

March 27, 2011 / Third Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

The Journey into Our Own Hearts

Romans 5:1-5 ... *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

John 4:5-15 ... *"The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."*

The inward journey that we talk about in our community can be easily misunderstood. It is not "turning inward" and away from the needs and sufferings, or joys and delights of God's world, or of our own lives. It IS, however, taking refuge in our relationship with God. Taking refuge means grounding our lives in what is most important and real. Following Jesus is not only DOING things, but BEING persons and a community whose lives are centered in our relationship with God, the source of life. Working daily with our inward journey is the way we grow in awareness of that relationship, deepening it and clarifying its meaning for all the dimensions of our lives--our life with others, with the world around us, with ourselves.

I believe that we come into the world with our inner connection with God clear, vivid, and untroubled. Young children have this awareness. Unfortunately, as we grow older, society, including religion, buries our spiritual awareness beneath a load of concepts, doctrines, prejudices, fears, and a multitude of distractions that take us further away from that rich inner life with which we were born. We might say that the inward journey is a returning, not to childhood but to that fundamental relationship we have with God and life. It is what Jesus meant when he said that we must become like children in order to enter the kingdom of God. It is what he meant when he said to Nicodemus that we have to be born from above, born afresh, by God's spirit in order to be fully alive. We make that journey as those who have accumulated all kinds of burdens and bought into all kinds of illusions and falsehoods about what really matters. The spiritual life involves a journey back into the present moment, where we as young children were able to live freely, joyfully, trustingly, and with honest hearts. Jesus as savior or reconciler means to me that in him we see and receive this authentic way of living—out of our renewed inner relationship with the very source and power of life.

I think this is what Paul is pointing to in the reading from the Letter to the Romans. Paul sees Jesus' life as re-opening the channel to our relationship with God. We are "justified

by faith,” Paul writes. He means that our relationship with God is not something we accomplish by doing good things or having the right religious thoughts. It is about faith. And faith is simply the receiving of God’s love as we experience it in Jesus. This receiving, this opening of our life is what Paul calls faith. Paul uses a powerful and vivid image: God’s love has been poured into our hearts. In Jesus God has given us a direct infusion of love.

You know, of course, what religion has done with this? What Christianity has done with this? Continued to tell people that they are not good enough or spiritual enough or moral enough. Or we have made Christian faith a matter of the head, of having the right ideas. Thinking is very important, but intellectualized religion has starved people, or made them fight, and sometimes kill, each other. Over what? Ideas! Paul doesn’t say that God’s love has been poured into our heads, but our hearts. Heart, soul, spirit, even mind. Those biblical words all mean the same thing—the very core of our being. Certainly we can get some very damaging ideas in our heads which lead to unhealthiness. Looking at how we think and thinking more clearly is very important. However, the life of faith has to do with awakening to God’s love poured into the center of our being...and then living that way. The spiritual life, in its inward and outward dimensions, is about our responding to God’s love with all our soul, with all our strength, with all our mind...with our whole being.

This is why Paul says that we can boast in our relationship with God and in our hope of sharing God’s glory. He is not talking about the religious arrogance that we see so much of today--we are right and you are wrong; we are saved and you are going to hell. He is not talking about having big egos or throwing our weight around. Paul is speaking from a very Jewish understanding, that boasting, in the sense he is using it, means proclaiming our human dignity and freedom. Our dignity and freedom are rooted in God’s love for us. We belong to God because God made us and continues to love us. We can even boast in our sufferings and struggles, and find in them a hope that cannot be destroyed. Boasting in our relationship with God and even in our struggles means that we do not have to be ashamed, either of who we are or of our most painful experiences and circumstances. We can live with a deep, unshakable confidence in life itself because God’s love is at the core of life.

For this reason, the inward journey should never be a process of self-judging or perfectionism that fills us with guilt. Nor should it be an anxious striving to live up to others’ or our own expectations. The inward journey is about waking up to our relationship with God and God’s love which has already been poured into our hearts. We can journey in the confidence that comes from God’s love for us through all the changes and challenges of our lives.

