

Taking Refuge in the Community of Faith

Mark 3:34-35 *“Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister, and mother.”*

Colossians 3:12-17 *Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

I take refuge in God through Jesus Christ.

I take refuge in the living Word of God.

These were the first two “refuges” I spoke about the past two Sundays. There are three refuges in Buddhism—I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma; I take refuge in the Sangha.” Reflecting on these over the years led me to consider what might be the “Three Jewels” of Christianity in which we can take refuge. Taking refuge is important for us. It is not running away or hiding. It is returning to our true home, touching the realities that nourish our lives of faith.

The Sangha is the third “jewel” of Buddhism. The Sangha is the community that practices those things that help one come to enlightenment, to wake up to Reality. Silence. Meditation. Study. Fuller awareness of one’s self and the world. All with the desire to live compassionately in the world. For me, the Sangha and the church, or community of faith, are the same thing—communities that we need in order to deepen our faith and the practice of that faith.

I prefer “community” to “church.” I like to speak of the Church of the Covenant Community. “Church” has unfortunate meanings for people. It signifies an institution that has often been full of suppression, repression, and oppression. “Church” also has the unfortunate baggage of representing Christian faith a matter of believing ideas or doctrines—a head trip! People argue, fight and kill over words, ideas, and doctrines. I find that most people long for community rather than belonging to an institution. We long to be part of a community of authentic love that calls forth the best in us, that encourages us to discover and live out what we were really put on this earth to be and do.

The New Testament word *ecclesia* is translated “church.” It has the fuller meaning of those who are called together, or called out, to be a community centered in God through discipleship to Jesus. The Christian community is a community of people devoting themselves to Christ who reveals for them the fullness of God and who we are in God. It is a community of practice, first and foremost, striving to live the life that Jesus taught and embodied and continues to offer us as the living Christ. The community of Jesus is about the life of living out God’s love. It is a refuge for us because it offers us relationship and meaning.

The community of Jesus is where we experience the gracious love of God for us. God’s love experienced in Christ calls us into community. We are here because of that love. Therefore, we are a community in which all who come may experience, perhaps for the first time, being truly loved. We all come with our mixture of strength and weakness, wholeness and woundedness, healthiness and unhealthiness. We strive to embody an acceptance that embraces and honors the whole person. Thus the Christian community is a refuge for all who are seeking love and acceptance.

For this reason one of our spiritual disciplines is to “endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God’s love and forgiveness.” Every relationship, not just some. This is a matter of practice, not just a nice idea. It calls us to work daily with ourselves and our own spirits. If we are not working in our inward journey on this practice with regard to the persons in our community, then we are fooling ourselves, no matter how strongly and zealously we proclaim our “greater love” for humanity. How we relate to one another reveals the authenticity and integrity of our love for the wider world and human family. To love humanity can only be done by loving the person in whose presence we find ourselves at any given moment.

To sustain this community of love asks that each of us face honestly things in ourselves that we don’t like to admit. Our prejudices, the ways we pre-judge others. Our desire to have people to be the way we think they should be. The ways we distance ourselves from others out of our fear rejection or feelings of superiority. And so forth. Our inward journey enables us to embrace, understand, and let go of these attitudes of heart and habits of thinking so that we more fully embody for one another God’s own unconditional love. Our community is a refuge insofar as each of us works seriously and honestly with our own abilities and disabilities when it comes to love.

The community of Jesus is a community of commitment. The grace of God embodied in Jesus accepts us as we are. That is what draws us into this community. We remain in the community in order to commit ourselves to deeper growth in and the extending of that love to others. The Church of the Covenant was born out of a vision of church as a community of persons called to discipleship to Jesus Christ. We call it a journey of faith. It is a journey inward through daily prayer, study, meditation, self-understanding, and seeking awareness of the persons God has made us to be. The outward journey is the way we live out of what we feel God has called us to do with our lives and the gifts God has given us. It is a commitment to our own spiritual growth and the full unfolding of our lives in God’s love.

