

April 3, 2011 / Fourth Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

Ultimate Responsibility: Finding Out for Ourselves

Psalm 34

O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God.

Ephesians 5:8-14

Life as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

In the Church of the Covenant, we talk about "ultimate responsibility" as an important element or dimension of the life of faith. It is one of the guiding insights we work with. The term sounds pretty heavy, so I can see how it might scare people away! However, "ultimate responsibility" is very liberating. It means that we as persons, as a community, and as mission groups are encouraged and freed to embrace complete responsibility for our lives of faith and the ministries to which we feel called. Ultimate responsibility recognizes that faith can and needs to become real in our own lives.

Ultimate responsibility happens as we respond to something we feel God is calling us to do to meet a need in our community or beyond. It has to do with discovering and then shaping our lives around the gifts God gives us to exercise in the service of life. Ultimate responsibility is about moving from adherence to a religion and its forms to living our faith within the concrete, real experiences and circumstances of our lives. As we work with these things, the meaning and importance of ultimate responsibility becomes clearer to us. We are embracing our own lives as the field in which the seeds of faithful living are sown and grown. Our lives as persons and as a community of faith become the portion of God's kingdom that is given into our care.

When we are striving to live on the basis of ultimate responsibility, we become a community charged with the energy of God's spirit working in and among us. Responding to the invitation to make a free and complete commitment to the journey of

discipleship to Jesus, we are a community in which persons are able to grow and deepen in their awareness of God and God's call in their lives. In such a community, various ministries and missions will continue to be born through those who are taking ultimate responsibility for their lives of faith.

Ultimate responsibility means that when I see a need, I must ask myself, "Am I called to respond to this need?" If the answer is a yes from deep within me, then I am on the threshold of call, and I begin to commit myself to it. I stop looking to someone else to do it. I begin to give myself to this particular work as a ministry of God's love working through me and the gifts that God has given or will give me. Ultimate responsibility begins as I, like the prophet Isaiah, say to God: Here I am, send me! Ultimate responsibility also teaches us to say no to those things to which we are not called. This is one way we can work with Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, that we must let our yes be yes and our no be no (Matt.5:37)

Ultimate responsibility does not mean that we do not receive help from others, that we go it alone. We need the help and support of our community. We need the fellowship of commitment found in a mission group. Ultimate responsibility simply means that I do not expect someone else to do it when it is something I am called to do. When a mission group forms around a particular vision for ministry within the church or the wider community of the city or world, the group begins to grow into the clear understanding that it is responsible for every aspect of its mission—learning what needs to be learned, making the decisions to be made, finding the resources for what is needed, facing the obstacles and challenges, and staying in touch with the core vision of that mission all along the way so that it does not get lost. Ultimate responsibility also, however, means discovering the deep joys and growth that come with this kind of commitment.

A part of ultimate responsibility is recognizing that, while this is what I am called to, others are called by God to other ministries, other missions. This is Paul's understanding of the community of faith as a body having many members, not just one [1 Cor. 12]. God works through diversity, not sameness. Taking responsibility for my own

life of faith and that to which God has called me means that I honor the ways God is calling others to live and to serve. Maintaining this view can keep us from expectations that others respond to our work the way we think they SHOULD respond, or feeling that what we are doing is more important than what others are working with.

That is something of what I think we mean by ultimate responsibility. However, I want to back up and look at ultimate responsibility as the very first movement in the spiritual life, understood as our response to Jesus' call to follow him. Here we remember the distinction between religion and spirituality, or the life of faith. They are related, of course, but are quite different. We can consider ourselves adherents of a particular religion without being persons in whom faith lives and who live by faith. We can hold certain beliefs, belong to a religious organization, participate in the ritual life, and otherwise consider ourselves Christians. Yet our lives can be devoid of, and even in opposition to, the values that Jesus taught and embodied--nonviolence, compassion, caring for those in need, and the like. The difference comes when I make the move from religion to life, from formality to reality, from thinking of myself as a religious person to becoming a person who lives life as a journey of faith. That turning point I would describe as taking ultimate responsibility--I choose to make this thing real in my life.