Now, let’s look to where we find Jesus sitting by a well in Samaria. He’s tired and

thirsty and hungry. The disciples have gone into town to get some take-out. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water. Jesus asks her for a drink. She is shocked. Jews don't have any social doings with Samaritans. They don't "share things in common." Though they share a religious heritage, there is a lot of bad blood between the two peoples. Jesus has crossed the line. He is always doing that. The dividing lines, the boundaries, the externals that separate people from each other--it is as though Jesus does not even see them. Or, seeing them, he deliberately steps across them. He's coming from a whole different place.

How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan--and a woman--for a drink? Jesus responds: If you knew the gift of God and who is asking for a drink, you would have asked for and been given living water. "Living water" in the literal sense means flowing water as in a stream or a spring, as opposed to well water that can be rather stagnant. Jesus means "living water" as the life that comes from God--the water of life. They are talking about two different kinds of water. This happens a lot in John's gospel. The woman does not yet get it, but if this Jewish rabbi has the guts to talk to her, a Samaritan woman, she's got the guts to hang in there with him to see what he's got!

Sir, you have no bucket. Where do you get this living water? Are you more powerful than Jacob who gave us this well? Jesus responds again: Whoever drinks of this water will just get thirsty again. The water I'm talking about will quench thirst forever. It will become a spring of water inside you gushing up to eternal life. The woman still does not get what Jesus is talking about, but she asks for this water. It sounds like a great deal! She will not have to keep coming to this well every day to draw water. Maybe she's thinking indoor plumbing! And in a way, that's what Jesus is talking about--our inner life, journeying to that center of our being where we tap into the ever-flowing stream of God's love. This living water becomes in us a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

Maybe that's what the inward journey is about--indoor plumbing! We don't have to be running around all over the place. It is not about externals, but internals. We live in a culture obsessed with the belief that the full, good life is about externals. The things we buy. The money we earn. The power we grab. The entertainment always there to distract us. It is really sad once you see how widespread is the inability of people to look within, to know that the source of real living is within them. We know about this because we experience it in our own lives. We know how difficult it is to stop, quiet ourselves, and become aware of our inner life. It can be very scary because just about everything and everyone has taught us that the really important stuff is outward, all the distractions, all the illusions, all the things that have nothing to do with really living.

God's love poured into our hearts. A stream of living water gushing up in us to eternal life. This is why it is so important that we commit ourselves to an inward journey, giving attention daily to awareness of our lives in relation to God. Jesus points the way and calls us to this journey. Without this growing and deepening awareness of our lives in God, we cannot really know who God made us to be and what God is giving us to do for the sake of the world. This is eternal life. In the scriptures, eternal life does not mean life after death, at least not that alone. It means a quality of life here and now, a way of living so that we are growing in awareness of our lives in relationship with God and are living out of that relationship. The living water Jesus speaks of is the love of God poured into our hearts, and not only our own hearts but into the very life of the world itself. Being in touch with that life-giving water IS to participate in the eternal life Jesus is talking about. It is life both now and forever. The more we become aware of it and live it, the less afraid we are of death.

There is one thing I try to make clear with those who are exploring what it means to become part of our community as a Covenant or Community Member. It is not a matter of joining the church and sharing the work of keeping the church running. It is not even a matter of persons deciding which of our ministries they feel they should join. It is first and foremost making a commitment to our own lives, to this journey of giving attention to, becoming aware of, and deepening our relationship with the living God. Because when we are doing that, the rest will follow. We will become more clear about who we are and what we are called to do.

The spiritual disciplines that we commit to are for the purpose of helping us make that journey. Daily times of prayer, silence, study, meditation. Regular worship with the community. The practice of financial giving. The discerning of our gifts and using those gifts to serve our community of faith or the world around us. Sharing our journeys with others, seeking help and guidance from others. These are not rules to be followed for their own sake, as though we are somehow earning or achieving something. They are the shape we give to our lives so that we continue to touch that living water within us, so that it becomes more and more the very fountain of our living.

This is the core of what we are about—being persons and a community making that decision to give ourselves to a journey of faith, a journey into our own spirits, our own hearts, discovering there that we belong to God and what that belonging means for the full unfolding of our lives. When our living becomes this kind of journey, our lives will blossom with the gifts God has given us and unfold in ministries to touch some need in God's world.