

February 20, 2011 / Seventh Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

The Way of Faithfulness

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 *You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*

Psalm 11:30, 33-40 *I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I set your ordinances before me.*

Matthew 5:38-48 *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Our readings for today contain some heavy-weight matters. God's commandments and ordinances. God's call to be holy and Jesus' teaching that we are to be "perfect" as God is perfect. I think there has been an aversion to these sorts of things in recent decades, at least in more moderate religious circles. We have seen more than enough of legalistic religion. When religion becomes a fear-driven following of rules, it produces everything from extremism to psychological depression. The idea that we are to be perfect sounds oppressive, because we can never measure up to some ideal laid on us by others or ourselves.

However, this is not really how the Jewish-Christian tradition has understood these things. Israel saw the law as a blessing from God, a gift, not something arbitrarily imposed on people as individuals and a nation. The commandments or laws were experienced as the way to fullness of life. When Israel was preparing to enter Canaan, the land of the promise, Moses told the people that living well in the land would hinge on their faithful following of God's commandments (Deut. 30:15-20).

There is truth and wisdom in the biblical idea that meaningful and bountiful living comes as we recognize and live in harmony with certain moral precepts. The way to fullness of life is not self-righteous moralism. Neither is it living without boundaries. Fullness of life comes through ways of living that enhance the quality of life for all people and the creation itself. I like what the Children Worship & Wonder program calls the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments--"The Ten Best Ways to Live". That is what it is about, discerning and then living harmoniously with the best ways to live.

The reading from Deuteronomy says clearly that the best way to live is to ensure the well being of the poor, the resident alien, and those with disabilities. In other words, the law is an expression of compassion and justice for those who are most vulnerable. When you harvest your crops, do not reap right to the edges of your fields. Leave the gleanings for those who are poor and for the resident aliens. It is your moral, spiritual obligation to not take everything for yourself, to always take into account those who are in need. Do not "revile" the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of those who are blind. In other words, do not ridicule or make life more difficult for those who already have challenges.

Notice how different these laws sound from what we are hearing today in the legislatures of our states and nation. Never in scripture is our moral obligation what it is made out to be in our culture -- making as much money as you can on the backs of those whom you can hire and fire according to how much profit you want for yourself. What if businesses balanced their desire for profit with a firm commitment to providing jobs? Legislators are eagerly proposing budget cuts that will make life even more difficult for those most in need. The irony is that many of those making such proposals identify themselves as very religious. They are either not familiar with or are deliberately ignoring the core of Jewish and Christian scripture when it comes to how we are to live. Living fruitfully in the land means that we live with compassion and justice, particularly caring for the needs of the most vulnerable. If we do

not, we are on the road to disaster. There is such a thing as biblical *karma*. When we live without compassion, when we focus on seeking our personal or national self-interest, when we are always preparing for and sowing the seeds of war, when we make decisions that increase the wealth of the wealthy and the poverty of the poor, it will eventually lead to our downfall. It is not about God punishing us. It is about the consequences of the choices we make. It is about the need for compassion, mercy, justice, and peace to be written into the law.

I saw a wonderful bumper sticker the other day. It showed the profile of a Native American and the words: "America -- Love It or Give It Back". It all has to do with how we choose to live. We can live in ways that enhance life around us, that safeguard those who are most vulnerable, that protect the creation upon which our own lives depend. Or we can choose ways of living that continue to favor some and exclude others, that consume the resources of the earth without regard for the future.

The words of Psalm 119 put it clearly and simply. "I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I set your ordinances before me." To a great extent, the spiritual life has to do with the ways we choose to live. Call it commandments, or laws, or precepts, it is crucial for us as human beings to discern and to live according to ways that bring fullness of life for all people and the creation. It is important to realize that fullness of life comes from harmonizing our lives with the ways that give life. In our community here, we talk about the importance of a commitment to spiritual disciplines or practices. These are simple, time-honored practices that can deepen our lives and can help us discern and stay in touch with our true humanity, who God created us to be and what God calls us to do.

Our community came into being out of the belief that fullness of life comes by way of giving attention to how we live inwardly and outwardly. The vision was that there need to be Christian communities that commit themselves to faithful living in response to God's unconditional love. And to do that meant committing to work with a few specific disciplines or practices. Daily reading of scripture, prayer, meditation, and growth in self-understanding. Financial giving beginning with a tithe. Discerning the gifts one has to use in service to the community of faith or the wider world. A willingness to be held accountable for working with the disciplines. And so forth. It is choosing a way or pattern for our lives that nurtures spiritual growth and giving to the world what God has created us to give. This is why I am here, because of my own desire and need for a fruitful pattern in my life. Living fruitfully in the land that is my own life depends upon doing those things that awaken the person God created me to be.

We are called to be people and a community that lives fruitfully in our culture and country, which always seems to be on the verge of abandoning precepts of justice, compassion, and peacefulness. It is important that we commit ourselves to living out what we hope to effect in our society. The spiritual disciplines we commit to are what monastic communities have always called a "rule". The word "rule" comes from the French word from which we get "trellis". A trellis is a form or framework upon which a rose or other vine can grow. The trellis, the rule supports growth. Just as Israel understood that the law or commandments supported its life, so the rule or the disciplines we work with support and deepen our growth as God's people.

All of this is why the psalmist can write with deep joy: I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I set all your ordinances before me. It is the awareness of the blessing of the law, of the precepts, of the commandments, of the practices--however you want to put it--that keep us on the path that leads to fullness of life. As persons. As a community of faith. As a nation. As a human family.

This, I think, is the biblical meaning of holiness and perfection. It is not about being sanctimonious. It is not even about being religious. It is about what it means to be fully human

as God created us to be. The word Jesus uses when he says "Be perfect (*telos*) as your heavenly Father is perfect", does not mean "perfect" the way we usually think. It does not mean never making a mistake, or not having any problems or "issues". It does not mean having to put forth some kind of image that hides the blemishes we all have. It means fullness or completeness or wholeness. When we are on the path of loving not only our family and friends and those like us, but also those considered enemies, we are on the path of wholeness. When we are growing in awareness that God's love falls equally upon every person, we are on the way to fullness of life. When we are learning how to lay aside all desire for revenge or reprisal, that we can freely give to whoever asks of us, then we are becoming perfect. When the ways we live and the laws we make are full of compassion and justice, then we are on our way to fullness of life.