

January 9, 2011 / First Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

A Gentle, Committed, and Universal Christian Faith

Isaiah 42:1-9 *He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.
He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*

Acts 10:34-43 *Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no
partiality,
but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to
him."*

Confession of an Uneasy Christian

I have always had a kind of ambivalence about being a Christian. Some of my most significant spiritual experiences have been outside of the church and formal religion. I have sometimes seen God more clearly in the lives of non-Christians and in nature than within the circles and walls of organized religion. I have often found a deeper commitment to humane and just causes outside the church than inside it. I have recognized a deep and real spirituality in people who are not part of the Christian or any religion. Though I have spent most of my life being nurtured by and serving the church, and am profoundly grateful for it, I have never had the sense that Christianity "has it all."

As I have embraced this ambivalence over the years, I have learned that we can be exclusively and deeply committed to Jesus and the revelation of God in him, while at the same time being open to spiritual truth wherever we find it. I have found that the deeper I go into my own spiritual tradition, the more open I am to the wider manifestation of God.

Two recent experiences may shed more light on what I am trying to say. One day in the fall, Jim Herward, Hannah's husband, dropped by the office. He had been outside for a while looking at the interfaith prayer circle, reading the prayers from different spiritual traditions. When he came in, he said with a sense of amazement: "They're all saying the same thing!" He was right. The words may be different, the images different, but all point toward the same spiritual dimension of life, which is wider and deeper than can be contained in any one tradition. On the other hand, one day I was sitting in a group of clergy from different religious traditions. The discussion turned to the subject of interfaith dialogue. Someone in the group quickly asserted that we cannot overlook differences and pretend we are all about the same thing. Heads nodded approvingly, except mine. My spirit sank as I realized again that our attachment to religion can cause us to miss the Reality to which religion points us. The person whose heart and mind are open sees oneness everywhere. The one who has clamped down hard around a set of beliefs and

practices sees differences all around, and is always ready to pick a fight.

There is a strong tendency to defend and promote religion rather than live with humility, depth, and integrity one's own spiritual path. Yet, I believe a new day is emerging from the darkness of religious competition, bigotry, and violence. We are beginning to understand the difference between religion and spirituality. Religion is about the practices, structures, and beliefs of particular traditions. Spirituality is about living by the heart of those traditions. Religion is not an end in itself, but can lead us to spirituality, awakening to our lives as spiritual human beings in relation to ourselves, others, and the world.

Serious and sustained work with scripture can help us. I mean, really engaging the whole of scripture, not the kind of selective proof-texting that feeds dogmatism and extremism. The readings for today from Isaiah and the Acts of the Apostles are excellent examples of what is at the heart of our scriptures. They express the core of our own spiritual tradition and the spirituality, or lived faith, of persons and communities who are trying to faithfully follow Jesus.

A Spirituality of Gentleness and Commitment

Isaiah speaks of the gentle, encouraging, and justice-oriented spirit of the servant of God. The text is probably speaking of Israel itself, the people and their leaders, as God's servant. For us as Christians, we can see in Isaiah's servant poem Jesus and ourselves as Jesus' community. This servant is upheld, chosen, and anointed by God's spirit. What a difference it makes when we see our lives as being upheld, chosen, and anointed by the very Power that called the universe into being! That is why in our community we lift up certain aspects of the spiritual life -- call, gifts, commitment to the inward journey of our relationship with God, and an outward journey of doing the things we feel called and gifted to do in the service of life. The spiritual disciplines we commit to and work with are for the purpose of helping us touch every day the reality that our lives are upheld, chosen, and anointed by God's spirit. Maybe we need to say this to ourselves each morning as part of our time of prayer and meditation -- God's spirit upholds(guides, sustains, comforts)me; God's spirit chooses(calls)me; God's spirit anoints(empowers)me.

The servant, however, does not "cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street." Being empowered by God's spirit does not mean exerting power over others. It means living with a humility that comes from always being open to that spirit speaking in our hearts. The servant listens more than speaks, so that when there is speaking, or acting, it has the truth and the spirit of God in it.

The servant's faithfulness expresses itself in a deep, ongoing commitment to doing what is right. Supporting those who are weak. Kindling the light of goodness, hope, and life in people, no matter how faintly it is burning. The servant does not feel the need to bash people, trying to

prove his rightness. The servant touches the bruised reed tenderly so as not to break it. Here I think of Gandhi's core spirituality: *ahimsa*, non-harming, or non-violence. The servant is devoted to right relationships, which is the meaning of justice, and cultivates a commitment for the long haul and a way of living that does add to suffering.

