

February 11, 2007/Sixth Sunday after Epiphany/David L. Edwards

The Life of Faith: On the Mountain and Down to Earth

Psalm 1 *They are like trees planted by streams of water....*

Luke 6:17-26 *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God...
But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”*

The sixth chapter of Luke’s gospel is a wonderful meditation on the inward and outward journeys of the life of faith. The inward journey is our commitment to and work with our own spiritual lives through regular practice of silence, prayer, reflection, study, and greater self-understanding. The outward journey is lived out of the inward journey as we sense God’s call in our lives and identify the gifts God has given us to use in the service of life. The inward and the outward dimensions are bound together, yet the inward, I would suggest, has priority. Without the inward journey, the outward journey can be directionless and unfruitful.

Down from the Mountain: The Inward Journey

There are two scenes in Luke 6. First Jesus goes up on the mountain where he spends the whole night in prayer. When the dawn breaks, he calls together all of the disciples who have joined him thus far and chooses twelve of them to be apostles, those he will send out to spread his message. Then they all go down the mountain onto a “level place” where Jesus presents the body of his teachings. This is where our reading begins.

People crowd around him, wanting to be near him, sensing a kind of power that flows from him. The power comes from Jesus’ relationship with God, recently deepened by the night spent on the mountain in prayer. Luke is clear that the source of Jesus’ ministry and the power to carry out that ministry comes from this rooting of his life in God and the times he withdraws to renew and deepen that relationship.

I like this picture of people being empowered and healed just by being around Jesus. I think most of us have known someone like that, who imparts a kind of peace or strength. Being around them makes us feel somehow stronger, encouraged, hopeful, or more loving. We have also known people whose distractedness and lack of being centered affects people negatively, draining energy and power. I have found that usually these are people who have very little, if any, intentional inward life. Those, however, who have an inward life bring with them a spirit that nourishes an atmosphere of creativity and fruitfulness.

Jesus’ power comes from this inward dimension of his life, his relationship with God. He also calls us to nourish and cultivate that inward dimension so that power can flow from us into the lives of others and the world. Jesus believed that we have that same relationship with God, only it gets lost or covered over or buried under all sorts of distractions fed us by society and even the church. Marcus Borg writes: “[T]he process of growing up, of learning about *this* world, is a process of increasingly forgetting the one from whom we came and in whom we live. The birth and intensification of self-consciousness, of self-awareness, involves a separation from God.” [THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY, p. 114] Buddhism teaches something very similar, that we come to attach ourselves to the illusion of being a self that is separate from the rest of reality. Young children don’t have a problem; they are still very close to God. It’s we older folks who have the problem and the challenge of getting back to that relationship, clearing out the way for our return home.

It is important that the whole group of disciples was up on the mountain with Jesus. This says clearly that we are to be where Jesus was when he withdrew to be alone with God. Solitude, times of retreat, daily times of quietness and prayer—these are necessary for us if we are to live fully our relationship with God. We practice the inward

journey for our own sakes and for the sake of the world. If we are rooted in God within our own lives, if we are practicing God's love and peace in our own lives, if we are gaining clarity about what we are called to do and what we are not called to do, what gifts we have and what gifts we don't have, then we are simply much more of use to other people and the world. This is planting our lives like a tree by streams of water, as Psalm 1 says, so that our lives are as fruitful as possible.

When I was on retreat recently, Sister Mary Fran, one of our friends at the Loretto Motherhouse, met with me over lunch on my last day. She is a spiritual director, which means she has a gift for helping people work with their relationship with God. Several times during lunch she said to me: You must take care of yourself. I am afraid that you are not taking care of yourself. She was right. I could only defend myself by saying that's why I was there, to get back on track, to get some rest, to re-examine my life and see what I needed to do to live more consistently with what God has given me to do and be.

Practicing the inward journey is taking care of ourselves in this way. It is making sure we are keeping our lives rooted in God. If we are not taking care of ourselves in this way then we are not much good for the world, for others, in spite of all the work we might do.

A Level Place: The Outward Journey

Now Jesus teaches. Luke takes what Matthew has in three chapters as the Sermon on the Mount and pares it down to about 30 verses of a Sermon on the Plain. He doesn't value Jesus' core teachings less. This has the effect of making them more intense and focused.

Luke has Jesus offering only four beatitudes. Jesus follows with four parallel woes. Like Psalm 1, Jesus is laying out two basic paths for our lives. One leads to blessing or happiness. One leads to misery and unhappiness. Psalm 1 puts it as a matter of listening to and studying God's law, God's purposes for our lives. This is how we plant our lives beside streams of water so that we are fruitful people. If you read the lectionary selection from Jeremiah this week, you remember that the prophet spoke of these same two paths in a different way. Jeremiah put it as a matter of where our ultimate trust is placed—in God or in other people. Jesus is speaking of the same thing, but in a different way.

First, however, in Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus is speaking to his disciples and the crowds. Luke has Jesus speaking directly to his disciples. The literal translation would be something like: "Then he fixed his gaze firmly on his disciples..." This is the way someone looks at us and speaks to us when he or she has something urgent or even lifesaving to tell us. Jesus is telling his disciples that they need to understand fully what they are getting themselves into. They have chosen the life of God's kingdom, God's rule over life. And that means choosing against some things that the world values greatly—wealth, prosperity, successfulness, distractions of all kinds, seeking the approval of other people and the systems that surround us.

Here Jesus is not talking about poverty or suffering in general. He is talking about the life of those who commit themselves to the way of true life. It will not be easy or prosperous or bring success after success. His is not a "gospel of prosperity." It will make us sensitive to the suffering of people and the creation. It will not earn us the admiring approval of others. Or, if it does, then that will mean nothing to us. It means detachment from all that stuff so that we can find something deeper, more lasting and real, something that can bring true happiness and blessing. The word used here is *makarios*, which can mean blessing or happiness. But it means something deep, not superficial, something like inner happiness or contentment. The more difficult path is the one that enables us to find true inner happiness because it leads us more fully into our relationship with God.

Jesus looks gently but firmly at us to make sure we understand that if we choose to follow him, the way will not bring us the things most people and the culture around us value and pursue. But it will bring us something of true value—a life rooted in God and what God is doing in and for the world.

We can assume that some in the group of disciples were poor and some not so poor, and so forth. Jesus is not saying someone who is wealthy or has bought into the illusory values of the culture cannot follow him. He's just saying that all who choose to follow him need to look at where their lives are ultimately grounded. Most of us are wealthy relative to the majority of people in the world. Most of us are privileged because we are white and middle class. Most of us are hooked in some way on the praise, admiration, or approval of others, and wilt at the first hint of rejection or disapproval. But we have nonetheless said yes to Jesus' call to this life of God's kingdom. And it will mean working with those things in ourselves. This is the journey we have chosen. And Jesus just wants us to know that he knows it is hard and demanding, but it is also the only way to go. It is the "blessed" way.

The life of faith we commit ourselves to is both going up the mountain to be alone with God—the inward journey—AND coming back down the mountain to a level place, to live the way of blessing, the outward journey. The inward journey is how we root ourselves in God so that we draw our power and direction from God, not other people, not the culture around us. The outward journey is how we live as those who know that God's kingdom belongs to the poor, not the rich, that those who hunger will be fed, those who grieve now will come to joy, and those who experience rejection for the sake of God's kingdom will find the deepest satisfaction and reward. This is a mystery that we will understand only as we make the journey. It makes no sense to the world around us, but only to those who give themselves to such a life.