

Taking Refuge In God

Psalm 46 *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

Matthew 11:25-30 *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”*

In Buddhism there are what are called the “three jewels of Buddhism”: The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Those who seriously practice in order to increase in awareness and compassion make this profession:

I take refuge in the Buddha.

I take refuge in the Dharma.

I take refuge in the Sangha.

The Buddha is not only the historical figure Siddhartha, but also the living Buddha, the continuing spirit and teachings of the Buddha that instruct and encourage people in their practice. Dharma is hard to translate. It is something like the teachings, or the way. It is the written body of *sutras*, or teachings. But also the teachings of spiritual guides and leaders. Thich Nhat Hanh believes that the Dharma--the truth or the way--is taught by everything around us, if only we are open to receive it--trees, rocks, birds, the sky, other people. The Sangha is the community that practices and studies in order to grow in awareness and compassion.

Since I first learned of the three “refuges,” I have wondered: What are the three jewels of Christianity, those realities in which we take refuge? Today and the next two Sundays, I want to share some reflections on a Zen-influenced Christian profession:

I take refuge in God through Jesus Christ.

I take refuge in the living Word of God.

I take refuge in the community of faith.

First, there is the idea of taking refuge. The psalms are full of invitations to take refuge in God. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,” says our psalm for today. I think that taking refuge is not a notion that sits comfortably with us activist Christians. We tend to emphasize radical and constant engagement with the world. Taking refuge may sound to us like escaping or abandoning responsibility. We tend to operate on the assumption that if we are not constantly “on the job,” as it were, the world will fall apart and God cannot accomplish what God wants for life. So we become hyperactive and hyper-responsible. We are afraid that if we take our hands off things, including our own lives, for one moment, all will be lost.

Taking refuge is not about abandoning responsibility. It is about regaining our true life and a true perspective on ourselves and the world. It is about going back to that “place” where we touch our relationship with God and recover our spiritual equilibrium. It is about re-centering ourselves on who we really are, who God has made us to be, and what we have been given or called to do in the world.

Refuge IS a retreat. It is a retreat from the feverishness and frantic pace of life. It is recognizing that we become contaminated by the very things

that we want to change. In our sense of urgency to make a difference in the world, we often find our own spirits have grown anxious, hostile, and even violent. We stop listening to people and our own hearts. We start pushing our way through and over people. Instead of really being conscious of “showing love and forgiveness in every relationship,” which is one of the disciplines of both Covenant and Community membership, we imagine that we are showing love and forgiveness when in reality we are treating others, including those in our own community, with impatience and insensitivity. Or, we may find in our spirits a growing sense of discouragement, despair, or hopelessness about life, the world, ourselves, or other people. In short, we lose perspective.

This is why we need to take refuge. We take refuge in God and our relationship with God. That means we have to stop, calm ourselves, and simply be in God’s presence as we become aware of the conditions of our hearts and minds. Simply aware. Not judging, but naming what is going on in us— anxiousness, fear, anger, hurt, whatever. All of this is the part of prayer we can call contemplation or simply being still. It is the beginning of a recovery of our true selves and a truer view of life. Quakers call it “centering down.” Zen Buddhists call it stopping and calming. We call it the inward journey of self-awareness and prayer.

Psalm 46 says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” The literal translation is, “Stop fighting!” Stop the wars. Stop the conflictual way of living. The psalm speaks to the United States, to Israel, to every nation. Stop the fighting! With God it is that simple! But I think this can also mean, Stop the inner fighting with yourself. Stop the struggle. Be still. This is not so easy. We get ourselves so wound up that the momentum of our roiling inner life cannot just stop on a dime. We have to let it settle down. That is why just a few minutes now and then of silence and quiet sitting as preparation for prayer is not enough. We have to allow more time for things settle down. Taking refuge needs to be a daily practice.

Thich Nhat Hanh tells the story of a young Vietnamese girl, Than Tui, who stayed with him at Plum Village, his community in France, while her father was in Paris looking for work. One day she wanted some apple juice, so he poured her a glass. The pulp in the juice made it look muddy and unappealing to Than Tui. When she refused to drink it, Nhat Hanh told her she could go out to play, but when she came back she had to drink her juice. When she returned, she looked at the apple juice, which now looked clear and refreshing. She thought it was a different glass of juice! Nhat Hanh explained to her that when the juice had time to sit quietly, the pulp settled to the bottom and it became clear. She said, Just like you when you sit, Uncle Monk! She understood right away. This is what happens when we pray and meditate. We give the pulp time to settle down. Stop fighting! Be still, and know that I am God! Then we are ready to listen to our own true hearts and to God.

