

September 30, 2007/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Investing in God's Future

Jeremiah 32:1-3a,6-15 *And I bought the field at Anathoth....*

1 Timothy 6:6-19 *...pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession....*

In a dream, God tells Jeremiah to buy a plot of land from his cousin. Everything is falling apart. The city of Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonian army and the great temple is about to be destroyed. The people of Israel will be taken into exile in Babylon for three generations. Jeremiah himself is in jail. And what does he do? He invests in a piece of real estate that he will never even see, much less live on. It makes absolutely no sense...unless you are living your life according to what you feel God is calling you to do.

Paul writes to the young Timothy, telling him to stay away from patterns of living focused on materialism and wealth, and to devote his life to righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. He is told to "lay hold of the eternal life to which you were called...." That plot of land that Jeremiah buys is an investment in the future God will bring about for Israel. The eternal life Timothy is to lay hold of is his own life lived as faithfully as he can, being and doing who God made him to be and what God will give him to do. That is eternal life. It is life as God means us to live it. That's what we need to be laying hold of and investing in. Simply being the persons God made us to be. Seeking to do what we feel God calls us to do. Jeremiah's buying that piece of land when it made no sense at all. Paul's telling Timothy to lay hold of the life that cannot be overcome, his own life lived in faith. These to me became images for the life of faith, the journey of faith we are on. An inward journey of laying hold of, claiming our own lives as God's beloved children. An outward journey of doing what we feel God is calling us to do even when it makes no sense in light of the seemingly hopeless situations around us. This will be living in the way that is most helpful to the world.

This morning I want to share with you where I am in my own spiritual life with regard to what I am feeling called to do, where I am feeling called to focus more of my time and energy and attention, and the gifts I believe God has given me that need better stewardship and fuller exercising than I have given them in recent times. The summer has become for me, and perhaps others of you, a time for spiritual reassessment. For the Festival Center Mission Group, August has become a kind of sabbatical month when we suspend mission group meetings and the Saturday children's program and look at our own commitments to the mission of the Festival Center and the mission group. I use this time to look at my whole life, as spiritual leader of this community but first of all as a person called by Christ to follow him, using my life and my gifts in the service of God's love for the world.

Yesterday was our annual recommitment retreat. This, too, is part this annual "season of spiritual re-evaluation," you might call it. As I come to the point of making my re-commitment to Covenant Membership, I want to share with you some things about my own sense of call at this point. I do it under this theme and deep personal belief: If each of us were living authentically

and deeply out of the unique persons God made us to be, exercising the gifts we have been given for the wellbeing of the community of faith and the world, we will be doing what is best for our community of faith and the world. I believe that as each of us discovers and lives out of our own "place," if you will, balance and fruitfulness and peace are established. The Church of the Covenant has always tried to live out of this vision of Christian community, that God calls each person in Christ to be the unique and gifted person she or he is. That is the way the needs of the world will be met. As we are spiritually attentive to life around us, the needs of the world will draw forth the persons and their gifts for the meeting of those needs. That's what we are to be about, nurturing ourselves as a community in which we and all who feel called to be here are on the journey of discovering and expressing our authentic, true selves, the selves God made us to be. And then living out of that inward discovery and knowledge of who we really are, giving our lives to and for the sake of the world as God's beloved creation. If this is our vision and mission as a community, then I need to be faithful to it in my own life. And so I share with you where I am at this point in my journey of faith.

Over the past four and a half years, I have given much time and energy to two visions, or rather two dimensions of one vision for our community. The Festival Center was envisioned as a place where we can be in community with those who live in the central city, overcoming in ourselves the boundaries of race and socio-economic separation. The Festival Center is becoming an accepted part of the Fifth Street/Madison Street area of the College Hill neighborhood. Building relationships with those in the neighborhood has been a slow, patient process involving much learning about ourselves and others, as we respond to the expressed needs of the neighborhood. Those relationships are continuing to develop.

Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center began as a vision in my heart when I lived for seven weeks upstairs in the church house while Kaye was in Indiana selling our house. What a beautiful spiritually and physically restful place this is! A place where people of all ages can touch their relationship with God's creation, with themselves, and with God. All right here in the city, a place of refuge and peace. I learned that the idea of a retreat center had been floating around now and then in the minds of others. Nearly two years ago, we sounded the call, formed a mission group, and Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center was born. The physical work of this phase of the center is done. We have already received over 40 guests since officially opening in April. Now we are turning attention to programming we can offer for spiritual deepening in an atmosphere of interfaith learning and respect.

