

March 4, 2007/Second Sunday of Lent/David L. Edwards

Jesus' Call and Ours

Luke 13:22-24, 31-35

“Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’”

Called to the Narrow Way

We find the setting for today's lectionary reading from Luke's gospel (13:31-35) a few verses earlier, where Luke writes: “Jesus went through one town and village after another teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.” Jesus has turned toward Jerusalem where his life and ministry will culminate with his death at the hands of the religious and political power structure of his day.

As he goes along, Jesus continues to call people into the life of faith. It is the call to the life of God's kingdom, to truly live as those who know and love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. Someone asks Jesus: “Jesus, how many people will be saved?” This is religious speculation. Will there only be a certain number of people saved? Are you one of them? Am I? Some forms of Christianity engage enthusiastically in this kind of speculation. It is assumed that there is some cosmic determination that only a certain number of people will be “saved” by God. Saved, in this sense, means believing the right religious ideas about God or Jesus or other things so that you can “go to heaven.” It is exclusivist Christianity that is focused on the next life, not this life.

That's not where Jesus is coming from. His response doesn't even match the question: “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.” He says a similar thing in Matthew's gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount. The wide gate is the doorway to destruction; the narrow gate is the path to true life. Jesus is not interested in religious speculation, especially the kind that fosters exclusiveness. He is calling people to wake up to their own lives, to live the way God made us to live. He's talking about life here and now being lived the way God means it to be lived, in peace, justice, compassion, and mercy.

Jesus calls us into a way of living, not a head-trip of religious doctrines. The way is open to everyone, but the reality is that few will make the effort and be willing to face the changes and

challenges of the narrow door. How many will be saved? It's not about that. It's about making the effort to enter the narrow door, to live the life God made us to live. It is available to every person. Yet Jesus is realistic enough to know that relatively few will make that kind of effort and commitment of their lives. The wide way is much easier, even though it leads nowhere.

The Church of the Covenant was born out of a response to Jesus' life and teachings just at this point. We recognize that the spiritual life does not just “happen.” To follow Jesus, to be a Christian in an authentic sense, means committing oneself to a “way.” That “way” involves going deeper into oneself and one's relationship with God through regular prayer, study, reflection, and growth in self-understanding, what we call the inward journey. The inward journey is the way of our own transformation, the emergence of our true self, the self created and loved by God. This leads to the outward journey, paying attention and giving ourselves to what God is calling each of us to do for the nourishing and healing of the world, God's good creation. Call it ministry, mission, or simply service, it is the outward expression of that inward connection or relationship with God.

This is the way we have tried to work here with what Jesus calls the narrow door. It is not about religious doctrines, about which we will always have different and, hopefully, changing understandings. Religious ideas are important, but they become a distraction from living the life of God's love, the life to which Jesus calls us. And entering by the narrow door is not about earning God's love or salvation. We don't have to do that; it's already ours. Salvation—which literally means wholeness or healing--is not about the hereafter but the here-and-now. It is our growing more fully and deeply into our relationship with God and living out of that relationship for the sake of God's world. Our community has simply acknowledged that all of that doesn't happen without effort, without a measure of commitment, without accepting in one's life some minimal spiritual practices that deepen and intensify our relationship with God, with other people, with the world as God's creation, and with ourselves. Ours is not the only way to do this. Maybe it isn't the best way. We need to always be learning and growing in our understanding and our practice. It is simply the way the Church of the Covenant, in our small way, tries to discover the blessings of the narrow door.

Jesus On His Way: Pioneer and Fulfiller of Our Faith

Jesus himself is walking the way to which he calls us. He doesn't just teach with words; he teaches with his life. Jesus' healings and miracles are important. But as we read the gospels, we see that it is his life that is most important. What is most powerful and significant for us is that Jesus embodies the way to which he calls others. We don't just hear the word in Jesus' teachings; we see it in his own life and we experience it in his living presence with us. In Jesus we have an empowering example to follow and to embody in our own unique lives. The Letter to the Hebrews uses the image of Jesus as the "pioneer and perfecter" (literally, "fulfiller") of our faith. He leads the way and fulfills what it means for us to be human beings the way God made us to be.

At this point some Pharisees come to warn Jesus that Herod Antipas wants to kill him, wants to put a stop to him. Herod is a political animal who will do anything to protect his power. It is interesting that Pharisees warn Jesus of the danger. This reminds us that Jesus was not in some kind of battle with the Pharisees as a whole. Some were caught up in the power thing and felt he was a threat. Others saw the sense of what he was talking about and doing, and gave him quiet support.

"Tell that fox that I am going to keep on doing what I am doing, casting out demons and curing people, today, tomorrow and the next day. I am going to fulfill what I've come to do." Jesus sees right through Herod, sees that he is caught in the political games, trying to protect his territory, his position. Jesus knows that such a life is empty and doomed. Herod is no real threat to Jesus because Jesus understands what life is really about, and that's what he is giving his life to. It is about being faithful to God and what God gives us to be and do for the sake of the world God loves. It is about living out of God's reign and realm, not the reign of Herod or Caesar or anyone else in religious or political power, or for that matter, out of anyone else's expectations of us.

Jesus knows he is about to get himself in deep trouble in Jerusalem. But he is going to keep doing what he is doing, what God has called him to do. He does not arouse the ire of Rome or the religious power structure of his day because he is taking them on directly. Herod and Pilate and the chief priests will conspire against him because he is staying true to what God has called him to do. Jesus is fully living out his faith in and faithfulness to God, and that is what disturbs those who want to maintain control.

Here is an important spiritual teaching for us. If we are being true to what we have come to believe God has called us to be and do for the world, **THAT** is the best thing we can do for the world and its needs. Jesus disappointed nearly everyone, including his disciples. He did not take his directions from what he thought would be most effective or popular. He lived from the inside out, and that is what brought so much truth, so much life, so much healing to the world. It also ended up making the religious and political leadership uneasy. But that was a by-product, not Jesus' primary agenda.

It is so important that each of us, as part of our spiritual life, discern what God has given us to be and do. And it is so important that we keep faithful to that. If it is truly what God has given us to do, then it will be just what the world needs. And if all of us were living on this basis, then the needs of the world would be addressed through the particular callings and gifts God gives us.

The problem is that we are so anxious to respond to the needs of the world that we end up going from this cause to that, not really knowing what we are called to do. We become spread too thin, making no significant difference. We make too many commitments and cannot fulfill them. What happens, I think, is that we talk ourselves out of what we most deeply feel ourselves called to do. It seems insignificant. It seems too small to make a difference. Or we let others convince us that what they are committed to is more important, and we give up our own calling.

What we find, however, is that if we discern what God has called us to do, what vision God has implanted in our spirits, what gifts God has given us to use, and we prayerfully, patiently, and with steady devotion follow that calling, we will see differences being made. It is by fulfilling what God has given us to do that we are able to bring a measure of new life and hope to the world. And it may also get us into trouble!

Jesus, the living Christ, is with us still, calling us to follow, to enter through the narrow door into life as it is really made to be lived. It is a life that asks of us effort, commitment, and the giving of our attention. It is not the wide and easy way that asks nothing of us, yet takes us nowhere. Jesus' life and spirit are our empowering example. He has gone before us, fulfilling what it means to live the life of God's kingdom, what it means to live as a human being the way God made us to live. He has blazed the way for us to follow.