

July 1, 2007/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

### **Following Christ: The Way of Non-Attachment**

Luke 9:49-62 *And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."*

I had written another sermon for today, but something happened at the Festival Center Friday far more important than what I was going to talk about. However, there is a connection. It has to do with the call of Christ to follow him in some particular work or mission. It has to do with our commitment to the journey of following Christ and not attaching ourselves to whatever becomes an obstacle to that journey.

The text from Luke's gospel is all about non-attachment. Not getting hung up in how other people respond or don't respond to us or what we are doing. Not getting caught in anger or resentment when others don't respond the way we think they should. Not staying attached to the past, letting the dead bury the dead, as Jesus put it. Not letting other loves and loyalties deter us from the fuller life to which God calls us. These are difficult, challenging teachings of Jesus. Yet the way of non-attachment because of our attachment to following Christ is the path of true freedom, joy, and being channels of what God wants to do for and in the world.

Four years ago there was a series of weekly lunches at the Western Hotel, the historic building on the corner of Fifth and Madison Streets owned by Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship. Thoughts, ideas, and visions were shared about how the nearly vacant building might be used for the community. By the end of the summer, the call was sounded to form a mission group around the vision of a center for community. About eight persons responded and began to meet weekly. The vision of the Festival Center began to take shape. It would be a place of peace, love, learning, hospitality, a place for the building of community. There were as yet no specifics. The mission group felt that the important thing was to remain open to the needs of the neighborhood. We knew also that we ourselves needed to learn what it meant to be in community with the people who live in that part of the College Hill neighborhood, which is predominately African American and low-income. If we were to be builders of community, it had to begin with us.

We did decide that the first program we would like to offer would be something for children. This was discussed and planned over the months we spent rehabilitating the first floor of the building, which would be the Festival Center itself. In April 2004 the Saturday morning children's program began. Our relationships with the children have remained the leading edge of the life and work of the Festival Center. We are trying to live the truth of one of Jesus' central teachings, that the kingdom of God belongs to children. They know the way to the kingdom, and we need to stay close to children to get there ourselves.

Now to this past Friday evening. Sylvia Hobson and Sandy Knodel, Co-Directors of the center, planned for weeks to have a neighborhood celebration. We had one last year around lead-safe education, which culminated in a neighborhood block party. It was quite an elaborate and wonderful event—music, food, huge inflated jumps and slides for the children, and sprinklers in the middle of the street, which the city had been kind enough to close off for our party.

Friday night was a similar event, but simpler. Sylvia and Sandy had planned a "Children's March Against Drugs" as the first activity of our celebration. We gathered at 5:00 p.m., with children from our children's program and Thursday afternoon girls' group. Adults from the neighborhood joined us, along with members of the Festival Center Mission Group, a group from St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and several members of the local Democratic Party organization.

The police department dispatched four officers to be there, one African American and three white. Sandy and Sylvia, along with the neighborhood women's group, have been having conversations with the police department about police-neighborhood relations, which are not good. Police cruisers might drive through the neighborhood, responding only to a crisis, and then very slowly. Or they might sit parked in a vacant lot on the edge of the neighborhood, a distant and ominous-feeling presence that does not really lend a sense of security.

By 4:30 there were two cruisers sitting next to each other in the lot across Madison Street. The officers were talking with each other through their open windows. Sandy walked over to them to welcome and thank them for being there. The response was, unfortunately, cool and unfriendly. Sandy came back agitated by the unfriendliness, which we have grown to expect from police officers in the neighborhood. But by then, Lt. Royal, an African American man full of warmth and friendliness, had arrived and was standing with us in front of the center chatting and meeting everyone. Sandy told him of the response she had gotten from the other officers, who were white. Lt. Royal smiled and said he would have a talk with them. We knew that he would.

Off we went on the march, with Sylvia Hobson leading the way with the children, bullhorn in hand. The girls' group had made up anti-drug chants for us to call out as we marched. When we got to the block of Madison St. where there are two notorious drug houses, Sylvia stopped us in front of those places and bellowed out firm warnings that drug dealers were being put on notice—they and their business were not welcomed in this neighborhood. Now, Sylvia has this amazing gentle and wise way of dealing with children and young people, enfolding them in love and affirmation. But when it comes to things that threaten children's health, safety, and happiness, her experience in the military, as the first black female police officer in the Lynchburg and Roanoke departments, and as a preacher in her own right comes through loud and clear. Had I been a person dealing drugs in one of those houses, I would surely have decided it was time to move elsewhere or change my life.