We are a community of practice, like the Sangha in Buddhism. The core of Christian community is not beliefs or doctrines. Jesus never talked about beliefs. He talked about faith as living with openness to God, trusting in God, and giving our lives to God’s loving purposes. When Jesus pulled Peter out of the water after the over-eager disciple tried to walk over the

waves to Jesus, he didn't criticize him because he didn't have the right beliefs. He asked him why he got scared, why he had lost his faith, his trust, his spiritual focus. When Jesus told a parable about how our lives will be ultimately measured, the so-called "final judgment," he didn't say we would be judged according to our religious beliefs. Did you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned? In other words, how we live our lives. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he did not launch into a lecture on "The Nature of Prayer." He gave them a prayer to pray, what we call the Lord's Prayer. When he told the parable of the so-called Good Samaritan, he gave us a picture of faith in action. A man beaten and left for dead in a ditch. The religiously righteous folks going out of their way to avoid him. The "godless Samaritan" stopping to bind his wounds and supply him with shelter and food. Who was neighbor to the man? Not the ones whose beliefs were rock-solid, who had the right religious ideas, but the one who had compassion, who acted like a human being the way God made us. When Jesus' mother and brothers came looking for him, he looked around at those in the house with him that day and said: Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does what God wants is my family.

Beliefs are not unimportant. They may serve us as guides, as pointers. But holding onto them as of primary importance makes us rigid and brittle and frozen. It is ultimately about practice and experience as we seek to be persons whose deepest desire is to love God and live as God's children. Because the Christian community is a community of practice, it is a refuge for us that can reveal for us the path of life.

The community of Jesus is most helpful and encouraging when each person is practicing as faithfully as she or he can. Let me share a story I have told before. Good stories always bear repeating. Thich Nhat Hanh tells of a father and daughter traveling from village to village performing their acrobatic act. The father would place one end of a bamboo pole on his forehead and the young girl would climb up the pole and sit on top. Villagers would give them coins for their performance. One day the father said, Daughter, we must take good care of each other today so that nothing will happen to us and we will be able to earn our living. The daughter responded, Father, that is not the way it is. We must each take care of ourselves so that we can earn our living. She was right. If each did not pay careful attention to what he or she was doing, their act would go to smash and they might get hurt.

The greatest help we offer one another is our own faithfulness to our inward and outward journeys. If I am not working daily with my own prayer life, self-understanding, and relationship with God, how can I help you? I only share my own lostness and lack of being centered and clear. I can offer you no peace because I am not peaceful in myself. I cannot help you to discover your own gifts and calling if I don't know what my own are, or at least am working to discover them. I only offer my own lack of direction and discipline.

In mission groups or in regular meetings with someone we ask to be a spiritual friend, we have the opportunity to share and to listen to spiritual reports. This is what we call accountability. How am I doing with my spiritual disciplines or practices? Where am I experiencing growth? Where am I struggling or stuck? What do I sense God is doing with my life at this point? How is the way I am living affecting my relationship with God? As we share these spiritual reports, we find that even the struggles are a source of encouragement and strength to others. At a recent Festival Center Mission Group meeting, a member was giving a spiritual accountability report. What was shared touched on the common experience of feeling "stuck" in our spiritual journey, times when we don't feel we are making any progress, when the stubborn personal issues we've identified just won't give way, no matter how much prayer we pour on them!

As I listened to the report, it occurred to me that these times of being stuck are very important. Being stuck means that we are going deeper, if we are being faithful in embracing and not giving up on the "stuckness." Whether or not we feel we are making progress, something is happening, something is shifting at a very deep level in us, and will show itself sooner or later. Meanwhile, the honest sharing of our dilemma is helpful not only to us but to others. The report that evening seemed not only to help the person giving it but also my own deeper insight and growth in understanding. Feeling stuck in our spiritual lives is also an important process in our spiritual growth. It needs to be accepted with patience and faithfulness, for our own sakes and for others.

The community of Christ is a refuge for us. In it we touch the grace of God's unconditional love for us. In it we are enabled to discern the gifts and callings that are ours, what God has made us to do with our lives for the sake of the world. And being in a community that is practicing the inward and outward journeys of faith holds us accountable, keeps us on track, and encourages us to keep going and growing in God's love as we know it in Christ.