

over the years. We have this vision of Christian life and community that speaks of the essential importance of each person taking his or her spiritual life, indeed, one's whole life, seriously and living it as faithfully as we can. When Jesus calls us to follow him, it is to a life of coming alive, of waking up to who we are in our relationship with God. And it is about committing ourselves to the things we feel God calls us to be and do today. It is a response to go beyond simply feeling grief or outrage at the way things are. It is the call to make our own lives points of change and new life, not only for ourselves but for the world.

This Saturday we have our annual recommitment silent retreat. Those considering committing to Covenant or Community Membership for another year, and those who are moving toward making such commitments, will have this day to reflect on readiness to commit to another year of an intentional spiritual life. It is a time for such questions as: What am I committing myself to in response to the needs or situations I see around me? How can I move from the paralysis of discouragement or despair or grief to living my life with responsibility and integrity? How is God calling me to use this one, small, precious life I have to increase my own and others' happiness and wellbeing? Our compassion is important; without it we do not see the suffering of people and the earth itself. But our compassion needs to lead us to doing something in response, something we feel God is calling us to do, something God has gifted us to do for the sake of life. I think that Jesus' words about being faithful in the little things are so important. If we are not doing what we can with the lives we have, as small and insignificant as we think them to be, how can we expect to make a difference in life around us? If we are committing ourselves to what we feel Jesus is calling us to do for the sake of other people and the world around us, then we experience the arising of hope and confidence and a different kind of power. It is the power of God's transforming love working in us and through us.

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

### **Compassion: From Grief to Responsibility**

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 *For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.*

Luke 16:1-13 *"Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much... You cannot serve God and wealth."*

The readings from Jeremiah and Luke are difficult. Sometimes scripture feels as unyielding as a rock! As I worked with Jeremiah's words, I understood and empathized with his grief about the situation of his society. I just could not get on board with him. A voice in me kept saying, "Okay, Jeremiah, the situation in your day was probably as bad as you say. So it is today in our society and world. But what are we going to do about it?" Jeremiah's tears of outrage and grief are important. But there has to be more. We need to move beyond feelings of outrage, grief, and distress to living our lives responsibly and in a redemptive way.

Jeremiah mourns the faithlessness of everyone in Israel. He rails against the prophets and priests, the religious leaders of his day, who are telling people that everything is fine, when in reality everything is a mess and everyone is in denial (see Jer. 14:18). Jeremiah also mourns those he calls "my poor people." He is not talking about the economically poor. He is talking about all the people. He sees everyone in the land as completely lost. The leaders are misleading the people; the people are allowing themselves to be misled. Misled from what? From their relationship with God as the forming center of their lives.

Jeremiah is not "speaking truth to power" only, but truth to everyone. God calls him to speak to the whole society and every person in it about the need to make a fundamental turning in their lives. It is a turning back to their relationship with God and responsible living out of that relationship. Jeremiah is speaking to a society that is completely out of touch with reality, the reality of the situation that has been created and the reality of God, the sacred dimension of life. Religion has become a sham and show. Politics and economics are in the service of greed and self-serving.

Jeremiah's response to what is going on is profound grief that comes from his compassion for his people. He sees how lost they are and his heart is breaking. Compassion as "suffering with" others in their situation is important. It means that we really see deeply into suffering and its causes. However, compassion as "feelings" is not enough. We must go beyond grief and indignation to action, to doing something about the situation. That is how I found myself responding to the text

from Jeremiah. It is not enough just to feel compassion or to grieve the situation of persons who are suffering or our society and world in its lostness. It is not enough to feel outrage over the war in Iraq or any other war we have started or contributed to. It is not enough to be outraged by global warming and the persistent denial of it. It is not enough to decry religious movements and organizations that are focused on becoming big and powerful instead of the nonviolence and servant spirit of Jesus.

