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Taking Refuge

Psalm 31:1-5

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame.

Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

1 Peter 2:2-10 *...like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house....*

John 14:1-14

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

To seek refuge means to look for a place...that is safe, a place we can rely on.

--Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

I would like to share with you this morning about "taking refuge." The psalmist writes: "In you, O Lord, I seek refuge...be a rock of refuge for me." The psalms are full of taking refuge in God and our relationship with God. The psalmist experiences being hemmed in, stressed out, or under siege by enemies, either the outward or inward kind. Life becomes overwhelmingly painful or threatening, and the psalmist reaches out for help. God becomes the "place" of refuge, offering shelter, recovery, and the renewal of hope and strength.

The meaning and practice of taking refuge has become increasingly important for me. I have even come to see taking refuge as the heart of our lives as followers and a community of Jesus. It wasn't always so. I used to think taking refuge meant running away from things that need to be faced. Christian faith, as I saw it practiced, tended to avoid or deny realities that called for response—war and other violence, poverty, environmental destruction, or our own internal attitudes, emotions, and whatever "stuff" was keeping us from living fully and lovingly. There was too much emphasis on individual salvation--how we can get to heaven--and not enough on how we can live fully and rightly here and now as part of God's good creation. "Taking refuge" seemed to mean pulling the covers over our heads, because I did not yet understand its meaning.

My work with Zen Buddhism opened me up to what taking refuge really means. There are "three jewels" of Buddhism: the Buddha—both the historical person Siddhartha Gautama and

the living Buddha, much as we speak of the historical Jesus and the living Christ; the *dharma* or the way of truth, much as we speak of the Word of God or the Gospel; and the *sangha*, the community that practices mindful living, just as we experience our community as we practice together the inward and outward dimensions of the life of faith. The Buddhist says, “I take refuge in the Buddha, the one who shows me the way in this life. I take refuge in the Dharma, the way of understanding and love. I take refuge in the Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness.” [The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching, Thich Nhat Hanh, p. 161] We take refuge not to escape but to become more fully alive, to live in the most meaningful way. We take refuge in the realities that keep us grounded and growing in who we really are, what we are called to do, and what life is really about.

We take refuge through what we call the “inward journey” of prayer, individually and together. Daily times of quietness, inner listening, reflection, reading and meditating on scripture and other readings, touching our relationship with God, other people, and the creation. Taking refuge IS a kind of withdrawal or retreating, not in order to avoid things but to stay centered in God and our true life. We experience painful losses. Our lives become frantic and distracted. We become anxious, preoccupied, fearful, angry. We drift into attitudes and practices promoted in our culture that are not physically, spiritually, or ethically healthy. In many ways, we get out of touch with our true selves and what truly matters. At times we feel, as the psalm says later on, like a “city under siege (v. 21).”

Refuge, or retreat, becomes crucial. We often think of retreat as an extended time that we take, going to a beautiful and quiet place for longer periods of rest, silence, and prayer. We don’t have to wait until we can do that. We can take “little retreats” each day, right in the midst of our normal daily lives. Taking refuge in God can mean the 30 minutes or hour we give each day to our set aside inward journey time. It can also be moments throughout the day when we simply sit or walk quietly, breathe with awareness, come back into the present moment, and open ourselves to God. Mission groups take refuge together when they devote a significant part of their time to worship, prayer, and silence, grounding themselves in God and in the vision and call to which they have responded. We take refuge together when we worship as a community. This small chapel is sacred because it has been devoted to the time we spend together, opening to God’s presence, love, and will for us. It is our sanctuary. Native people remind us that our sanctuary is also the creation itself that surrounds us. So we take refuge here together, remembering through our worship, and on these grounds, who we are in God. We touch our true life.

There is another reason why is it so important that we take refuge on a consistent basis. If we do not do it, we only contribute to the fear, despondency, anger, confusion, or other

diminishing and destructive aspects of human life. We practice what we call the inward journey not only for our own sake but for the sake of others and the world.

We also take refuge in the community of faith that practices prayer and the life of love that we know in Jesus. The Church of the Covenant is our *sangha*, as the Buddhist would say. Our reading from 1 Peter speaks of the community of faith as a “spiritual house built of living stones.” This image sounds strange at first. We have been made a community in and through which God can be known and touched. We have firmness and solidity when we are faithfully grounding our lives in God through the practices of prayer and of outward service to which we devote ourselves. When that is happening, we are living, full of life, because God’s spirit is able to move in and through us. We are a house of living stones!