This sentence in the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians stood out for me: "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." The writer is urging the community and its members to discover for themselves what it means to live as followers of Jesus. We need to do this for ourselves, within the fabric of our own unique lives and relationships, within our society and culture and the challenges we face. Find out for yourself what is pleasing to God, what is in harmony with God's purposes and love. There is a lovely verse in Psalm 34 that says the same thing: "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God." The literal meaning of it is: "Find out for yourself that God is good."

Find out for yourself. Discover who God is and what it means to live by faith. No one can do it for you, and don't buy into somebody's spiritual program. And, it is not enough to see what you think is wrong with other churches or religions, to know what

you DON'T believe or what you think is NOT right. It is a matter of discovering for ourselves what the life of faith is about, what it means to love, trust, and serve God and God's purposes for the world. This is taking ultimate responsibility for our own lives and faith. To me, that is just what the spiritual life is about—finding out for ourselves who God is and what our relationship with God means for our lives. It is about discovery. It is the opposite of buying into ideas or doctrines or spiritual programs. It is not about becoming part of a religious institution. Jesus said nothing about that, and even spoke against such things. We are to be discovering, tasting and seeing for ourselves the goodness of God, and how our diverse and unique lives can become expressions of that goodness. We are to discover in our own lives what it means to take refuge in God, what it means to root our lives in God and God's love. It is an ongoing adventure, an ongoing journey.

What if we as the church really took the psalmist and the advice of the writer of Ephesians seriously? You ARE light. Didn't Jesus say we are the light of the world? Live in the light. Find out for yourself that God is good. Go and discover in your own life what is pleasing to God, the kind of life that harmonizes with God's love, compassion, justice, and peace. The words that we speak in the church about faith, following Jesus, loving God with our whole being, serving those in need, and so forth...all those words are good and true. But they cannot stay as words. They long to be tried out, to take on the flesh of our unique lives. And that is what it means to take ultimate responsibility for our own lives and lives of faith—finding out for ourselves the living meaning of the things we read in scripture and talk about as the community of Jesus.

This is why it is so important that we as a community do not try to give people answers or tell them what to do. It is better when we hold up this invitation to taste and see, to find out for ourselves what the life of faith is about. What we do offer is a kind of structure or framework that can enable us to undertake and sustain this journey in our own lives. We call these spiritual disciplines. They are practices that, through the centuries, people have found important, even essential, to making faith something that lives in and through us. They are a means, tools that can awaken us to our lives as light

and help us live out of that light. Silence. Prayer. Study of scripture. Material giving. Regular worship with the community. Discerning our gifts and the particular ways God is calling us to serve. Sharing our journeys with one another through what we call accountability. These are practices we commend as ways to help us continue to take ultimate responsibility for our own lives and faith, to continually find out for ourselves the goodness of God, what it means to take refuge or trust in God, and what is pleasing to God, a life in harmony with God's purposes and love.

One last thing. We need to remember that when we talk about ultimate responsibility, we are talking about taking responsibility for ourselves and our own lives as a journey of faith. We do not mean that everything in the world depends on us! When we speak of God, we are speaking of the ultimate source and power of life, which is always beyond our understanding or our control. Our ultimate trust is in God, not ourselves. When we take ultimate responsibility for our own lives, we are choosing and discovering how to live as human beings in our true and right relationship with God, trusting God in all things. This is the way to read the beloved Psalm 23, as the words of one who has given and is entrusting her or his life completely to God and God's ways.

Ultimate responsibility is part of this whole thing we call the life of faith. It is about our coming fully alive as human beings, the way God created us to be and to live. The writer of Ephesians quotes what may have been a fragment of an early Christian hymn: "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." This is a good and rich image for the spiritual life, for what it means to live our lives as a journey of faith--waking up, rising from sleep. This happens as we work with ultimate responsibility, with fully embracing our lives as those called by God in Jesus to our true life.