When we got back to the Festival Center, a band composed of high school students had set up on the front sidewalk, led by Sylvia's son on keyboard. These

outstanding young people filled the street and neighborhood with their music for a good hour and a half. More people were drawn in by the music and the food, hot dogs cooked and served in the Children's Garden. More children came. Bill Long, president of the Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship Board, was there with his wife Lyn. They sat in folding chairs under the tent donated and set up by Louis Wilson, Jr., of Wilson's Barber Shop just down Fifth Street from the center. Louis pitched right in to help in many ways. The crowd was large enough to feel like a neighborhood gathering and small enough for people to get to know each other.

About an hour into the festivities, I noticed a change. The police officers were out of their cruisers standing in the street chatting with the people and horsing around with the children. They found their way back into the garden to get something to drink. When I offered hot dogs, one of them said that he had dinner waiting for him at home. How late do you have to work? I asked. Oh, he said, this is my day off, but we were short on street officers today. I was deeply touched and thanked him for making that sacrifice. The thing was, though, he and the others were now really enjoying it! They walked around here and there, inside the center and outside, looking around, talking and laughing with people.

The thing that finally undid me, though, was what I saw as I walked through the center on my way back to the grill in the garden. I had left the hot dog operation to Larry Farmer while I went to take a look out front. I walked through the children's room. There sat a group of children around the activity table, working on impromptu crafts that Selina Field had provided for them. And at the table sat one of the officers with his craft in front of him! He got up to offer his seat to a child who had come in. I joked with him about how well he seemed to be doing with his craft. He laughed, so I took a chance and pushed the envelope a bit further. Selina, I asked, has this one been giving you any trouble? He laughed. Selina laughed said he had done pretty well.

When things were winding down, I had a chance to thank the officers for their presence there. One of them quickly said that it was really a pleasure to be part of something people had worked so hard to put together for the community. I could tell this was from his heart. I hear that these officers told Sylvia before they left that if we ever need help like that again, we should call the department and ask for them by name. The officer from the craft table had also asked at one point in the evening what time the daily worship was.

Following the call of God in Christ means giving ourselves to the way of Christ and letting go of all our attachments. Our ideas of how things should be. Our own plans and great thoughts for programs and goals and the like. It means staying wide open while we keep on the journey, trusting a vision that may be as general and vague as building community, bringing together people who are different from one another, among whom there may be distances of distrust, fear, even hostility. When we are called to a mission, whatever it might be, our spiritual work is to keep this openness, this non-attachment so that we can leave everything for what God wants to do through us. We don't know beforehand how it will look or what it will really

become. People and their gifts and needs will tell us. God will speak to us and lead us through them.

I think this is part of what Jesus meant when told the would-be disciple, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus was telling him how it would be, this journey to new life, the life of God's kingdom. We will have nowhere to lay our heads either. It is breathtaking and sometimes very scary, this letting go of our security and clinging, trusting God to show us the way and learning to trust ourselves as the new people of faith we are becoming along the way.

At the Festival Center we are still learning what it really means to be in community with the people of the neighborhood, trying to be bridge builders and community makers. We had no idea that one of the bridges we would be called to build, a part of community that would need to be made would be with those officers Friday night. But something happened. The walls came down. The coolness melted. And love did its work. There is much yet to be done. But seeds were sown and relationships made. It all has to do with how we are all going to learn to be in community and our willingness to be changed, to grow.

There are still great challenges and struggles ahead. We know, however, that the Festival Center needs to always be there, especially now that the neighborhood is feeling that it is their place. The financial challenges are great. We will wonder how in the world we can keep it going. I don't know where the answers or the resources will come from. But I do know for sure that we have to keep focused on the vision, the mission, the call, the children, the people. And we have to keep believing that God will provide what we need. We just need to keep letting go, not attaching, as we keep on the journey.