When we take refuge, we learn just how much “pulp” there is swirling around inside of us and how distorted our living had become. Yet we experience again that all we need to do is to let the pulp settle. Not try to solve problems. Not fret over our feelings. Not trying to think our way out of our messes. Simply being still, letting the fighting, the struggle stop. Whether for a few days or just a half hour, taking refuge renews us. When we become still and quiet, we are able to touch our relationship with God once again. I don’t think it

is our intellectual doubts that get in the way of our belief in God. I think it is the condition of our lives, that we have not yet learned how to be still, how to stop the struggle, the fighting so that we know that God is God.

This is not a luxury. And it is not even something we do just so that we can be more effective in our living or so that the missions in which we are involved will succeed. It is simply being with our selves and with God so that we gain solidity. I have come to like that word very much as a spiritual word—solidity. That is what the psalm is also talking about. When we touch God as our refuge and strength, we participate in God's solidity. We will not fear even if everything seems to be shaking and falling apart around us. The most frequent description of God in Hebrew scriptures is "steadfast love." Love that is always there. Love that never shakes or changes. Solidity.

We can take refuge any time, become quiet and still, stop the inward fighting and struggles, and touch our true selves and our true home, which is God. When we do this, like the apple juice that Than Tui saw when she returned from play, we become a new being! We can live with freshness and focus. We can bring a solidity to our own lives and to others. We can then be sent out by God as truly an instrument of God's peace and love. In fact, when we are not taking refuge in this way through our daily practice, it shows in the ways our lives only add to the hurt, unawareness, and lack of peace in our community of faith and the world. This is why we ask that anyone becoming part of this community commit themselves to their own inward journey.

As Christians we take refuge in God through Jesus Christ. He is our touch point, our gateway to our relationship with God. In Christ we see what it means to be a human being who lives fully out of his relationship with God. We look to Jesus to see how taking refuge in God transforms us and makes us persons who are a transforming presence in the world. Jesus calls us to take refuge. Come to me, you who are carrying heavy burdens, who are tired in body, spirit, or mind. I give you rest, a deep rest for your bodies and your spirits. I don't want you running around worn out and spiritually empty. You do no one any good. Take off all the yokes that are heavy and burdensome, that don't fit who you really are, who God made you to be. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me the essential things for life. My yoke is easy. My burden is light. It is so because it has to do with who God made you to be, who you really are. My yoke fits you. Wearing the yoke of Christ, we may work harder than we ever worked in our lives, giving everything we have. But it doesn't really feel like it because we are living authentically out of our relationship with God and our true selves, doing what God calls and gifts us to do, not what is imposed on us by the world.

Taking refuge is an essential part of human life. Everyone needs it, whatever their situation in life. This is the conviction of the Chrysalis Retreat Center Mission Group that is working to bring into being an interfaith center for retreat and refuge here on these grounds. It is important that we work for the material needs of human beings. It is important that we be in solidarity with those who are on the margins of society, those who are poor, powerless, ignored, and oppressed. But it is equally important that we recognize the common spiritual needs of all people no matter what their condition in life. The retreat center vision is to create a place for spiritual and physical rest and renewal for people of all faith traditions, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and

learning. It is also to be a place where people can come for retreat who would otherwise not be able to do so because of their economic or social status. We plan to offer retreats for interfaith dialogue and understanding, fostering a pluralistic and peaceful vision of religious life. We also plan to offer the center to those who live in our central city. Perhaps a group of parents, like those in the Adults Relating to Kids parenting program that met at the Festival Center this past year. Or a group of the most challenging youth, those who Gene Tweedy calls the most "at promise" kids. Treney Tweedy, Gene's wife, and Sandy Knodel are hoping to develop a group for young girls who live in the neighborhood around the Festival Center. Maybe when this happens, they will have a place to bring these girls for a weekend where they can experience peace and draw closer to one another and their own deepest selves. Taking refuge is essential to hope and transformation.

Our world is facing crises on many fronts—violence, poverty, global warming. God in Christ calls us to respond. Our scriptures remind us, however, that essential to our response to God's call is taking refuge in God. To touch our true selves. To stop fighting. To be still. Then to listen for what God is saying to us about who we are and what God has given us to offer for the world's healing.