

September 26, 2010/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Investing in Hope & Life

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel:

Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.

1 Timothy 6:6-19

...so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

This coming Saturday, Covenant and Community Members will gather for a day of silence and reflection on their decisions to recommit or not recommit to another year of membership. Others who are considering moving toward such a commitment are also invited to participate in this day of silence together. The vision of the Church of the Covenant is that of being a community of persons taking responsibility for their own spiritual lives as discipleship to Jesus and being part of a community of prayer and service, the inward and outward journeys of the life of faith. The decision for membership is one that must be completely free, not arising from guilt or obligation or wanting to belong to a certain religious organization. It is a response to the call of Jesus to follow him within the uniqueness of our lives and the life of our world today. This in mind, I think that the readings from Jeremiah and 1 Timothy provide excellent material for our reflections and preparations in this time of recommitment.

Jeremiah is in a terrible mess. The picture could not be more depressing. Jerusalem is under siege from the armies of Babylon. The tidal wave of conquest and destruction that has swept over the rest of Israel is finally crashing against the walls of the city. Jeremiah is under arrest and Zedekiah, king of Judah, is accusing him of being unpatriotic and giving encouragement to the enemy. That is what people say when you don't go along with the nationalistic politics of the day, when you are critical of the regime and the culture, when you don't buy into the friends and enemies way of looking at life.

In a dream, God tells Jeremiah to buy a piece of the family farm from his cousin Hanamel. Sure enough, here comes Hanamel to the prison with the offer. Jeremiah has learned to trust the Inner Voice. If we are open to it, we too will receive confirmations of God's leading in our lives. Grow in trust of that inner voice of God's spirit, we will experience confirmations along the way. But that doesn't mean that sometimes we won't feel foolish or on very thin ice, just like Jeremiah.

Jeremiah signs the deed in front of witnesses who doubtlessly think he is completely out of touch with reality. Then Jeremiah puts both copies of the deed, the sealed deed and the open copy, in an earthenware jar so they will last a long time. As the text says: *For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.* Jeremiah's action is an investment in the future God promises. It is a staking of his claim on a deeper reality than that which is happening at the moment.

The buying of the field is an act of irrational hope. Jerusalem will be destroyed and most of the people carried off into exile. It will be two or three generations before the exiles will be able to return to Israel. At that moment, no one can foresee that such a return will ever happen. Jeremiah won't even live to retrieve those deeds. Jeremiah hardly understood what he was being asked to do. It seemed foolish. But he did it, attending to that inner voice, the living word of God in his life. His inner life was resonant to God's voice and this shaped his actions toward the future, toward new life, even in the midst of death and demise.

When we are attuning our spirits to God, receptive to the speaking and leading of God's spirit, this leads to outward actions that establish hope even in seemingly hopeless circumstances. I think of the life of this community of faith and the literal purchasing of properties for the purposes of God. The very land we meet on today, this house transformed into a place of worship and a center for the life of our community, the old garage across the way transformed into a place of hospitality—a coffee house that kept many young people like myself back then in touch with the church, a weekly meal served to those who have come to see it as a sacred gathering place, and a beautiful, comfortable place for people to meet for learning, recovery, and other life-giving purposes. The other 36 acres, held now by Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship, used by hundreds of children each summer at Camp Kum Ba Yah and by many who find in its trails and quiet places a renewing solitude in nature. There have been other properties seen through the eyes of faith, purchased by going out on a limb, and

transformed into housing for the poor, the homeless and addicted, a jobs ministry, or a center for community and ministry in the inner city. The Gateway, the Lynchburg High and Frank Roane Apartments, the Wood Ministry, the Haven, the Festival Center. Tiny groups of people conspiring to listen to God and to give themselves to irrational actions of hope and new life.

As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the Church of the Covenant, we are reminded of these actions in the past that sowed the seeds of hope for the future. But we are also asked to be listening to God who speaks to us now, whispering in our hearts other directions, to go out and claim other portions of life for God's purposes, for God's future. This doesn't mean only physical property. We are to look at all of our outward life and relationships and resources as the field to be purchased for new life. What piece of God's dawning kingdom are you being led to purchase, to claim and give your life to? Are each of us listening inwardly for that voice urging us to go out and touch some part of this world, this city, some need, with the particular gifts that God has given us? As hopeless as we may feel when we look at the big picture, the situation today in our world, are we not hearing what God is inviting us to do, that small part that will affect the whole? God has promised to bring new life to us and the world. Christ calls us to respond to that promise. But God cannot do what we must do as faithful people—purchase that little plot of ground, that small piece of life that we will claim for God and work with. It doesn't matter how small it is. That's not our concern. If we each are discovering and responding to that call God has put in our hearts, then together we send forth waves of hope and new life.

The reading from 1 Timothy comes at it from a different angle. But it is the same thing—the relationship between our inner and outer life as those centering our lives in God. The reading begins by addressing problems with some folks in the early church who were using religion for personal gain. They had imported the values of the world around them into the community of Christ. These folks were causing disruptions, power struggles, and other ego-centered problems. They were turning the gospel of Christ, of self-giving love, into a gospel of prosperity, a way to get rich, a way to get ahead, a way to be successful.

