

February 28, 2010/Second Sunday of Lent/David L. Edwards

### A Spirit of Confidence

Psalm 27      *Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;  
though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.*

Luke 13:[22-24], 31-35

*“Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’”*

The setting for today’s reading from Luke’s gospel (13:31-35) is found a few verses earlier, where Luke writes: “Jesus went through one town and village after another teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.” Jesus has turned toward Jerusalem where his life and ministry will culminate with his death at the hands of the religious and political power structures of his day.

As he goes along, Jesus keeps calling people into the life of faith. It is the call to the life of God’s kingdom, to lives rooted in the love of God, being who God made us to be and doing what God calls us to do for the sake of the world. Someone asks Jesus: “Lord, how many people will be saved?” Will there only be a certain number of people saved? Are you one of them? Am I? Where does such a question come from? It is religious speculation. Some forms of Christianity engage enthusiastically in this kind of speculation. There must be some kind of cosmic determination as to who will be "saved" and who won't, who is right and who is wrong, and so forth. Such preoccupation leads to exclusivism - I'm right and you're wrong -- and to a self-righteousness that never finds true security or freedom.

Jesus is coming from a completely different place. His response doesn’t even match the question: “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.” He says a similar thing in Matthew’s gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount. The wide gate is the doorway to destruction; the narrow gate is the path to true life (Matt. 7:13-14). Jesus is not interested in religious speculation that fosters exclusiveness and self-righteousness. He shows surprisingly little interest in the afterlife and who "makes it" and who doesn't. He is interested in the here and now, how we find fullness of life now, as well as forever. He calls people to wake up to their own lives, to live the way God made us to live.

Jesus calls us into a way of living, not a head-trip of religious doctrines or speculations. The way is open to everyone, but the reality is that few will make the effort, are willing to face the changes and challenges of the narrow door. How many will be saved? It’s not about that. It’s about striving to enter the narrow door, to live the life God made us to live. It is available to every person. Yet Jesus is realistic enough to know that relatively few will make that kind of effort and commitment of their lives. The wide way is much easier, even though it leads nowhere.

The Church of the Covenant was born out of a response to Jesus’ life and teachings just at this point. We recognize that the spiritual life does not just “happen.” To follow Jesus, to be a Christian in an authentic sense, means committing oneself to a “way.” That “way” involves going deeper into oneself and one’s relationship with God through regular prayer, study, reflection, and growth in self-understanding, what we call the inward journey. The inward journey is the way of our own transformation, the emergence of our true self, the self created and loved by God. This leads to the outward journey, paying attention and giving ourselves to what God is calling each of us to do for the nourishing and healing of the world, God’s good creation. Call it ministry, mission, or simply service, it is the outward expression of that inward connection or relationship with God.

This is the way we work with what Jesus calls striving to enter the narrow door. It is not about religious doctrines. Religious ideas are important, but they can become a distraction from living the life of God’s love, the life to which Jesus calls us. And entering by the narrow door is not about

earning God's love or salvation. We don't have to do that; it's already ours. Salvation—which literally means wholeness or healing—is not about the hereafter but the here-and-now. Our spiritual journey, or work, is that of letting our true self, the self created by and in relationship with God, re-emerge from the layers of forgetfulness, inattention, and distraction that have been piled upon us. Our community has simply acknowledged that this doesn't happen without effort, without a measure of commitment, without accepting in one's life some minimal spiritual practices that actualize and deepen our relationship with God, with other people, with the world as God's creation, and with ourselves. Ours is not the only way to do this. Maybe it isn't the best way. It is simply the way our community tries to discover the blessings of the narrow door.

Jesus himself is walking the way to which he calls us. He doesn't just teach with words; he teaches with his life. I read recently that the spiritual life is not about practicing what we preach. It is about preaching, or talking about, what we practice. Jesus' words flow from the life he is living and to which he calls us. We don't just hear the word in Jesus' teachings; we see it in his own life and we experience it in his living presence with us. Jesus' life is authentic, real. And he invites us to uncover and liberate that same authenticity and reality in our own lives. He calls us to come alive to who we truly are and what we are called to do.

There is nothing more invigorating than such a life. Gordon Cosby has said that the best way to call forth the gifts of others is to exercise our own gift. Yet this can also be very threatening to others who are immersed in inauthenticity and illusion. Some Pharisees come to warn Jesus that Herod Antipas wants to kill him. Herod is a political animal who will do anything to protect his power. It is interesting that Pharisees warn Jesus of the danger. This reminds us that Jesus was not in some kind of battle with the Pharisees as a whole. Some were caught up in the power thing and felt he was a threat. Others saw the sense of what he was talking about and doing, and gave him quiet support.

