

August 16, 2009/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

### **Thankfulness, Faithfulness, and Reverent Awe: Reflections on Psalm 111**

For three weeks I have been reading and living with Psalm 111. Here is one fruitful way to work with scripture -- you live with the same reading over a longer period of time, reading it each day, not trying to figure it out or force it to have some meaning you think it should have. Just letting it speak its own word, some days clear, some days not so clear. In the meantime, you go about your life, doing the things you feel called to do, and let your experiences speak to the scripture. This is a dialogue between scripture and our lives. We give attention to scripture. We give attention to our lives. We listen for the living Word spoken to us in the process.

The psalmist begins by looking forward to giving thanks to God within the community of faith. For the psalmist, worship is primarily an act of gratitude. I sense that the psalmist can't wait to join the community in worship and to express gratitude in the company of those who share the life of faith. This reminded me of the importance the discipline to which we commit ourselves as Covenant or Community members--to be with our community of faith in worship.

Kaye and I met a very interesting person at the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Indianapolis. His name is Wahhab Baldwin. A practicing Sufi for forty years, he is also now a member of the Disciples of Christ. He has started a new Disciples congregation in Seattle--the Sufi Christian Church! He told us that what he thought Christianity uniquely brings to the interfaith table is a radical emphasis on community.

When we follow Jesus, he leads us into community. That is where we discover, grow in, and live out the life of faith. When we worship together here on Sunday mornings and in our mission groups, we are expressing this reality. We cannot be Christians alone. We cannot be human beings alone. Certainly some of us are more extroverted and some more introverted. That is a matter of temperament and personality. For all of us it is in community that we find what we need to fulfill the life of faith. And the foremost character of our gathering is to give thanks. Gratitude is the most authentic spiritual attitude. It arises in us as we recognize more and more that, regardless of difficulties in our lives and the life of the world, life itself is a gift, full of blessings. Awakening to this is perhaps our most important spiritual work.

The middle section of the psalm speaks of two things. The works of God that are to be delighted in and contemplated, and that are full of God's faithfulness and justice. And God's covenant with us, a relationship or partnership into which we enter. Our part of that relationship is to become aware of and to live according to God's "precepts". I like precepts better than "laws," which has too formal and rigid a feel to it. Precepts are simply the way things work, the way life works. We discover these one way or another as we go along in this life. Speaking the truth works; not speaking the truth doesn't work. Cooperation works; demanding that things be done our way doesn't work. Generosity and sharing work; clinging to our own selfish wants doesn't work. Jesus gives his disciples one central commandment--to love one another as he has loved them. Love lived out in community and in action works; bearing grudges, holding onto resentments, seeing others as enemies, hurting, dishonoring, killing--all of that doesn't work.

When we live in partnership with God--a covenant relationship--learning and following the precepts of God that give life, good things happen! It's not easy and can demand everything from us. Yet when we persevere in this life of faithfulness, the meaning of the wonderful works of God becomes increasingly real to us.

As the arrival of the New York work group drew closer, I was busy making preparations -- deciding on jobs, gathering materials, preparing the rooms where they would stay, trying to think through every possible thing that would be needed. At times I wondered, Can I really do this again each year! I'm not getting younger!

Then our friends arrived for their eleventh year of working with and for us. There were many things to deal with throughout the week, and at times it could get confusing and frustrating. Yet these young people and adults dove right into the work and the spirit of it. They were here because they share with us the faith that Jesus has called us to serve others, to make love into actions of generosity and caring, and to work together so that life will be more just, compassionate, and peaceful. Precepts!

Being around children and young people keeps our spirits young. This group took on each task with energy, purpose, and carefulness, and without any serious complaint. The first day at The Festival Center, I spoke briefly to the group before they set to work, explaining the work of the center and how important were all

the jobs they would be doing for us. Later, I was walking through the garden and met one of the girls coming toward me on some errand. Wearing her work gloves proudly, she said, "I feel so important." She had taken to heart what I had said to the group, and I inwardly bowed to her in humility. Many were their tasks. Repainting the inside trim that takes a beating. Installing the rain water collection barrels for the garden. Raking the magnolia leaves that constantly bury the garden. Cleaning the sidewalk in front of the building. Repainting the water-damaged chapel wall. Giving the kitchen a long overdue thorough cleaning and arranging. Fixing doors. Cleaning rooms and hallways.

Out here, the tasks were as numerous. Two new benches for the trails. Painting the interior of the Youth House. Planting flowers. Repainting the cottage ramp and giving us a good start on repainting the Church House porch. Clearing the piles of rubbish and leaves from around Kitty's Cottage. Each task done with much labor, yet with eagerness and care.

This morning I come to worship with my community in the spirit of the psalmist who couldn't wait to give thanks to God for all of God's wondrous works. It is a curious and wonderful thing that as people of faith we give ourselves to the things God calls us to, work very hard, expending all our energy, and yet when we look back, we experience this gratitude to God for God's works. We see that it is all part of what God continues to do for the world, and we feel deeply grateful to be part of it. It is our work, but it is moreover God's working in and through us.

The psalm ends by speaking of the "fear of God." The "fear of God" is at the heart of our faith tradition, and we cannot throw it out before we try to understand what it really means. It is not about being afraid of God's punishing us if we do something wrong. That's what the "fear of God" has been made into by certain religious groups and churches. The "fear of God" means something like what I call "reverent awe." It is connected with the "holy and awesome name of God." In Hebrew, there is a name of God that consists four Hebrew letters (YHWH). It is not to be pronounced, or at least not used in ordinary speech or even in prayer. This preserves the mystery of God who cannot be contained in any word, thought, image, or doctrine. This deepens our sense of the sacredness of life as coming from God who is beyond every name. All of this means that we are made to live with an awareness of the sacred dimension of life -- the lives of others, the world itself, and our own lives. When we cultivate this kind of "fear of God" in ourselves, we cannot demean, diminish, or destroy. We honor others and ourselves, and the earth itself as God's good creation. This kind of "fear" enables us to live without the other kinds of fear. We can live trustfully, able to risk much for the sake of life as God has created it.

It is a gift to know the young people who come here each year. I have learned something of their life situations, which often include very difficult hurts and challenges. On Thursday morning I walked over to the climbing wall where Phil Boyce and an assistant were working with them. I sat at a distance on the grass watching them one by one find the courage to step forward and attempt the climb. All of them tried it. All of them went at least part way up. For those who made the top, it was yet another challenge to start back down. It was the same but perhaps more dramatic at the Leap for Life. Once they were on the beam forty feet up, they were invited--not forced--to jump off and out, trusting the rope and the one who held it. Knowing their fears, embracing their fears, and going beyond their fears. I think they will remember how they learned that they are much more than their fears, and how they encouraged each other all the way.

Somehow that revealed to me the truest meaning of the "fear of God". It is living with the knowledge that all of life is sacred because it comes from God, including our own lives. And so we can live our lives as an adventure in reverence and trust, learning not in our heads but in our experience the precepts that make for life, even when the work--inwardly or outwardly--is very difficult and challenging. Meanwhile, we are part of a community that encourages each other in this kind of life, just as the work group kids encouraged each one who dared the wall or the high beam. Thankfulness. Faithfulness. The sense of reverent awe at the sacred dimension of life. I think that is what it means to be on the path of wisdom and having a good understanding.