

January 22, 2012 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

Loving Without Possessing

Psalm 62:5-12

*On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God...
Put no confidence in extortion, and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.*

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

...the present form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxiety.

Mark 1:14-20

And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Psalm 62 calls us to complete and ultimate trust in God alone. In all circumstances, especially those that trouble us, we are counseled to become quiet and to wait on God. I take this quite literally these days to mean we sit for our time of inward journey and let our inner life, our feelings and thoughts that are swirling around all the time, settle down. The psalm then says we are to not attach our hopes to circumstances and experiences that come and go, rise and fall, bring good fortune one moment and suffering the next. When dishonesty, power-grabbing, and living by force seem to get results and tempt us to act the same way, we are to put no stock in any of it. The poor are a breath. The wealthy are a sham. All human beings are very small within the context of all of life and the grand sweep of the ages. The psalm ends by bringing us back to trust in God, the only source of life-giving power and of love that is steadfast.

Paul writes to the quarreling Christian community in Corinth, trying to wake them up to what it really means to be a community of Jesus. In Paul's day, there was intense expectation that Jesus would return any moment or day, establishing once and for all God's reign over everything and everyone. So, Paul writes that as a community of Jesus, the triumphant returning One, they are to live in a different way. If married, as though not married. If grieving, as though not grieving. If buying things, as though they had not a possession in the world. And in dealing with the world on a daily basis, as though they had no dealings with it. Why? Because all of this is passing away, and

Paul wants them to be without anxiety about it.

We no longer have that early Christian expectation that the Day of God will dawn any moment and suddenly everything will be changed. Does that mean there is not something worth looking at in Paul's seemingly strange writings? Times, circumstances, and understandings have changed from the middle first century to now. Yet maybe there is something important about living in the world in a way that is not attached to it, to things, to people, to circumstances that are always changing. The life of Jesus as the manifestation of God's realm, God's kingdom, and what it means to live the life of God's love, does, in fact, mean the end of the world as we know it. It turns everything on its head, a whole new way of looking at things and a different way of living.

Mark's story of Jesus calling his disciples is wonderfully sparse and concise, leaving it to us to discover what it means for us in our own lives today. Jesus walks along the seashore, sees two sets of brothers fishing and mending nets. He calls them to follow him and to fish for people. Just like that, they drop their nets and go with him, leaving home, work, and family.

How do you just drop everything and go? Surely there is more to it? Surely Jesus doesn't expect us to quit our jobs, sell our houses, leave our families? Jesus' simply calls us to follow him, to make the journey of discipleship, the life of faith, the central-most thing, and to discover along the way what it means. This will mean letting go of something, maybe many things. And maybe not just once, but all through our lives, we will need to look at what we are holding onto that we need to let go of in order to experience the fullness of life Jesus talked about.

There was for me a thread in these readings. It is about attachment and detachment. It is about the reality that to live fully and love fully, we have to learn to let go, and what to let go of. It has to do with the very nature of life. The form of this world may not be passing away in the sense Paul meant. But the forms of the world are always passing away. Our own form is passing away, changing daily. Scientists tell us this. The great spiritual traditions tell us this. Life is always changing, dying and being born. There is always resurrection, new life, but not without death. The two go together. The great world religions, as far as I can see, including Christianity, tell us that our unhappiness, our violence, our inability to live as we were created to live, are all rooted in our trying to hold onto, grasp, cling, make permanent, build up something for ourselves—wealth, security, some ideal world of our own thinking. We

try to hang on to things and people, and we are forever unhappy and dissatisfied in spite of our consuming, and our possessiveness and dependencies in relationships. Too top it all off, we have become insane enough to destroy our own home—the earth—because of our attachments to owning, profiting, conquering, and just plain destructiveness.

I have found help in understanding these things better from the wisdom of other, even older, traditions. *The Bhagavad Gita*, a central Hindu text, was Gandhi's most cherished spiritual source. In it he discovered the principle of *ahimsa*, non-harming or non-violence. The God Krishna is in the guise of a chariot driver, who speaks to the warrior and spiritual seeker Arjuna. *They*[those who know God] *do not rejoice in good fortune; they do not lament at bad fortune; lucid, with minds unshaken, they remain within what is real.* Lord Krishna also says: *Pleasures from external objects are wombs of suffering, Arjuna. They have their beginnings and their ends; no wise person seeks joy among them.*

From the earliest text attributed to the Buddha, called *The Dhammapada*, these teachings: *Selfish attachment brings suffering; selfish attachment brings fear. Be detached, and you will be free from suffering and fear.* Also this: *As a solid rock cannot be moved by the wind, the wise are not shaken by praise or blame.*

Finally, a little something from the oldest of the eastern texts, *The Upanishads*, the fountain of Hinduism. This is a lovely poetic piece that pretty much captures the whole problem but also points us to the answer.