“Tell that fox that I am going to keep on doing what I am doing, casting out demons and curing people, today, tomorrow and the next day. I am going to fulfill what I've come to do.” Jesus sees right through Herod, sees that he is caught in the political games, trying to protect his territory, his position. Jesus knows that such a life is empty and doomed. Herod is no real threat to Jesus because Jesus understands what life is really about, and that's what he is giving his life to. It is about being faithful to God and what God gives us to be and do for the sake of the world God loves. It is about living out of God's reign and realm, not the reign of Herod or Caesar or anyone else in religious or political power, or for that matter, living out of anyone else's expectations of us.

Jesus knows he is about to get himself in deep trouble in Jerusalem. But he is going to keep doing what he is doing, what God has called him to do. He does not arouse the ire of Rome or the religious power structure of his day because he is taking them on directly. Herod and Pilate and the chief priests will conspire against him because he is staying true to what God has called him to do. Jesus is fully living out his faith in and faithfulness to God, and that is what most disturbs those who want to maintain control.

If we are being true to what we believe God has called us to be and do for the world, THAT is the best thing we can do for the world and its needs. Jesus disappointed nearly everyone, including his disciples. He did not take his directions from what he thought would be most effective or popular. He did not respond to every need he encountered. He lived from the inside out, and that is what brought so much truth, so much life, so much healing to the world. It also ended up making the religious and political leadership uneasy. Jesus' life was revolutionary not because he took on the power structures directly, but because he lived his life from inside out, from his intimate and vital relationship with God. His life was "radical," because it was "rooted" deeply in God.

It is so important that each of us continually discern what God is giving us to be and do, and to keep faithful to that. That is what the world needs most from us. The problem is that we are so anxious to respond to the needs of the world or the expectations of others that we end up going from this cause to that, not really knowing who we are and what we have been given to do. We become

spread too thin, making no significant difference. We make too many commitments and cannot fulfill them. We talk ourselves out of what we most deeply feel called to do. It seems insignificant. It seems too small to make a difference. We let others convince us that what they are committed to is more important, and so we give up our own calling.

However, we find that if we discern what God has called us to do, what vision God has implanted in our spirits, what gifts God has given us to use, and we prayerfully, patiently, and with steady devotion follow that calling, we will see differences being made, in us and around us. It is by fulfilling what God has given us to be and do that we are able to bring a measure of new life and hope to the world. It may also get us into trouble!

There is something else in all of this. It dawned on me that Jesus shows startling spiritual confidence and courage. He knows who he is and he knows what his life is about because he is rooted in his relationship with God. In Psalm 27, this verse grabbed my attention: "Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident." I am not sure that we sufficiently recognize and affirm the confidence and courage that are part of the life of faith. We tend to shy away from such things, worried about becoming proud or pushy or the like. Yet there is nothing arrogant or dominating about Jesus. He simply knows who he is and what he is called to do with his life. And he is able to live out his calling without fear or backing down in the face of opposition or rejection or misunderstanding.

True humility and deep spiritual confidence go together. Humility comes from being grounded in our relationship with God who made us and the world. Confidence and courage come as we live out of who we know ourselves created to be and what we believe God has called us to do with our lives. We may not have a Herod breathing down our necks, but we all experience challenges to the knowledge of ourselves as created and called by God. Labels someone put on us, and which we bought into -- sinful, disabled, unworthy, victim, and so forth -- some self-concept that keeps us from having the confidence to be who we are and do what we feel called to do. Maybe it is the overwhelming feeling that there is so much "out there" working against goodness, compassion, beauty, peace, justice, love, that who we are and what we feel called to do won't make a difference, so why bother. Or maybe it is a dismal spirituality that makes no room for the joy that comes from simply knowing our very lives as gifts from God, without which the world would be diminished. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel says: "Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy."

I love it when Jesus says to the messengers: "You go tell that fox Herod that I am going to keep doing what I am doing -- healing, comforting, serving, calling out evil -- and his death threats don't bother me a bit because I already know I am going to die right there in his city!" And I love it when the psalmist says that, even though life feels like an army surrounding us, we will not be afraid. We will, in fact, be confident, because we are being who God made us to be and doing what God calls us to do.