Of course we are a very mixed bag! Sometimes we live God’s love clearly and powerfully. Sometimes we are very faithful to the life God calls us to live, to the commitments we have made. Sometimes we are forgiving, humble, and open to God’s creative, leading spirit. However, sometimes we are narrow, unloving, unforgiving, half-hearted or neglectful in our commitments, and stuck in our ways so that the spirit has no room to work. Even so, if we are a community that keeps directing our attention and efforts toward being a community of the living Christ, then we will continue to be a community in which others and we ourselves can take refuge in God.

However, I do want to emphasize how important it is that we always and honestly examine and renew our faithfulness in the commitments we have made as Covenant and Community Members. Are we really doing what we say we are doing, what we committed ourselves to? The daily practice of the inward journey. Being in a relationship with a person or mission group in which we are held accountable. Being faithful to our gifts and the things we know ourselves called to do. Growing in our understanding and capacity when it comes to showing love and forgiveness in every relationship. Giving financially so that we can meet our needs as a community and the ministries we support. Making it a priority to be with the community for worship. The solid part comes from how seriously and faithfully we work with the commitments we have made. That is also what keeps us open and receptive to the movements of God's spirit.

Being part of a community that practices taking refuge in God is essential to our spiritual growth and maturity. There is no perfect community. It is important that we start with the one we have. Our community, with its splendid weakness and imperfection, is the very community God has called together here to be a “house of living stones,” a community of God’s love known in Jesus Christ.

In all of this, we are taking refuge in God through our discipleship to the living Christ. Jesus says that he is going ahead of the disciples in order to prepare rooms, or dwelling places, in God's house for them. We might think that this means only life after death. However, Jesus in John's gospel speaks a lot about "dwelling". God dwells with him, he dwells with God. His disciples, by dwelling in him, dwell also with God and God with them. This is the inter-dwelling of God with us and us with God, and us with one another, all in and through the life of following Jesus, the life of discipleship. Jesus did not mean that we dwell with God only after we die. We dwell with God right now, in this life, in community. It is our refuge.

You know the way to where I am going, Jesus says. Thomas responds, How can we know the way? Jesus answers, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know God. You have seen in me what it is like when God dwells fully in us and we in God. So we can say as Christians, I take refuge in Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, the life. By staying close to him, we find our true life, what Jesus calls "eternal life." And it is both now and forever.

This is used by some to say that Christianity is superior to other religions, that becoming a Christian is the ONLY way to God. This view justifies intolerance, an unwillingness to learn from others, and violence, physical or spiritual--the very opposite of Christ's teachings and spirit. Furthermore, such a view ignores places in the gospels where Jesus himself affirms all who are seeking to do God's will (e.g. Mark 3:31-35). And it ignores the places where Jesus clearly points away from himself to God (e.g. Mk. 10:17-18).

Jesus identifies himself as way, truth, and life to be lived--not as a set of beliefs or a doctrine! It is not about just saying Jesus' name or believing something ABOUT Jesus. It is about living the way Jesus lived and taught and to which he points, the way of our true life as human beings created by God. We're supposed to be living in a whole new way, and the only way we can do that is to pay attention to Jesus as the incarnate Word of God. Never do scriptures say that God became a human being. John's gospel says that the "word" became flesh and lived among us. In him we see and receive what it means to live as we are meant to live, out of love, which is the nature of our relationship with God and one another. In essence, Jesus is saying to his disciples and to us that when we take refuge in God through him, we find our dwelling place. It is our true home that we can touch and live out of right here and now. This refuge, this dwelling place is also forever.

To me this means: For me Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. That is the way I have chosen and in which I continue to grow and find life. There is nothing about this that means condemnation of or superiority over those who follow other paths. Exclusive and intense

devotion to following Jesus DOES NOT mean exclusion of others or what they can teach us. In fact, I find that the more deeply I go in my life of faith, the closer it brings me to all human beings and to the world as God's creation. I find it true also that the more I learn from other spiritual traditions, the more my own faith and practice is deepened in understanding and commitment.

As much as I used to think that taking refuge was a flight from real life, I now think that taking refuge in God, in Christ, in the community of faith is an important, even essential, way of understanding what we call the spiritual life. It is seeking refuge in what is good and true, in who we really are and are made to be. It is seeking refuge in what is most real, our true identity as children of the living God, what gives us life. And if our seeking refuge in God is humble, sincere, and courageous, then the God whom we meet, the Christ whose spirit we share, the community whose life encourages us will enable and strengthen us to live as those who have something life-giving to offer. We will come to understand and experience in some small way the astounding thing that Jesus said to his first disciples—you will do even greater things than I have done! You will do it where you are, in your own times and places and relationships, in the circumstances and needs that are part of your life and the life of the world in the present moment. And as we take refuge in this way, increasingly we will grow in a kind of fearlessness in our living and our dying.