Well, says the text, there IS gain in religion, when it is combined with contentment. The New English Bible puts it something like this: "...religion does yield high dividends, but only to the one whose resources are within." It all has to do with our inner life and that connection we have with God. To have a rich inner life, to be growing more and more responsive to the living God is the only wealth worth having. We come into the world with nothing; we leave this world with nothing. That should give us a clue as to where real life is to be found. Not in the accumulation of stuff. Not in the achieving of good reputations or the admiration and approval of others. Not in the outward signs of success hawked by our society and bought into by the church today. The gain of spirituality, of true faithfulness comes from knowing that we already have all we need to live the full and meaningful life. And when we go beyond that—which, in honesty we all have--then we get into dangerous waters. The danger is that we will lose our souls, our very lives. We will get lost.

So the young Timothy is urged to stay focused on his own spiritual life, his own faith and faithfulness. He isn't told to go out and fight those who oppose these things, who are troublemakers but to fight a different kind of fight, the good struggle of being a faithful person. Here I think of the Muslim word *jihad* that is so misused and misunderstood these days by both extremist Muslims and non-Muslims. The faithful person in Islam is to carry out *jihad* understood as the personal struggle to be a faithful person. This is the mature religious view that real faith is not a matter of doctrines or superficial religious practices but the transformation of persons. The life of faith is hard work, NOT in order to earn God's grace and love. That is already given. The work of faith is to live out of God's grace and love so that we are transformed persons who transform life around us. That is *jihad*. We Christians have the same trouble with our own tradition and scriptures. There are scriptural words and images used to describe the life of faith in terms of battles and wars, conflicts and fighting. But these are to be taken not as a call to fight other people but to struggle with those things in ourselves that keep us from living the life God has made us to live.

So Timothy is told to fight this good fight and to "take hold of the eternal life to which" he has been called. Eternal life does not mean life after death, at least not that alone. It means life as it really is, in harmony with God and God's purposes for life. The true gospel of Christian faith is not that we have "souls" that must be saved so that we can go to heaven. Jesus never talked in such terms. He spoke of the way of eternal life lying along the path of love of God and love of neighbor, of divesting ourselves of material wealth and becoming poor both in the sense of a simple, contented material life and a poverty of spirit that is empty enough to be filled with God. Eternal life is a quality of life to be lived now. And if we miss it, if we don't structure our lives around the seeking of this life, we will experience the "hell" of being disoriented and frittering away this precious life we

are given.

This is why in the last verses of our reading Timothy is urged to warn those who are materially wealthy of the dangers to their souls. They are to let go of haughtiness and pride and give themselves to generosity, using what they have to improve life around them. It is a word to us as well, for relative to the majority of people in our world, we are all very rich. All that we have is to be used for the good of others. And if we are all doing this, then, as the text says, we are laying a good foundation for the future and we are taking hold of life that really is life—what we call eternal life.

The materially simple life contributes to our intimacy with God and true life, the life that is eternal and unshakeable in its meaning and quality. The material life is not just possessions and money. It is everything about our outward life—how we use our time, energy, resources, relationships.

I had an extraordinary experience last Thursday morning. Public Radio's "Morning Edition" was doing a story on a group of Kalahari San, or Bushmen, who are in the U.S. to raise awareness of their plight and funds for their legal battle with the government of Botswana. The San people are the most ancient human culture. They are being pushed off their ancestral land, which has been designated a game preserve. The real reason is the exploitation of the land for diamond mining. It is the story of every indigenous people in every country, including the Native Americans. I listened with particular interest, for Kaye and I had been a week in Botswana four years ago, three days of which we helped with an educational retreat on HIV/AIDS sponsored by the United Churches of Southern Africa.

The reporter introduced one of the men as Roy Sesana, a tribal leader. I couldn't believe it! We had been with Roy for those three days in Botswana. He had come to the retreat to find help for his people. HIV/AIDS was beginning to make its way into his remote society. With the help of translators, we got to know Roy. Yet just being in his presence, you would know he was spiritual leader of a people who live in harmony with all life. Economically poor, still living a mostly hunter-gatherer life, intimately aware of and at home in the creation, Roy and his people, like indigenous people everywhere, have so much to teach us about spirituality and life. This is not romanticizing them. It is the far-too-late recognition that we should have been learning all along from those we have been destroying or forcing into our so-called civilized patterns of living. Roy had asked if we could travel with him to teach his people about HIV/AIDS. We were not able to go, for we were at the end of our time in Southern Africa and could not extend it. I left feeling a sense of loss, that we were unable to do what we could to help and that I would not have the opportunity to learn more from these people.

There is probably little hope that Roy and his people will be able to keep their way of life or their land. But there is hope that we can begin now to learn from the spiritual wisdom of indigenous people, the same wisdom that is embedded in our scriptures, that spirituality embraces our whole life. A simple and generous material life draws us closer to reality, to life that really is life, as the writer of 1 Timothy says. And a deepening relationship with God through our inward journey leads us to a simpler material life and a greater awareness of the magnificence of this whole world and universe of which we are a part, the creation itself. This is what the writer calls "godliness with contentment."

Actions of hope arising from our attentiveness to God's voice and spirit within us, like Jeremiah.

Striving to hold onto and live more deeply into the life that really is life, as Timothy is advised to do.

When we are on this kind of spiritual journey, which embraces all of our life, we are investing in hope, in life, in the future God has promised.