Our grief or outrage, our sadness or righteous indignation is an important awakening to the reality of life as we are living it. However, we need to move from tears to transformation, from grief and anger to responsible living. When I was in college, a friend used to chide me in a good natured way, saying that I felt every bullet fired in Vietnam. This made me defensive, for I took myself VERY seriously! What she said touched this very same point. It is not enough to “feel” compassion or righteous anger or grief for a situation. Just feeling compassion does not help anyone. Compassion needs to deepen toward insight and understanding, and ripen into action, how we live our lives. We recognize that we are part of the situation, that our inattentiveness or unawareness has contributed to the suffering. Then we recognize that changing our own lives can help change the situation.

This is where Jesus’ teaching in Luke’s gospel began to make sense to me. There is a very puzzling parable about a dishonest manager, or steward, who saves his own skin by endearing himself to those who owe his master money. He “cooks the books” and earns the friendship of his master’s debtors. The rich land owner who had fired this guy is delight by his shrewdness. He admires the fellow’s crafty self-preservation. Jesus then says that the children of “this age” are more shrewd in dealing with “dishonest wealth” than the children of light. I think that Jesus is saying that we need to be as energetic, resourceful, and committed to living out our faith in the world as those who could care less about such things! In other words, it is not enough to be very “spiritual,” distancing ourselves from the world around us, while not doing all we can to live what we say we believe. Jesus doesn’t call us to a life of looking beyond this world to a better one, but to living in ways that make a difference in this world. And we make a difference when we live in this world as those who know it is God’s world, God’s good creation.

Jesus then says that if we live faithfully in small things, we will be faithful in greater things. If we are dishonest in small things, we will be dishonest in large things. I think Jesus means by “dishonest” living in ways that are not mindful of God and our relationship with God. In other words, irresponsible living. The decisions we make, whether they seem to us little or big, are all important and have an impact. How we spend our time. How we spend our money. How we use our energy. Jesus is counseling us to live in such a way that whatever wealth or influence or power we may have, we will use it for good purposes, the purposes of life. According to what Jesus is saying, we can’t sit back and say that since we don’t have much by way of

money or material wealth or power that we can’t do much. Whatever we have can be used to enhance life, to make things better. The most faithful stewards of money and most generous givers in the churches I’ve served through the years have been those whose lives were materially modest. They understood what Jesus was talking about. They knew whatever they had was not theirs but God’s and they could use it to help. Those who have the most money or wealth or power, unfortunately, seem most insulated against what Jeremiah and Jesus are talking about. They see neither the dire situation of their own life or the world around them nor their obligation to help by being faithful stewards of what has been entrusted to them. Wealth and power have great potential to make us addicted to them. So Jesus finishes by saying that we can’t serve both God and wealth, or whatever else has become dominant in our lives. When we make our relationship with God primary, when we take seriously our lives as spiritual persons, then everything else is brought under that relationship and becomes a means of serving God, of serving life.

Last week while on vacation, I re-read Henry David Thoreau’s WALDEN. I have been reading this book about every two or three years since I first read it in college. It is always fresh and new, a book that speaks to us today in important ways. Thoreau was a prophet in that he saw deeply into the situation around him, the confusion and destructiveness, spiritually and materially, of his society. But he went beyond criticism and grieving. He set out to live his life as truly as he could, to see things as clearly as he could, and to let go of every illusory attachment. He wrote: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.” He went to Walden Pond to live for two years in order to confront, as he wrote, “only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” Thoreau saw how encumbered people had become by what they owned or wore or the so-called success they were pursuing. He saw how spiritually dead people had become and set about discovering for himself how to wake up to life. While living on the shore of Walden Pond in the little house he had built himself, he studied the small things and thus learned the big lessons of life. He simplified his life materially so that he could awaken spiritually. In an often-quoted passage from Thoreau’s conclusion to WALDEN, he wrote: “I learned this at least from my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

That sounded to me a lot like what we work with here in our community. We might put it like this: We are learning that if we make a commitment to our own spiritual lives and follow as faithfully as we can what we feel God is calling us to be and do, we will experience a fullness of life not possible otherwise. It has to do with faithfulness and responsibility in our own lives. That is the way of recovery, the way of hope and new life. It is really what the Church of the Covenant has been about