The work involved with these two missions, along with the ongoing weekly work of being pastor of the community, has been incredibly intense and demanding. But now the Festival Center and Chrysalis are on pretty firm footing. I do not say things are clear sailing. That is never the case. The Festival Center has funds to keep it going for about 6-7 months. We need to find significant sources of funding in order to continue and grow in our work there. The retreat center is a month-to-month adventure, but so far we have been able to pay rent, utilities, and supplies, as well as a part time director. Both the Festival Center and Chrysalis mission groups are continuing to work very hard and shoulder the responsibility for the ongoing work to which they have committed.

My involvement in these two missions is changing according to what I feel as God's call at this point. I am stepping aside as president of the FC Board after three years. Because the Festival Center and Chrysalis mission groups now meet on the same night, I will be dividing my time between them. This is not the best arrangement for commitment to a mission group, but we have worked it out this way for the time being since my role as minister of the community puts me in a different situation of leadership. The leadership and responsibility for these missions is being taken up and shared by others, and I feel myself called at this point to move in new directions.

I will be giving more time to spiritual leadership of our community with regard to several things. I will be working to offer more frequent School for Christian Living classes, opportunities for learning, sharing, and spiritual growth through study together. On Wednesday, Oct. 10, I will begin a six-week class that will center on our life and ministry as the Church of the Covenant. We will use as our resource for study and discussion the manuscript of a small book I have been writing, with the working title "Journey of a Lifetime: Life and Ministry in the Church of the Covenant Community." I have put in this book the basic structure, vision, and shape of our community, not only for persons exploring membership but for all of us as a reminder of who we feel ourselves called to be as a community. Besides being a way of re-visiting who we are as a community, the class will help me with the final re-writing of the book itself. I will then work to plan other classes through the year that will give us all opportunities for learning and growth.

I want to give more attention to working with individuals as they seek to discover their own giftedness and callings. And in this, I want to be mindful of persons who may feel called to one of our existing ministries or who may have within them the seeds of new ministries.

I will be giving more attention and time to worship and preparation for our worship as a community. In particular, I have for some time longed to spend more time focusing on music and on the weekly preparation of sermons. Our worship together is the heartbeat of our community. It is our weekly time together when we renew ourselves as Christ's community and experience the presence and call of God in our life as a community. As well, our worship gives us as individuals a crucial time of touching afresh our own lives as those loved and called by God in Christ.

Yet, there is an even deeper call that I feel and have felt, indeed, all my life. That is the call to a more contemplative way of life out of which I can do the writing and create the music I feel called to offer. When I met with the Covenant Members to discuss my coming here as pastor, we agreed that I could take time each week for music and writing, not as avocations but as a significant part of my sense of call. The ball was in my court! Other callings emerged that seemed right and compelling, like the Festival Center and Chrysalis. Now I feel God is telling me to get back to what I am most deeply called to do out of my own uniqueness and gifts.

Ours is a different kind of spiritual community. The pattern of Christian life we try to live by is simple but challenging. It has to do not with running a religious organization but with offering persons the opportunity and environment in which they can discover, understand more deeply, and live out of the spiritual core of their lives. We need to be ever-aware of what it means to be Christ's community in today's world and how we can be the Church of the Covenant in a dynamic and changing way, while remaining faithful to the core vision that we have. I want to be able to have the time, energy, and attentiveness to reflect on and express what insights God might give me to help us continue to be that kind of spiritual community.

Responding to God's call to buy a piece of property in a land soon to be lost for generations, Jeremiah invested in the future God would one day bring about. Houses and fields and vineyards would again be established in that land. Paul counseled the young Timothy to claim his own life as one who loved and was loved by God. Being ourselves as God uniquely made us and doing the things we feel in our hearts God is calling us to do—this is the way we become channels of what God wants to do for the world. Sometimes it makes no more sense than Jeremiah's buying that piece of land in a collapsing nation. But it makes perfect sense in the scheme of God's sovereignty and love.