

August 14, 2011 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

It's About Community

Genesis 45:1-15 *"...do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."*

Psalm 133:1 *How very good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity!*

Matthew 15:21-28 *But he did not answer her at all.*

The readings from Genesis and Matthew stirred up for me many reflections on community, our community, and the importance of making a clear commitment to being in community. As Thom's song says, it is only in community that we learn to love each other, and that we become our true selves. I was reminded of this on many occasions recently, especially this past week as I was with the group of young people and adults who came to us from New York.

Membership in our community of faith involves a commitment to working with intentional, daily practices that keep us grounded and growing in our relationship with God, others, the world, and ourselves. Yet we are more than a collection of individuals working on our own spiritual lives. Inherent in the commitment to our own personal journey of faith is the commitment to being in community with one another.

Jesus does not call us to follow him as a collection of individuals. He calls us to be a community that embodies God's love in our life together. Being in community is hard because in community we come up against ourselves. We think it is the other person who is the problem, but in community I sooner or later realize that the problem is me. My ego. My expectations. The baggage I carry around in myself out of my life experiences. The needs I expect others to fulfill. The demands I make that others like what I like, value what I value, and do what I want them to do. This is the hard part of community. A community of love calls

forth my goodness and gifts. It also makes me face the things I don't want to see in myself. Many people long for community, but they want it as some kind of ideal. The reality of it is difficult, challenging, sometimes painful. Community asks something of us and changes us.

That is also the blessing of community. When I am willing to be in community with others, I can become aware of and begin to let go of the things that cause me pain and misery. In community I am able to perceive and move beyond the smaller self that wants everything to be the way I want it to be, that wants others to be who I want them to be. In other words, in community I am able to experience the death of what Paul called the old self and the birth or unfolding of the new self, the true person.

Joseph's reconciling with his brothers is the climax of a story of family dysfunction and human relationships awash in ego-centeredness and selfish ambition, jealousy and betrayal, hurt and reprisal. In other words, normal human behavior! This is the beauty of these great stories in Hebrew Scriptures. They are completely real, not dressed up. Yet there is always an awareness that within, beneath, and through all of the human drama and trauma, God is at work for the deeper and larger purposes of life.

As Joseph encounters and reveals himself to his brothers, he sees his own and his brothers' lives within the panorama of what God is doing. God, the very source and power of life, has been at work all the time to bring healing out of hurt, reconciliation out of brokenness, new life possibilities out of the mess of human relationships. Reflecting on this powerfully moving story, I thought how being in community means that we are willing to be part of the messiness of human life, but with an openness to seeing our lives within the bigger picture of what God is doing.

Joseph is not an innocent victim. Parental favoritism planted tensions between Joseph and his half-brothers. Joseph, however, played into it, strutting around in that robe with long sleeves, flaunting his dreams of the future in which he was the main attraction. By the way, it was not a coat of many colors. A robe with long sleeves was designed for royalty, the life of leisure and privilege. Joseph's brothers wore the short-sleeved robes of those who work for a living!

Joseph was treated violently by his brothers as they sold him into slavery. Yet, now Joseph is able to look back and leave behind all of that personal stuff. His love for his brothers bursts forth in tearful embraces. Now he sees that nothing is as important as their being together. Their painful family history now pales before the need to care for each other and their father in the threatening circumstances of famine.

To be in community means being willing to look at our offenses and hurts and misunderstandings in a wider and deeper context--the purposes of God and God's love for the world, the purposes of life. We do not pretend that hurts are not there. Neither do we look at our community as an escape from the realities of human conflict. As a community of God's love, we take seriously and work seriously with our own inward journey, individually and together. That is where the spiritual work has to be done if we are to find within our hurts or conflicts the deep blessings of community. It helps us come to the place where we see even the most painful of our hurts and broken relationships in the context of the greater meanings and purposes of life. And we begin to let them go as our spirits grow larger.

As I reflected on this Joseph story, I also realized that we move beyond the hurts and conflicts and broken relationships in other ways. There are times when all the therapy or counseling or heart-to-heart talking doesn't do it. We finally get so sick of carrying all that stuff around that we just put it down. We finally understand that we are hurting no one but ourselves and wasting no one's life but our own, (and that others are getting tired of hearing about it!) and we lay it all down. I think that Joseph and his brothers may have felt some of that after all those years of harboring guilt, hate, the desire for revenge.

Then there is this strange story of Jesus. He has left a mostly Jewish territory and ventured into a borderland. This is symbolic; Jesus has left his comfort zone. A woman approaches him and starts shouting for him to cast a demon out of her daughter. She is called a Canaanite. That's an old school name for Gentiles, non-Jews. It dredges up ancient hostility toward the native people of the land of Canaan when the Israelites came in and conquered them. The name is meant to arouse intense prejudice and hostility. And, believe it or not, it seems to do so

in Jesus himself! He "does not answer her at all". Stone cold. This is not the only place in the gospels where Jesus' response is contrary to what we expect of a spiritual hero. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, always ready to help everyone? Not in this story! Something else is going on.

The disciples finally plead with Jesus to send her away. Jesus does not send her away, yet he is still not eager to relate to her. You sense a struggle going on in Jesus. He finally does say something to the woman, but it is not very nice! "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Implied is, "...and not to you foreigners, you Gentiles". This woman is persistent and smart. Her suffering daughter is more important than her ego. She pleads again for help. Jesus' responds: "It is not fair to take the children's food and give it to the dogs." Jesus has just called this woman a dog! Can you believe it? Jesus seems to be struggling with things in himself just the way we do, things like prejudice and judgments we have made about people. He has walls within himself, just like we do. The woman responds: "Okay, I can accept that. But even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table." Something melts in Jesus. Whatever wall there was in him toward this woman crumbles. Woman, your faith is great. Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter is immediately healed.

Where's the real healing? The woman's daughter? Yes. But there is also a healing in Jesus. With this woman, Jesus has confronted something in himself that prevents the fullness of God's love and power from working through him. And I find this very empowering. This story is about Jesus, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, who is the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith," the one who has gone through everything we go through, blazed the trail, as it were, to the fullness of life as God's children.

And this causes us to reflect on the barriers to community, to being our true selves, loving the way God created us to love. What I realized again with the help of these stories is that community is something that happens in me! It has to do with our running into walls within ourselves that we have erected between ourselves and others. The thing is, those walls, those prejudices or fears or whatever, cause us more suffering than they cause others. When things are revealed to us about ourselves in community, we are given the great gift of the

possibility of our own healing, our own greater wholeness.

I think that spiritual growth, the spiritual life, is more about letting things go, dropping things, than it is about achieving or progressing. As we let go of our interior walls, our fears, our prejudices, the grudges we hold onto, whatever it is that is a barrier to love, our true self emerges. The smaller self, the self we hold onto so tightly, protecting and defending, simply drops away as we become aware of and understand the things that stand in the way of love. And all of this can only happen as we make and continue to work with that commitment to being in community. Then we fully and deeply hear the psalmist's words: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity! That is where the blessing is, life forevermore."