

March 25, 2012 / Fifth Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

Unless the Seed Dies

Jeremiah 31:31-34 *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts....*

John 12:20-26 *Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

*What is the knowledge of God that would bring [the vision of Isaiah 11] to pass?
The sense, deep in each one, of the blessedness of each other creature,
and the unity of all life in God. --Elaine Marie Prevallet, Interconnections*

The reading from Jeremiah 31 speaks of a relationship with God that is immediate and inward. "I will put my law within you; I will write it on your hearts." "Law" does not mean written laws or rules. It means the way of life, what life is most deeply and truly about, and the most fruitful ways to live. Awareness of God and the wisdom growing from it are to be found within us. I especially love the part about not having to teach or ask about God; everyone, from the smallest child to the oldest adult, will know God. "Knowing" does not mean head knowledge, knowing a lot about God. It is intimate awareness of and communion with that Reality we call God. This is echoed in Isaiah 11, the vision of God's "peaceable kingdom", the wolf and the lamb lying down together, a little child leading even the fiercest of creatures around, no wounding or destruction, and "the whole earth being filled with the knowledge of God."

Jesus' words in Luke 17:20-21 are in this same vein. He says to those who want outward signs of God's kingdom that God's kingdom is **within** you. It can also be translated **among you**, but in either case, it is something intimate and near and knowable. And didn't Jesus teach that young children already know the kingdom of God, that it belongs to them, and that we can't enter it until we become like them? There are many other places in scripture that point to our capacity for knowing God as the near and yet ever-mysterious source and power of life.

What happened to make us feel so separate from God, that God is some "up there" being we cannot reach on our own? I think that we were taught to not trust our own hearts, our own experience, to not believe that we have in us the God-created

capacity to know God. The story line of the Christianity most of us grew up with was called “the fall of man” and “original sin”. We are born essentially sinful, separated from God, and it took the death of Jesus to reconnect us. The problem with that is, the more time we spend with scripture, the more we see how unbiblical that view is. There are some elements in scripture from which one could create such a doctrine, but it is not by any stretch the only, much less, the major image used to talk about who we are as human beings and the significance of Jesus.

So many adults have confided in me over the years how close they felt to God as young children, clear and vivid experiences of the sacred dimension of life and their own lives, especially when they were out in the natural world, the creation. Young children are very close to God and to the world as God's creation. Education is important, but sadly what we do to children is pour a lot of knowledge into their heads without nurturing the most important thing—their awareness of themselves in relation to God and to the world as God's creation. We make them cogs in the machinery of religion and society instead of helping them deepen and grow in the knowledge of God that Jeremiah and Isaiah are talking about. Faith is made into a head trip instead a way of living. No wonder we grow up feeling alienated from ourselves, from the world around us, and from God!

We are beginning finally to listen to and learn from religious traditions older than our own and from indigenous people who have known these things for aeons. We are part of the world. Our lives are integrated into everything around us—the air, the water, the earth. Spiritually we are created with awareness of the sacred source and power of life we call God, which is both intimately familiar and forever a great mystery. Such knowledge can help us to look with fresh eyes at our own scriptures and see more deeply into them. We are created by God in goodness, with a capacity for knowing God all around and within us, and to live with joy, generosity, right actions, and love. Such knowledge and awareness can become distorted or buried deeply by experiences of pain, by actions and values that are violent, full of greed, and just plain evil. Yet there is always the possibility of touching again that most central part of us upon which is written God's law, life as God created it to be lived, what Jesus called the kingdom of God. I think that is the framework for our spiritual work and life.

I wanted also today to say something about the reading from John's gospel. It is about understanding death not as some alien reality that has intruded on what would otherwise be a perfect world, but as a part of the whole process of the life of the world,

the creation.

Some Greeks were in Jerusalem and asked to see Jesus. Earlier in John's gospel [10:16], Jesus said that he had "other sheep" to bring into his fold, people beyond the boundaries of Israel. They would also listen to his voice and follow him as their shepherd. The arrival of these Gentiles signals that widening of the circle of response to the good news of God's love and kingdom.

