

October 2, 2011 / Commitment Sunday / David L. Edwards

**Forgetting the Past, Leaning Toward the Future,
Living in the Present—The Journey of Faith**

Philippians 3:4b-14

Paul's words to the Christian community at Philippi offer us a fruitful vantage point as we celebrate and reflect on the commitments we make today.

Paul writes, first of all, about all of his achievements and credentials as a religious person. He has accomplished a great deal, climbed the ladder of success, jumped through all the social and religious hoops. As a "religious" person, he had become a "defender of the faith" to the point of violence toward those perceived as a threat.

However, everything changed because of Paul's encounter with Jesus, the living Christ. He saw that true life is a matter of God's grace, not our achievements. Paul looked deeper into the nature of life, that we live not by law, by what we do or achieve, but by God's gracious, freely-given, ever-present love. And nothing we have done or can do will separate us from that love (Rom. 8).

Paul had spent his life living the opposite way. No one had more to brag about than Paul when it came to doing the right religious things and having the right religious pedigree, and having great religious fervor. Yet, now Paul sees all that stuff is in the realm of human pride and achievement, amounting to nothing. None of it matters a whit compared to what Paul knows now.

Paul's words mean to me that we are to live from the inside out rather than the outside in. Our life is to spring from a real and vital awareness of ourselves in relation to God, to others, to the world as God's good creation, and to ourselves. Judging ourselves, always measuring the worth of our lives, distracted by what our culture tells us is important--these things are discovered, sooner or later, to be empty. What matters is waking up to who we truly are as human beings, as persons and as a community. I have come to believe that this is the meaning of the "spiritual life"--waking up, becoming aware, and no longer sleepwalking

through life.

Life as discipleship to Jesus means that we are on the journey of our true humanity. We are on the journey of becoming who we already, most deeply are. It is a life centered and rooted in God's love that awakens us to our true identities as God's people and empowers us to live as God made us to live. It has to do with experiencing death and resurrection, the death of the old, false person, and the birth, or rebirth, of the new, true person. The covenants that we work with are for the purpose of helping us stay rooted in the grace of God's love and growing in our capacity to live out of that love.

Paul continues by saying that all of that stuff he achieved in the past, before he woke up, is worthless. It is garbage. The Greek word he uses is stronger than that! What he is now learning because of his encounter with Jesus has to do with his own rebirth, a whole new way of living. It is living by faith and trust in God and God's love and power. It is the overcoming of the small, unhappy self--the ego--and the birth, or liberation, of the larger, true Self.

The life of faith is the journey of our own transformation, our deepening awareness of God's presence and leading. This journey has little to do with right beliefs or religious credentials of any kind, and everything to do with living each day awake to God, alive to God's spirit, and sensitive to the living Christ as he calls us to follow him in the life of God's kingdom.

The vision of the Church of the Covenant is that every person might experience and grow into the fullness of this new way of living. In Jesus we encounter and receive the fullness of God's love for us. In him, not only do we hear, see, and experience what God intends for us—the life of love—but we embrace that life as a gracious gift. It is something we already have, already are, but which has gotten buried beneath all kinds of what Paul calls garbage—false views of ourselves and life itself, illusions we have bought into that have been fed us by society or family, or even the church.

It is the difference between life as deadening obedience, laced with spiritual uneasiness and anxiety, and life as the seeking and discovering of what is really real. The commitment and discipline that are so important to this life of

faith are for the purpose of pointing us toward and keeping us in touch with this kind of life. They are not ends in themselves. There is no spiritual merit in commitment or discipline. The disciplines to which we commit as Covenant or Community Members are not heroic or radical. They are nothing to brag about and they don't earn us any points with anyone, especially God! If that's the way we look at commitment and spiritual discipline, then they, too, are garbage. They are only means, instruments, guides. They are not the shore of the new life toward which we want to move, but only the raft that can help us get us there. As is said in Buddhism, we must remember that the raft is not the shore.

This does not make commitment and spiritual discipline less important. The life of faith does not really begin until we give to our lives a form, a shape that keeps us pointed in the right direction. Commitment and discipline assist us in our deep desire to live as full a life as possible. It is not commitment for commitment's sake, not discipline for discipline's sake, but a way of giving fuller attention to opening our lives more completely to God and God's world, and to let ourselves be brought into harmony with God's love. Our practice of spiritual disciplines is not for the sake of being different from others or, God forbid, thinking we are somehow better than others. It is only for the goal of becoming more and more awake to God, and clearer about what it is God has given us to do and be for the sake of the world. Commitment and spiritual discipline express our deep desire, as Paul says, to know Christ and the power of his resurrection within our own experience.

Finally Paul writes that he has not already fulfilled all the things he is talking about. He has not "made it". The life of faith is not something we achieve, not some place we finally arrive. It is a journey. And Paul says that he lets go of the past and leans toward the future, "pressing on" along this path of God's call in his life.

The spiritual life is not a state that we achieve, when we finally get it all together. It is a process, just as life itself is a process. The point is not to constantly measure our progress or whether we are achieving a goal. The point is to let ourselves be in this process of seeking God and following Jesus each

day. Paul says he presses on to make Christ his own because Christ has already made Paul his own. We are already where we seek to be. What a paradox! We already have what we seek. We already belong to God. We are home. And yet we strive to let this belonging to God in Christ unfold in all aspects of our lives. The spiritual life is not about becoming something we are not. It is about letting our truest nature unfold.

On this day of our anniversary as a faith community, Paul says forget the past. We want to hang onto the past, be proud of it, even live in it. This community has a rich past. Appreciating our past, being aware of what has been at the heart of the Church of the Covenant's life and work—this is memory in the right sense. However, Paul still says forget it! He means let go of it! We are not to cling even to the past that is rich and good and laudable. To hang onto the past in any way is to be unresponsive, individually and as a community, to God who is trying to get our attention in the present and toward the future. Letting go of the past. Leaning toward the future. Yet always living fully in the present, where God calls us to be and to serve.

One last word about why we work with all this stuff--commitment, spiritual disciplines, the inward and outward journeys, call, gifts. For me, it is because this is the most urgent and important thing in our lives. Spirituality is not something you do when you have time or leisure, after you take care of more important things. It is THE thing, and if we go through our lives without ever having learned to center our lives in God and live from that center, we will have missed it.

We did not read this morning the gospel for this week, Jesus' parable in Matthew 21. It is not a very pleasant story. I won't get into the story except to say that the upshot is that our lives are something precious and entrusted to us as gifts from God, to be lived joyfully and fruitfully. Jesus says at the end of the parable--he is speaking to the religious types--that God's kingdom will be taken away from those who do not produce its fruits. Jesus said such things on several occasions, startling us with his intensity.

In the Chrysalis Mission Group, one of our disciplines is to become familiar with religious traditions other than our own. This summer I decided to re-read my

copy of The Upanishads, the four thousand year-old wisdom writings that gave birth to the Hindu religion in India, as well as Buddhism. When I read these particular words, they took my breath away:

*Those who depart this world without knowing who they are
or what they truly desire have no freedom here or hereafter.
Those who leave here knowing who they are and what they
truly desire have freedom everywhere, both in this world and in the
next.*

(The Chandogya Upanishad, The Upanishads,
translated by Eknath Easwaran, p.142)

In the Church of the Covenant we might put it this way: Those who are on the journey of discovering who they truly are and what they are given and gifted to do with their lives are finding what Jesus called "eternal life" both now and forever. It is the kingdom of God, the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field. It is that which will never be taken away from them.