In the secret cave of the heart, two are seated by life's fountain.

The separate ego drinks of the sweet and bitter stuff,

Liking the sweet, disliking the bitter,

While the supreme Self drinks sweet and bitter

Neither liking this nor disliking that.

The ego gropes in darkness, while the Self lives in light.

I love the imagery here. The fountain of life is within us. [Jesus said the similar things, by the way.] We have an ego that gets caught up in emotions and sensations, that experiences pain and pleasure, despair and hope. The ego also gets its feelings hurt and often wants to be a little dictator. Yet, there is also the larger Self, we might say our true Self. That's why we can be aware that we are hurting or happy, depressed or serene. Though our emotions are very important and real, we are much more than our emotions, or our thoughts, for that matter. The larger, true Self can keep us from

sinking into our despair or fear or anger. I think it is that larger, truer Self that Jesus makes us aware of, the person we are in relation to God who created us. That is why, I think, he could tell us that, as messed up and confused and self-absorbed as we might get(ego stuff), we are still the light of the world and the salt of the earth, because God made us!(Matt. 5:13-14)

When we lose something or someone, it feels as though our world has come to an end. Our emotions overwhelm us, and our minds follow, until we can't imagine anything other than emptiness or unending grief. When we love or admire something or someone, it is good, enjoyable, wonderful, inspiring. Yet, there is always the tendency to possess, to hold onto, to control, and this will always lead to unhappiness and in some instances abuse of oneself or the other person. When we become attached to some idea of the way we think the world should be, it can be a good thing, until we start defending it against any criticism or question or doubt or challenge. Then we become angry, violent defenders of ideas, political agendas, national, racial, or religious identities. Getting back to our own scriptures, the anonymous author of the Letter of James put it dead on: *Those conflicts and disputes (literally, fightings and wars) among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts*(James 4:1-2).

Do you begin to see what I am talking about? The Western world tends to misunderstand the Eastern view. Let's remember that Jesus was part of a Middle Eastern world! It is not a matter of not feeling anything, or not enjoying things or people. It is not a matter of hating the world or becoming austere and dry, afraid of having a good time or delighting in this good creation. It is a matter of realizing the whole of who we are as human beings created of earth and spirit.

I think all of this invites us to look at our lives and our attachments, and to see how and to what, or whom, we have become attached in ways that keep us from the journey of fullness of life, the journey to which Jesus calls us. Maybe it is attachment to security that keeps us from taking the risks of doing something we feel deeply called to do but are held back by our fears. Maybe it is attachment to some view of ourselves that keeps us stuck in a sense of worthlessness, self-hate, or inability to experience joy in life. Maybe it is attachment to someone we have lost or are losing, a painful letting go, to be sure, but one that can open up in us a deeper connection to

life than we thought possible, if we remain open to it, with the help of others, our community, I must say. Maybe it is attachment to our own ideas about things that keeps us from really seeing the world as it is, or people as they are instead of how we categorize and judge them.

There is much more to talk about in all of this. I hope I have not given the impression that I have some kind of complete understanding of it all. But I need to bring this sermon to an end. So I simply share these thoughts with you about our texts for today for our reflection and wondering, to see how they might help us on our journey. I am learning more and more that our happiness and unhappiness, as well as the inward and outward journeys of following Jesus, have a great deal to do with attachments, with seeing them and understanding them, with letting go of things in order to find what Jesus called eternal life, fullness of life. And it has to do with what I think the Christian tradition brings, not exclusively, but especially, to the world of spirituality. It is the call to repent, to wake up to God's kingdom right here and now, and to "fish for people". Not making people, or ourselves, religious, but living in the ways of a love that heals, uplifts, comforts, frees, advocates. It is a life of loving others, the creation, and ourselves in ways that do no control, possess, or exploit. This kind of non-attaching, non-possessing love can grow to delight in and enjoy, and to look with compassion and understanding on everything and everyone, including ourselves, in this world, which is God's good creation.