

July 3, 2005/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

### **Living by the Spirit**

Genesis 24:34-67 *Then I bowed my head and worshiped the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son.*

Romans 7:15-25a *Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

### **Faith: Living by the Spirit**

The story of Abraham's servant seeking a wife for Isaac is about ordinary human beings following the leading of God's spirit. It is a story of people trusting their relationship with God and their inner sensitivity to God's purposes. Faith is not belief in doctrines or the following of rules or commandments. Faith is trustful living. This is one of the many stories in Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, that tell of human beings trusting their connectedness to God and being willing to give themselves to the leading of God's spirit. The life of faith is living by the spirit of God.

God created us good and trustworthy, with a capacity to be in and to trust our relationship with God. This is the opposite of what we have always been taught by the church itself—that we are originally sinful and incapable of living in faith. Hebrew scriptures know nothing of a doctrine of original sin, that we are hopelessly helpless to be or do anything that is right and good. We, along with the rest of creation, are created good and have God's blessing. That goodness gets covered over, twisted or sometimes lost. Our connection with God is not easy to maintain. But it is still there. It is still who we really are.

The story of Abraham's servant finding Rebekah is a simple and moving story of human beings living their lives in innocent and complete trust in God's guidance and provision. Sometimes in these stories people get it right, sometimes they get it wrong. But there is never any doubt that God continues to trust us and believe in us, that we can live as we were created to live—in partnership with God in the ongoing process of creation and life.

### **Living by Grace, Not Law**

Paul is another story. It is from some of Paul's writings that the doctrine of original sin has been constructed. However, it is not clear that Paul himself had such a doctrine in mind. The reading from Romans 7 is a painfully honest revelation of Paul's inner turmoil. The harder he tries to "be good," to obey the commandments, the worse things seem to get. Prior to the section we heard this morning, Paul even says that the commandments themselves stir up the worst in us. The law puts in our minds the idea of

being lawless! "If it had not been for the law," he writes, "I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" (7:7) That seems an odd thing for a devout Jew to say! And it calls into question the current religious/political fervor that wants to plaster public areas with copies of the Ten Commandments. It is as though the important thing is just having them up there, not whether we as a people or a nation are really obeying them. We want to appear religious or think of ourselves as religious. We don't really want to stop killing in our wars, or robbing the poor in our own or other countries, or coveting the resources of others so that we can maintain a wasteful and destructive lifestyle.

Paul's deal is that all the commandments in the world and our efforts to obey them will not make us good or better. There is something he experiences that just keeps frustrating that kind of sheer moral effort. He calls it "sin." But sin, for Paul, is not some inherent defect in us that keeps us from being able to be faithful. It is not "original sin" in the way that doctrine later was developed by Augustine. Sin for Paul is a kind of force in life that keeps us from living as we are truly made to live, that is, by faith, by trustful living.

Paul sounds totally confused. He tries to do what is right but he can't seem to get it right. His innermost self desires to do what is right, but he keeps doing the opposite. I may not experience things exactly the way Paul did, but there are certainly times when I feel completely confused and frustrated! It seems the harder I try to be good or "spiritual" or morally consistent, the farther I get from it. The more I focus on the law, on doing the right things, the more I realize how vulnerable to self-deception I am. There's just something about life that tells me that obeying the laws, that living life as a matter of keeping commandments is not going to get it!

Paul's solution is not to try harder. The way to be the people God made us to be is not to exert ourselves with greater moral fervor. It's not a matter of the will. It is a matter of the heart, the spirit, the person. It is a matter of entering into God's grace and living not by law but spirit. That's why Paul gets to the end of his rope, as we all do at times, feeling on the verge of despair about his ability to be a righteous or good person. But instead of tying a knot and hang on, Paul just lets go of all that. "Who can save us from this quandary? Who can free us from the dead-end path of trying to justify ourselves by doing all the right things all the time? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" We just can't be the persons we truly are by focusing on the law, but by entering constantly into God's grace and living by God's spirit. We can't will our way into a relationship with God. We can't base that relationship on how good we are behaving or our own sense of being right. It is all a matter of God's gracious love for us in Christ. In Christ we receive and enter into our true identity as God's children. It has nothing to do with proving or improving ourselves. It has to do with coming to Christ. He is the true human being, who lives in complete faith, that is, in trustful living. As we touch Christ, our true identity is reaffirmed, restored, and received.