Isaiah's picture of spirituality, or lived faith, raises helpful questions for us to reflect on as persons and as a community. How am I being and becoming a person who does not break the bruised reed or quench the dimly burning wick? What does this mean for the way I treat myself as well as the way I treat others? In my inward journey work, am I looking honestly at those things that lead me to treat people harshly or angrily, that cause me to withhold encouragement and acceptance of others? In what ways can I use my gifts and the gift of my life to touch those who are suffering the things that beset us all as human beings, or the suffering that is inflicted by people and institutions? In the outward journey of doing what I feel called to do, how can I grow in patience, long-term commitment, and dealing with discouragement?

In Jesus, God gives us the spirit of treating each person, and life itself, with care and dignity. That same Jesus-spirit enables us to sustain commitment to what is good and right over the long haul and through the most discouraging of circumstances.

God's Impartiality and a Universal Christian Spirituality

In the passage from Acts, we hear of God's impartiality and universality. God has led Peter to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile and, even worse, a Roman centurion. Peter is coming face to face with two huge prejudices--one against non-Jews, the other against Romans in particular. Cornelius has sent for Peter because God told him in a dream to do so. Cornelius is a man devoted to prayer, a reminder that there are many people of prayer throughout the world who are not part of our group! God does not speak only to Christians. Peter is astounded that God's spirit is already present with Gentiles. Peter has an awakening. He now understands that God shows no partiality. Anyone anywhere who is doing what is right is acceptable to God.

Peter is devoted to the gospel of Jesus Christ. For him God has fully revealed in Christ divine love and purpose, with forgiveness for all. But now Peter understands that this Jesus is not the possession of one sect or group or even religion. He is the expression of God's universal affirmation of and love for all persons. We see this in the gospels themselves, in passages that are not often lifted up. We hear a lot these days about Jesus as the only way to God, about salvation through Jesus alone. We need to hear of the Jesus who was in someone's home one day when his family came looking for him. When told that his mother and brothers were outside looking for him, he asked, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He looked around the room and said, "Here is my family. Everyone who does what God wants is my family." [Mk. 3:31-35] That's

universalism. Then there is Jesus' teaching that shows his frustration with those who go on and on about his being "their Lord" but do not do what he tells them to do, do not embody his teachings.[Lk. 6:46] And what about the famous parable of the Good Samaritan?[Lk. 10:25-37] Who did what he was supposed to do in God's sight? Who found the way of eternal life as he cared for his beaten and abandoned neighbor? Not the professional religious types. Not the ones who saw themselves as holy. Not the adherents of the dominant religion. No. It was the Samaritan, the one seen as irreligious and spiritually impure.

To be exclusively devoted to Jesus Christ means being devoted to him who was open to and embracing of all anywhere who sought to do God's will. Our exclusive commitment to Christ will manifest itself in an inclusive attitude toward others. In other words, to be a dogmatic fundamentalist or a religious zealot is contradictory to who Jesus is.

God is far more expansive than we can ever imagine, is always moving outward to include others, is always beyond us. We are called to be a community that is specifically committed to Jesus. Yet that very commitment will cause to grow in us an openness to others, a universality of spirit, an ability to be Christians in a pluralistic world. We are called, because of the very nature of Jesus as the servant of God, to be the kind of Christians who can be and join with those whose faith, race, or condition in life is different from our own. We can bring what we have to share and receive what others have to share. This, too, is the servant spirit of Jesus.

When the Festival Center mission began, the mission group commissioned the creation of a stained glass piece by Jack Glenn, local stained glass artist and friend of our community. The piece was to be in memory of Bev Cosby and would be placed in the chapel of the center. When Jack was ready to show us his design, we all trooped down to his studio one night to take a look. I was initially disappointed. We did not want any dominant Christian or religious symbols, for the chapel and the Center itself were to be welcoming to people of all faiths or no faith at all. I did not even see it at first, but Jack pointed out a cross hidden in the piece. After it was hung in the window of the chapel, I had many opportunities to sit and contemplate it. It was a beautiful creation that received the light coming in the Fifth Street window through a multitude of pieces of stained glass of all sizes, shapes, colors, and patterns. Within all of this could be seen a light green cross, embedded within all the color and diversity, its lower stem broken. This piece of art now hangs in the parlor of the Church House.

I came to appreciate Jack's vision in what he had made for us. It is for me an expression not only of the kind of Christian faith that Bev Cosby and others held as they began our community, but the kind of Christian spirituality needed today. One that is humble, gentle, nurturing of the good in people, and open to what others have to bring, what they can share with

us about God, just as we share with them what we have. It is the hidden motivation behind all that we do, not because we are ashamed of our faith or reluctant to share it, but because we know that our faith must be lived with humility in our own hearts, minds, and lives. And Christian spirituality knows the patience, the struggles, the endurance that accompany a life committed for the long haul to being who God created us to be and doing the things God calls us to do. It is the life of the servant who is full of God's spirit.