

supposed to be about, what the sabbath is really about? It's about our relationship with God and what that relationship means for our relationships with life around us. We are to be a people of compassion, justice, and peace.

Jesus confronted this issue many times, in many ways. When the forms of religion become more important than faithful living, we are sunk. People come to the faith community seeking refuge in their relationship with God. What they often find is a religious organization preoccupied with the structure and the perpetuation of the institution. This story can raise our awareness of our true nature as a spiritual community. We are called to be a community of persons in touch with, exploring, and deepening our relationship with God. We are to be a community in which persons can discover their own lives as gifts from God and what God calls them to do with the particular gifts God has given them. But being the human beings we are, we have this tendency to drift over into the same kind of formalism the leader of the synagogue was defending that day. The form of religion is important; it can guide us into the deepening of our relationship with God and our living out of that relationship. However, when the form is taken as the most important thing, the essence is lost.

All of us come into the community of faith "bent over" in different ways. Physically, emotionally, spiritually, we become possessed by "demons" that have made our lives unsatisfactory. As Christ's community, we seek to offer a place where each of us and all who come here—children, youth, adults--can begin to stand up straight, can discover or re-discover our relationship with God and start living as those who are rooted and grounded in God, our rock, our fortress, our refuge.

August 23, 2007/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Further Thoughts on Taking Refuge

Psalm 71:1-6 *In you, O Lord, I take refuge...Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me....*

Jeremiah 1:4-10 *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you..."*

Luke 13:10-17 *Jesus heals on the Sabbath.*

Some months ago I spoke about the meaning and importance of "taking refuge." It is the way we live so that we are always grounding our lives in our relationship with God. Taking refuge is also what we call here the inward journey. This week's scripture lessons and the Children Worship & Wonder training here this weekend drew my attention back to "taking refuge."

Psalm 71 begins: "In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame." It goes on to speak of God as rock of refuge and strong fortress. The psalmist acknowledges God as the source of his life since childhood. Taking refuge is not avoiding reality. It is returning to what is most real—our relationship with God. Taking refuge in God and our relationship with God DOES mean turning from certain so-called realities. There are many things about life around us that detract from and contradict who we are as God's beloved people. For many reasons, we often feel under assault, alienated from ourselves and others, confused, or just slogging through each day, putting one foot in front of the other, existing but not really living.

Taking refuge means a return to our relationship with God, in which we recover our sense of belonging and purpose. God is rediscovered as a rock of refuge and a strong fortress. We regain within ourselves a kind of solidity or inner strength. This happens as we practice regular times of silence and prayer, times of solitude when we become aware of our lives in God. We stop, we breathe, we quiet ourselves. We let go of preoccupations, aware of our thoughts and feelings but not attaching to them. There is a very physical dimension to prayer, which we often overlook. Prayer is far more than thinking about God. It is BEING in God's presence, BEING in our relationship with God. When we breathe with awareness so that we are

truly in the present, when we sit straight and alert, then we experience the solidity the psalmist is talking about. When we practice taking refuge in this way, we experience something of what the psalmist speaks of as God, our rock and fortress.

We are very grateful for those of you who are here for the Children Worship & Wonder training, that you are able to be in this place which we consider and are working to enhance as a place of refuge. It is a place where we hope that all who come here, and we ourselves, will be able to touch our relationship with God and the creation. The human world we have created is a stressful, violent, confused and confusing mess! We can and do get very lost, losing touch with our true selves. We need places and times for taking refuge, for withdrawing from the pressures and noises and false claims that surround us every day so that we can listen inwardly to our own spirits and to God. There is nothing more needed today than to have places where people can rediscover and touch base with themselves as spiritual beings, as those who are made by God and are called by God to use their unique lives and gifts for the healing of life. Being grounded in and nurturing our relationship with God enables us to live in ways that bring life to the world.

Children need to take refuge in God and we need to take refuge with children. I know that you are working very hard this weekend as those who want to be with children in a very special way, so that their relationship with God is nourished and deepened. The psalmist speaks of having leaned upon God from childhood. God was the midwife who took him from his mother's womb. God tells Jeremiah, "I formed you in the womb; before you were born I consecrated you and appointed you to be one who will speak for me." Jeremiah resists: But I am only a boy! Children and young people often feel this way. Surrounded by an adult world that dismisses their value, treating them only as potential adults, children and youth often feel discounted, left out, with nothing to contribute. We must realize that children, all children, are among those who are marginalized by society and often the church itself.

The Children Worship & Wonder program assumes that children already have a very close relationship with God. Young children are closer to God than we adults are. Jesus told us that the kingdom of God belongs to

children, and if we want to find it, we have to become like little children. Children Worship & Wonder provides an environment in which children can explore, deepen, and express their relationship with God. They hear the stories of faith told simply, without explanation, and are given freedom to respond in their own ways. Their relationship with God is honored, and they are invited to dwell in and deepen that relationship. Adults are not there to fill their heads but to encourage them to wonder. Adults who take refuge in God with children in this way experience the re-awakening of their own spiritual lives.

The community of faith is to be a place of refuge for children as well as adults. We are to be a community in which children's relationship with God is recognized and valued. They are to be received the way Jesus received children, a those who can lead us into the kingdom. If we let them, children will teach us how to live and pray more simply, more honestly, and with a heightened sense of wonder. We run the risk of being too much an adult-oriented community—too serious, too complicated, too wordy, too joyless, and too full of activism. Children are natural-born contemplatives and mystics! Those who think children have to always be "entertained" or assaulted with noise and hyperactivity have never taken the time to really be with young children. Children often know better how to be with themselves in their relationship with God than we do. They can and need to experience quietness and solitude, and they need adults with them who themselves practice a prayerful life.

Finally, the woman possessed by a crippling spirit finds refuge in Jesus after eighteen years of suffering. She doesn't even ask him for help. He sees her condition and acts out of compassion to liberate her. Jesus' healing of this woman offends the religious establishment and upsets the religious order of things. He has healed on the sabbath, which the synagogue leader sees as upsetting the status quo. He seems quite reasonable about it. Look, he says to the people, you have six days in which to come here and find healing. Let's not spoil the sabbath by upsetting the rules. Jesus pokes a big hole in this. Even on the sabbath, he says, don't you untie your ox or donkey to take it for a drink of water? That's "working on the sabbath." How come you are so upset when a human being who is suffering receives healing on the sabbath? Have you forgotten what we are