## **Jesus: The Easy Yoke and Light Burden of the Life of Faith**

In our gospel reading, Jesus is talking about John the Baptist and himself. People can't make up their minds. John came along as a wild-haired ascetic, eating bugs and honey from wild bees out in the desert. It made people uncomfortable and they criticized him for being too strict. Then here comes Jesus who doesn't mind going to a party and enjoying food and drink, and he gets criticized for being a drunk and a carouser. Worse, he hangs out with people who don't have college degrees, who labor with their hands, who are involved in shady stuff like Roman tax collection, who are, in short, sinners. They don't fit into the "religious" category. A really "religious" or "spiritual" person, especially a rabbi, wouldn't keep company with such folks, much less seem to enjoy it!

Jesus says, You can't make up your minds. You're all hung up on judging and measuring and keeping laws and such. You are like children playing who hear a dance tune and you won't dance, or a funeral song and you won't weep. Jesus is saying that we should stop focusing on being religious or good or spiritual and live as children of God, trusting ourselves as God trusts us, responding in faith as God's spirit moves in us. And how are we to do that?

"Come to me," says Jesus, "all who are weary and heavily burdened, and I will give you rest." He's talking about the weariness and burdens that come with oppressive religious emphasis on the wrong things, with trying to measure up, trying to be good enough or right enough. He's calling us out of the dismal and despairing life centered on obedience to external expectations and laws, and into the life of communion with God and God's spirit. Jesus invites us into the life of faith and living by faith. It is the kind of life pictured in the story of Abraham's servant, following our sensitivity to God's spirit and leading, trusting our inner relationship with the living God. It is the life of moving one step at a time, one small thing at a time, trusting that the big picture is in God's hands, that God is in the depths working out the good of all creation. Jesus calls us away from obsessing over being right or wrong, over laws and structures, which is, in the end, only a kind of self-centeredness. He calls us to himself, to be with him, to follow him, and in that to receive our true lives, the life of communion with God and God's love for us and the world.

## **Spiritual Discipline and Spiritual Freedom**

The story of Abraham's servant is a reminder that scripture tells us we are loved and trusted by God, and that we are made by God so that we have the capacity to live by faith, being sensitive to and following the leading of God's spirit.

Paul's confession of his own confusion reminds us that living as people of faith is not easy. Life has a way of confusing, frustrating, and challenging us at every turn. We need constantly to give thanks to God for God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls us to himself, not to a set of rules or laws, finding afresh our true lives as those loved and cared for by God, as those who can live out

of that love and care. It is a yoke and burden, this life in Christ, but it is easy and light because it has to do with who we truly are.

We are a community that affirms the freedom of the life of the spirit, of living by God's spirit. The fullness of Christian life is found as each of us seeks, finds, and is faithful to the callings and the gifts God gives to each. The life and mission of the Church of the Covenant is to nurture, support, and encourage this life of the spirit, this life of faith as trustful living. Our corporate desire is that each one of us and all who come into our community will touch and be touched by this spirit, that each life will blossom in its unique and precious way as a channel of God's creative love for the world.

At the same time, we are a covenant community. We understand that such a life of faith and freedom does not happen without giving a certain shape to our lives. Spiritual disciplines, or practices--expressed in "Our Covenant One with Another," adopted by mission groups, or in different ways practiced by all of us--are not meant to be laws or commandments. They are meant to be practices that keep us oriented toward Christ and the life of the spirit. The temptation is to make these disciplines into laws, to become legalistic. But this happens only when we focus on the disciplines as ends in themselves or as a mark of spiritual superiority. We can actually be very regular in our spiritual practices and stop living by the spirit. Or fall into a self-satisfaction that we have these disciplines but cease practicing them toward actually living the life of faith.

This doesn't mean that we are to be less committed to spiritual practices, to take less seriously the disciplines of prayer, study, worship, tithing, mission, and living in love and forgiveness. It simply means that, as the Zen Buddhist would say, we must not mistake the raft for the shore. The raft is the kind of order we give our lives so that we reach the shore, the life of faith. We must not mistake the spiritual disciplines we take on for the life of faith to which they point us and in which they can deepen us. We work with spiritual disciplines in our lives with even greater seriousness and passion because we know that they can keep us directed toward and rooted in the life of the spirit.

The point is to keep coming to Jesus, to keep laying down life as a burden or demand and entering into life as God made it to be. In Christ we are reminded of who we really are, people made, loved, blessed, and trusted by God. In Christ we find the grace of God's love that reminds us that we don't have to keep trying to prove ourselves or have some kind of morally perfect life to show how good or right we are. In Christ we find the one who calls us to and energizes us for the journey into our true identity, our communion with God, and into the journey of living out the unique callings and gifts God gives each of us for the sustaining and renewing of the life of God's world. This is the life of faith, living by God's spirit. It is who we are made to be.