

## The Journey into Our Own Hearts

Romans 5:1-5 *...God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

John 4:5-15 *"The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."*

The inward journey that we talk about in our community can be misunderstood. It is not a "turning inward" and away from the needs, sufferings, and struggles of God's world that call for our response. It is not something just for introverts and optional for extraverts or activists. The inward journey is at the core of Jesus' call to follow him.

The inward journey is the way we speak of the most vital relationship of our lives—our relationship with God. Working with our inward journey is the way we grow in awareness of that relationship, deepening it, and clarifying its meaning for all the dimensions of our lives. We devote time daily to quietness and solitude to know our own hearts, including the difficult and painful parts that we would rather avoid. The inward journey includes prayer and study, yet our main purpose is to become more spiritually awake, more aware of who we are in God and what God is giving us to do.

I believe that we come into the world with this inner connection with God clear and vivid. Young children have this awareness, though they have not yet developed words to name it or analyze it. Unfortunately, as children grow older, society and often the church itself bury their spiritual awareness beneath a load of concepts, doctrines, prejudices, and other preoccupations that take them further away from that deep and rich inner life with which they were born. We might say that the inward journey is a returning to that fundamental relationship we have with God and life. It is, I think, our response to Jesus' words that we must become like children in order to enter the kingdom of God. We make that journey as those who have accumulated all kinds of burdens and followed all kinds of spiritual dead-ends. The spiritual life involves a journey back into the present moment, where we as children were able to live freely and joyfully. When we speak of Jesus as savior or reconciler, we mean that in his life we see and are enabled to receive this authentic way of living—out of our inner relationship with the very source and power of life.

This is what Paul is pointing to in the reading from the Letter to the Romans. Paul sees Jesus' life as having the effect of opening the channel to our relationship with God. We are "justified by faith," Paul writes. He means that our right relationship with God is not a matter of works, of something we do, but faith. And faith is simply the receiving of God's love as we experience it in Christ. Our relationship with God is not about achieving something or being good enough to merit divine love. Our relationship with God is only to be received. This receiving, this simple opening of our hand, as it were, is what Paul calls faith.

God's love has been poured into our hearts, Paul writes. It has already happened to us. It is in every sense a "given." But you know what religion has done with this? What Christianity has done with this? Ignored it. Continued to tell people that they are not good enough or spiritual enough or moral enough. Or we have made Christian faith a matter of the head. Thinking is very important, but the intellectual focus of religion has starved people. Paul doesn't say that God's love has been poured into our heads, but our hearts. Heart, soul, spirit. Those biblical words all mean the same thing—the very core of our being. Living in and then out of God's love doesn't have to do with having the right religious ideas or believing the right religious doctrines or measuring up to a rigid set of moral laws. It has to do with awakening to the reality that God has poured love directly into the center of our being. And we know this through Christ who has showed us this way.

All of this is why Paul says that we can boast in our relationship with God, and we can boast in our hope of sharing God's glory. He is not talking about the religious arrogance that so easily overtakes Christianity, or other religions as well. He is not talking about having big egos or throwing our weight around. Paul is drawing upon a very Jewish understanding, that boasting, in the sense he is using it, means proclaiming our human dignity and freedom. Our human dignity and freedom are rooted in God's love for us. We belong to God because God made us and continues to love us. We can even boast of our sufferings and struggles, and find in them a hope that cannot be destroyed. Boasting of our relationship with God and even of our struggles means that we do not have to be ashamed, either of who we are or our most painful experiences and

circumstances. This means living with a deep, unshakable confidence in life itself because God's love is at the core of life. For this reason, the inward journey should never be a process of harsh self-incrimination or perfectionism that fills us with anxiousness. Nor should it be a guilt-driven striving to always live up to expectations. The inward journey is our awakening to our relationship with God whose love has already been poured into our hearts. We journey in the confidence of this firm foundation through all the changes and challenges of our lives.

Then we find Jesus at a well in Samaria. He's tired and thirsty. The disciples have gone into town to get some take-out. A Samaritan woman comes to get water. Jesus asks her for a drink. She is shocked. Jews don't have any social dealings with Samaritans. They don't "share things." There's a lot of bad blood between the two peoples. Jesus has crossed the line, as he is always doing.

The woman asks, How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan, for a drink? Jesus responds: If you knew the gift of God and who is asking for a drink, you would have asked for and been given living water. "Living water" in the literal sense means flowing water as in a river or stream, as opposed to well water that can be rather stagnant. Jesus means "living water" as the life that comes from God--the water of life. They are talking about two different kinds of water.

Sir, you have no bucket. Where do you get this living water? Are you better than Jacob who gave us this well? Jesus responds again: Whoever drinks of this water will just get thirsty again. The water I'm talking about will quench thirst forever. In fact, it will become a spring of water within people gushing up to eternal life. The woman still does not get what Jesus is talking about. But she asks for this water. It sounds like a great deal! She will not have to keep coming to this well every day to draw water. Maybe she's thinking indoor plumbing! And in a way, that's what Jesus is talking about--our inner life, journeying to that center of our being where we tap into the ever-flowing stream of God's love. This living water becomes in us a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

God's love poured into our hearts. A stream of living water gushing up in us to eternal life. This is why it is so important that we commit ourselves to an inward journey, giving attention daily to awareness of our relationship with God. Jesus points the way and calls us to this journey. It is no more important than the outward journey of doing what we feel God is calling us to do, but it is no less important either. In fact, without this growing and deepening awareness of our lives in God, we cannot really know who God made us to be and what God is giving us to do for the sake of the world. It is the path of eternal life. In the scriptures, eternal life does not mean life after death, at least not that alone. It means a quality of life here and now, a way of living so that we are always aware of our lives in relationship with God and are living out of that relationship. The living water Jesus speaks of is the love of God poured into our hearts, and not only our own hearts but into the very life of the world itself. Being in touch with that life-giving water, that underground river of life, IS to participate in the eternal life Jesus is talking about. It is life both now and forever.

This is the main thing that I try to make clear whenever I talk with someone about the possibility of their becoming part of our community as a Covenant or Community Member. It is not a matter of joining the church and taking on responsibilities to keep the church running. It is not even a matter of persons deciding which of our ministries they feel they should join. It is first and foremost making a commitment to their own lives, to this journey of giving attention to, becoming aware of, and deepening their relationship with the living God.

The spiritual disciplines that we commit to are for the purpose of helping us make that journey. Daily times of prayer, silence, study, meditation. Regular worship with the community. The practice of financial giving. The discerning of our gifts and using those gifts to serve our community of faith or the world around us. Sharing our journeys with others, seeking help and guidance from others. These are not rules to be followed for their own sake, as though we are somehow earning or achieving something. They are the shape we give to our lives so that we continue to touch that living water within us and it becomes more and more the very fountain of our living.

This is the core of what we are about--being persons and a community making that decision to give ourselves to a journey of faith, a journey into our own spirits, our own hearts, discovering there that we belong to God and what that belonging means for the full unfolding of our lives. If our living becomes this kind of journey, then our lives will blossom with the gifts God has given us and will unfold in ministries to touch some need in God's world.