

August 22, 2010/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Community of Wholeness

Psalm 71:1-6 *In you, O Lord, I take refuge; never let me be put to shame.*

Jeremiah 1:4-10 *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you...."*

Luke 13:10-17 *When he had laid his hands on her,
immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.*

The psalmist takes refuge in God when life has become threatening or overwhelming. Taking refuge in our relationship with God is our foremost spiritual practice. It is why we make time daily for our inward journey, to quiet ourselves, to inwardly listen, to study, to reflect, to pray. We are touching our relationship with God, which is the most basic and vital reality of our lives. Taking refuge is not running away from or avoiding anything. It is drawing near and embracing our own lives in God. When we are practicing taking refuge through our inward journey, and if we keep at it over time, we will come to know the same sense of protection, safety, and belonging that the psalmist expresses. This will give our lives strength and a foundation of courage to face whatever seems a threat to us.

Jeremiah hears that God has known him before he was even conceived, and that his life has had a purpose from God from the beginning. He belongs to God, and God has called him to a particular mission or ministry for his day and time. Jeremiah does not feel qualified or able to do what God calls him to do. After all, he is only a boy. We don't know how old he was, but apparently he felt that in order to do something important for God, you had to be older and wiser and more experienced. Not so, says God. This is what I need for you to do for my people, and I am going to give you everything you need to accomplish it, including my very presence. God will be with Jeremiah so that he does not need to fear the obstacles or resistance that he will encounter.

In Luke 13, a woman who has suffered for many years, perhaps from what we know as scoliosis, is noticed by Jesus as he teaches in the synagogue. He sees suffering and does something about it. He seems to embody the words God spoke to Jeremiah; he has the power to overthrow and cast out the things that oppress people and cause suffering. Jesus cures the woman, who is at long last is able to stand up straight. She had been coming to synagogue perhaps for as many years as she suffered, not experiencing healing and maybe not even expecting it. But this day, she is touched by one who is a channel of God's healing love. She is liberated from her suffering, from being bent-over.

The synagogue leader accuses Jesus of breaking sabbath law by curing on the sabbath. He tells the people that they have six days to come and be cured. There is no need to disturb the sabbath. Jesus accuses the leader of the synagogue and those who side with him of hypocrisy. Don't they untie their animals so that they can take them to water on the sabbath? That is an act of compassion that is also breaking sabbath law. Then why not relieve the suffering of a human being on the sabbath?

Sabbath is a great thing. On the sabbath, one was to completely rest and regain awareness that it is God, and not our labor, that sustains the world. God is creator, not us. God is the power that gives life to the world, not us. God owns the world, not us. One day out of seven, Israel remembered that "the earth belongs to God and all that is in it". We who live in the aggressive, goal-oriented, get-all-I-can world of today need to be reminded of sabbath. It is not just a day but an awareness, the spiritual understanding that life is a gift, that it is not we who are in control but God, and it is not by all our activism that the world is sustained but by the same Power that called the world into being.

The problem is we lose perspective. We start serving religion rather than human beings, rather than life. The synagogue leader was more concerned about preserving religious order than relieving the suffering of people. Religion was made for human beings, not human beings for religion. Or as Jesus said elsewhere, "the sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the sabbath". Christianity, like all religions, has gotten caught up in making people religious. The highest purpose of religion is that it can lead us to and nurture in us our true humanity. A Buddhist teaching says that the raft is not the shore.

The raft takes you to the shore, but once you get there, you don't keep carrying the raft around. Spiritual practice is to bring us to our humanity, to help us be true human beings. And that includes being compassionate and relieving suffering whenever we can. Religion is the raft; our true humanity is the shore. We see clearly today how religion can make us less than human, make us into people who hate, who fight, who kill in the name of our religions.

That day in the synagogue, Jesus showed that the community of God's faithful people can be a community of healing, of wholeness. To me, this is what it means to "stand up straight" and be healed of our being "bent over". I am taking the story of Jesus and the woman in a more figurative way. I do not doubt that Jesus cured people, and that there is a power of healing that Jesus as the living Christ continues to hold forth. However, I also know that the gospel stories tell us that Jesus did not cure everyone and that his primary mission was not curing people or casting out demons, but proclaiming and calling people to live in harmony with God's kingdom, life the way God created it to be. I know that many loving, compassionate, and faithful people do not experience the curing of their diseases or injuries. Yet there is a healing that is possible for everyone of us. It is becoming whole as people, embracing the totality of who we are, our strengths and weaknesses, our health and un-health, our joys and sorrows, and living the lives we were created and gifted to live, as channels of God's love, mercy, and justice. That is what it means to me to "stand up straight" like the woman in the story.

Here is where these three readings came together for me. Taking refuge in the reality of our relationship with the living God. Becoming aware of ourselves as known, called, and empowered by God and God's presence so that we live for the sake of others, for the sake of life. That is what it means, I think, to stand up straight, to become whole. We are and can continue to grow as a community of Jesus in which others and we ourselves can find wholeness. It means being a community in which people can take refuge in their relationship with God so that they know, not just in their heads but in their souls, their spirits, that they belong to God first of all. Taking refuge in this way, we grow in the knowledge that nothing can rob us of our integrity and identity as unique and precious human beings. Being a community of wholeness means that here people can begin to see their lives in terms of God's call, perceiving what they feel that they are put on this earth to do for the sake of life, for the relieving of suffering. In a community of wholeness, people can come to accept and affirm their uniqueness, not trying to imitate someone else or do what someone else thinks they should do. Wholeness has to do with living out of our own relationship with God and what we come to understand that God has called and gifted us to be and to do. In a community of wholeness, people can grow and deepen in the awareness that, as we live our lives as this kind of spiritual journey, God is always with us. With such an awareness, we can acknowledge our fears, but also to go beyond them to live the life for which God made us.

The Church of the Covenant has been called to be such a community of wholeness, in which people, starting with ourselves, can stand up straight as God's children. I think that we need to be more conscious and aware of this vision and call. The vision and structure of the Church of the Covenant is very simple, simple to state, challenging to live. We commit ourselves to following Jesus through a few very simple and time-honored spiritual practices. Daily prayer, study, reflection. Cultivating an ability to be silent and inwardly listen. Regular worship with the community. The giving of our material resources and our spiritual gifts. Making God's love and forgiveness our aim in all our relationships. Being willing to be held accountable for the commitments we make, and asking for help when we need it in the living out of our commitments. The purpose of all of this is that we not fall into the synagogue leader's attitude--keeping the law or perpetuating religion--but that we continue to experience the rebirth of our lives as our relationship with God becomes more and more real and vital.

We remain and increasingly become a community of wholeness as we ourselves practice with awareness, devotion, and authenticity the things to which we have committed ourselves. In short, it means that we are doing what we say we are doing, not out of legalism but out of our deep desire to wake up more and more to who we are in our relationship to God and God's world. If we are doing this together, in community, then we are creating the kind of place and space where people can find wholeness in their lives, where they can begin to stand up straight.