details and tasks become opportunities for care, attentiveness, and joy. The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence is a classic book about discipline and joy in every moment, every task of life. When we make our lives into the loving of God in Christ, then even washing the dishes or running the vacuum can be a sacred activity. The Zen Buddhist might put it that when we walk, we know we are walking, when we eat, we know we are eating, when we run the vacuum, we know we are running the vacuum. Giving this kind of attentiveness, or love, to the small tasks of life prepares us for making the larger tasks ways of loving God as well. If we cannot do it in the small things, we cannot do it in the larger things.

What does Jesus mean by keeping his commandments? What are Jesus’ commandments? Pray. Forgive. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Visit the prisoner. Make peace. All of his teachings are summed up in the commandment to love one another as we have been loved by him, thus by God (Jn. 13:34). Love as keeping commandments may sound contradictory. Isn’t love a matter of feelings, emotions? If love is keeping commandments, doesn’t it become something else? Legalism or wooden obedience or dry obligation?

The love Jesus talks about, the love that comes to us from God, is not a matter of feelings or emotions, but actions. God acts toward us in unconditional acceptance of us as God’s beloved children. This love is empowering compassion and liberation. This is how we are to relate to each other and the world. Earlier in John’s gospel there is that famous sentence—*God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son*. Love and action are there in the same sentence. God’s love for the world is shown in God’s actions toward the world, toward us, actions that continually offer life and the renewal of life.

We take on practices of prayer and service, study and forgiveness, as the expression of our love for Christ, for God. The main purpose of our inward journey is so that we stay in touch with the motivation for it all—loving God with our whole lives, our whole being.

Then Jesus tells his disciples that he is giving them *another Advocate, to be with you forever*. We aren’t doing all of this on our own steam. We have help. Our help is God’s own spirit that enlightens, empowers, reminds, and guides us. The Greek word here [*parakletos*] means advocate, helper, sustainer, encourager—someone who is on our side. We couldn’t have it any better than this! Not only can life be a matter of loving God, God helps us make it so. The Holy Spirit is God’s enlivening and enlightening presence with us. It is that uncontrollable and infinitely creative way that God touches, shapes, and guides our lives. And yet, the movement of God’s spirit in our lives does have something to do with spiritual practices and disciplines.

An ancient symbol for the church is a ship with its sail unfurled. This can also work for our personal spiritual lives. Here it is good to remember that the words for “spirit” in both Greek and Hebrew, the biblical languages, mean spirit, wind, breath. The life of spiritual practice is not a way of gaining control over God’s spirit. It is how we lift and set our sail to catch this wind of God. Spiritual practice does not control God and does not guarantee smooth sailing. Sometimes, in fact, it takes us into rougher waters. However, spiritual practices put us in the place where we are most likely to be in the stream and flow of God’s loving purposes and power, the directions in which God’s spirit is moving.

God's spirit is not a perpetual high and does not plunge us into anything foreign to who we are as human beings. God's spirit is the constant presence of God that awakens and empowers us to live out our true identities and purposes as God's children.

There is a longtime favorite hymn that I learned first from my father who would sing it accompanying himself on the autoharp. The words are by an English Quaker woman Jesse Adams (1863-1954):

*I feel the winds of God today; today my sail I lift,  
Though heavy, oft with drenching spray, and torn with many a rift;  
If hope but light the water's crest, and Christ my bark will use,  
I'll seek the seas at His behest, and brave another cruise.*

Finally, Jesus says that as we love him by keeping his commandments, with the help of God's spirit, he and God will become even more real and present in our lives. *Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them...we will come and make our home with them.* That last part is more powerful than the English translation expresses. It has the sense of Christ and God coming to dwell permanently, creatively, and powerfully within our lives (*monei*=dwelling, staying + *poieo*=create, establish). As we give ourselves to the life of practicing love, we come to know God and Christ more and more. It is something we experience along the way, not as we sit and try to think our way to it. Paul's sermon in Athens (Acts 17), which was also in the lectionary for today, speaks of God who is the majestic and unknowable Creator and Lord of all the universe, and yet is also near to us. We are made to seek and find God. Paul uses the phrase "groping after God." In Jesus' terms, we seek God by living the life of loving God. And if we are on that path, then we will know God more and more. Who Christ is will be revealed to us with greater clarity. It all happens along the journey.

This is different from faith as believing in doctrines. It is faith as a life's journey of loving and seeking God and Christ. It is not the kind of self-assured and dogmatic attitude often presented as faith. The phrase "people of faith," being used so much today in the political sphere, does not mean something exclusive, those who dogmatically hold select theological or moral beliefs. To be people and communities of faith means being on a journey—a voyage—of loving God by loving the world with the gifts and callings God gives us.

Spiritual practice or discipline is our way of loving Christ by keeping his commandments.

Spiritual practice is the way we lift the sail of our lives to the wind of God's helping, guiding, and empowering Spirit.

As we live life as a journey of practicing our faith, God and Christ dwell in us with more and more clarity and understanding.

Being this kind of community and this kind of people, we become a refuge in which others and we ourselves find and live out the love of God.