

October 4, 2009/Recommitment Sunday/David L. Edwards

## The Spirit of Our Commitment

Psalm 8                    *You have made them a little lower than God [or, the heavenly beings]  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands....*

Mark 10:13-16            *"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them;  
for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.  
Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God  
as a little child will never enter it."*

Psalm 8 and the story of Jesus and the children tell us something about who we really are and are made to be--our truest identity as human beings. The psalmist looks at the universe and is overwhelmed at our smallness and insignificance as human beings. However, we have been created "a little lower than God," or also translated, "than the heavenly beings, or angels". We are crowned by God with glory and honor. And we have been entrusted with the world God made.

Matthew Fox writes that we are created with "original blessing," not original sin. What does God say in the first creation story, after the human being is created male and female? It is GOOD. And that never changes, though the scriptures acknowledge that we lose touch with who we really are, we forget our true identity as blessed and good and trusted. Yet our essence never changes. The "original sin" view is a distortion of scripture and has distorted our view of ourselves, turning us toward self-despising and the view that we are only fallen and lost creatures. What can you expect from us!

The psalmist has a very different insight. Not only are we created good, a little lower than God, but God does expect a lot from us! We are entrusted with the care of the world, God's own creation. We are made for responsibility. "Dominion" here, as well as in Genesis 1, does not mean domination. It cannot be misconstrued to justify our insane misuse of our own environment, the destruction of our own home. It is responsible caring and tending, as one would cultivate a garden or a field.

I suggest on this day of our recommitments as Covenant and Community Members, that the spirit of our commitment is the intention of rediscovering, touching, and living out of our truest identity as human beings -- created a little lower than God or the heavenly beings, crowned with glory and honor, and entrusted with the tending and nurturing of life itself on this earth. The disciplines, or practices, that we commit to are not alien demands imposed on us to make us "better people". They are practices we choose that can keep us grounded in our true identities, can lead us back from the false self-images that keep us from being who God made us to be. Prayer. Study. Giving. Relationships of love and forgiveness. Being in community. Discovering and using our gifts. Being sensitive to what God calls us to do for the enriching of life. The spirit of our commitment is the decision to devote ourselves to the discovery, recovery, and living out of our truest selves.

Jesus was about these same things. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5), he told the crowd: You are the light of the world; you are the salt of the earth. That's who you really are. Live that way. Don't hide your light; let it shine! That is what the kingdom of God is about and what it means to live in that kingdom. And who did he think could show us the way to the kingdom? Not the powerful or rich or influential. Not the proud or arrogant or wielders of political, economic, or religious power. Not the kingdom builders.

Parents were bringing their little children to Jesus, hoping he would touch and bless them. What parent does not want, more than anything in the world, for her or his children to know themselves as blessed? The disciples intervened. Jesus doesn't have time for kids! The master has more important

things to do than waste time with children! Let them come back when they grow up, when they become really important, when they become adults. Jesus was indignant at this. That is as strong a word as is used in the scriptures for being angry at ignorance and injustice. Do not keep the children away from me. The kingdom of God belongs to them; it includes them, too. Furthermore, they know what it's about. And more than that, if you cannot receive God's kingdom as a child, then you cannot enter it yourselves.

So, a second dimension of our spirit of commitment is having the soul, if you will, of a child. Jesus never tells us exactly what it is about small children that makes them possessors of the kingdom of God. But if we hang around children long enough, and if we are truly open to learning what children have to teach us, we will find out. I think Jesus leaves this for us to discover, so that we need to stay in touch with young children, so that we keep close to them and pay attention.

For me, it is the small child's sense of wonder at life, an openness to all of reality. It is seeing things fresh and undiluted by preconceptions and judgments. It is the openness of heart and mind that is free of manipulations and duplicities. It is the clear and honest recognition of our needs and emotions, living without a sense of shame at our humanity. Jesus is not romanticizing childhood or children. He is not saying we can somehow go back and be children again. He is lifting them up and embracing them as those to whom God's kingdom, life as God made it to be lived, especially belongs. Young children can put us back in touch with that quality of spirit that opens up to us what Jesus called the kingdom of God.

These two things came together somehow in my mind this week. The journey of awakening to our true identity as those given honor and glory by God, those entrusted with the care of God's world, and receiving God's kingdom like a child. It has to do with growing in our sense of wonder at life--other people, the creation, and our own lives. The restoring of the damaged creation will not significantly happen until we recover our sense of awe and deep respect for life, until we find again in ourselves a profound wonder at the intricate, vast, and beautiful web of life into which our own lives are woven. The care of life and of other people calls for us to have spirits that are humble, open, deeply respectful, and conscious of the interdependence of all of life. And I think that young children know these things innately because they have not yet been socialized out of them.

Yesterday at our silent retreat, I was re-reading "Our Covenant One with Another," the commitment one makes as a Covenant Member. The point that drew my attention is the same in the Community Member commitment: "Endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness." This is the one every member agrees is the hardest, the most challenging. It occurred to me, however, that it says we are to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness. It is not about our own ability to love and forgive. It is about being a channel of a power, a spirit, an energy, if you will, of a love and forgiveness that are not our own. We all are painfully aware how limited are our own love and forgiveness. Our loving is so contingent. Our forgiveness is so shackled by our hurt feelings and the grudges we carry. But it is not about our capacities. It is about becoming clear channels for God's love and forgiveness, so that in and through us, other people and the creation itself touch and are touched by God.

To me that made a huge difference. That means our work is to clear the channel. Our inward journey is to become aware of attitudes, habits of thinking and acting, ways of looking at others that impede the flow of God's love and forgiveness through us. To me this connected with becoming the persons God made us--given honor, glory, and entrusted with the care of the world--and receiving God's kingdom like a child. It means that I become increasingly aware of the way I make demands on others, seek to control events and people, make others the objects of my neediness, expect others and the world to please me and fulfill all my expectations. The more I become aware of these things in myself, the easier it is to let them go, to drop them. Then I begin to experience myself becoming that clearer channel for a power of love and forgiveness that is not my own. I become more able to recognize what I am given to do for the sake of life and to do it freely, without measuring myself

against others or demanding that others be about the same thing. It means I am more able to let others be who God made them to be and do what God is giving them to do. In short, I become a more peaceful person, and experience freedom and joy. To receive the kingdom of God like a child means dropping everything that gets in the way of that way of living. It is dominion without domination. It is receiving God's kingdom and not building it the way I think it should be. Jesus did not teach us to pray "Help me to build your kingdom" but "Let your kingdom come." It is about growing in my sense of wonder and connectedness to all of life so that life flows through me without being short-circuited. I become more and more a channel for that power that gives life to all the earth and all creatures.

As we recommit ourselves for another year to this journey of faith, perhaps these images will be helpful to us, this view of the direction and nature of that journey. It is the journey of our becoming what we already are, those who are crowned with glory and honor, and entrusted with the care of life. And it is about being those who are learning what it means to receive and enter the kingdom of God, life as God made it to be lived, like a little child.