When Philip and Andrew announce the visitors to Jesus, he seems not to respond at all. Instead, he says that now it is time for the Son of Man to be glorified. This is the Gospel of John's way of talking about Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. It is the final unfolding of Jesus' life purpose. Jesus now speaks of his impending death. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, by itself, doing no one any good. But if it dies, it bears fruit.

I spoke on this text one Sunday early in my ministry at Antioch Christian Church, in the farmlands outside Lexington, Kentucky. After the service, Jimmy Gragg, one of the farmers in our congregation, spoke to me about what Jesus said. He had that quiet and wise way about him that came from a lifetime of working and living in partnership with nature. "You know," he said with a slight smile, "the grain doesn't really die." Of course, I thought! The grain doesn't die. It changes form. It goes into the earth and becomes something new--a seedling, then a stalk of wheat or corn. Jesus was talking about a deeper reality, that our true being, our true nature is to give ourselves in the service of life. With all of creation we share in this pattern of life. We are made to give, to be part of the greater whole. And it means dying, letting go, changing form.

It is not just about our literal dying, but how we live. Those who love their lives lose them. Those who hate their lives in this world keep their lives forever. By "loving" our lives Jesus meant clinging to them, refusing to change, resisting transformation. He meant living only for ourselves. And when we do that, death DOES become a problem for us, something fearful and dreaded, an enemy. By "hating" our lives, Jesus did not mean emotionally despising ourselves or the world. Jesus said the same thing before in other ways [Matt. 10:37-39; Mk. 8:34-35; Lk. 9:23-24]. If you try to grasp your life, you lose it. If you let go of your life, you find it. That's what Jesus meant by "loving" or "hating" our lives. If we try to hang onto our lives, try to build a wall of security around ourselves or our church or our nation or whatever, it has the opposite effect. It doesn't bring life, but destruction and unhappiness. Look at our obsession with personal security and handguns. What has it brought but death and fear and more acute insecurity? Only

by letting go do we find life. Only as we die to our ego-centric and possessive ways of living do we find true security and joy that comes from entering fully into the process of life itself. Hating our lives in the world means letting go of our efforts to control everyone and everything, including ourselves. It means opening ourselves up to God and God's spirit. It means laying down the burdens of fear that keep us from living fully and freely the lives God has given us to live. And if we are living in that way, we eventually realize that there is nothing to fear about our actual dying.

I was reading recently a new biography of the German theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed in April 1945 for his part in the underground resistance to Hitler. I have always admired Bonhoeffer's life. Some of his writings have profoundly shaped contemporary Christianity. However, at the beginning of one of the chapters was a quotation from Bonhoeffer's writings: "Death reveals that the world is not as it should be but that it stands in need of redemption. Christ alone is the conquering of death." It is the view of death promoted by Christianity for centuries, that death is an intruder into life, something outside of creation, a punishment for disobedience. That view is built mostly on some portions of Paul's letters, that death came by way of the sin, and Jesus' death and resurrection overcame death.

As I read Bonhoeffer's words, it struck me how utterly foreign they sounded to me. There is a much older and widespread spiritual view in the history of humanity that understands death as a part of life, that without death, there is no life. Birth and death are part of the cycle, the process that sustains life and brings about newness. This is also the view of science and what it is telling us today about the nature of the universe and our place in it. Jesus' words in John 12 are part of that same spiritual wisdom. The seed does not die. It changes form, and that form gives birth to new life, expanded life, fruitful life. This is not only true at the point of our physical deaths, but also true for our living. We can experience death and resurrection throughout our lives, as we die to our small selves and bear the fruit of our true Self, as we grow from isolation and alienation into communion and community with God, one another, the creation around us, and ourselves.

This is what our inward and outward journeys are about. The inward journey is the way we come to know the law that is written on our hearts, how we come alive in our knowledge, our awareness of God. It is how we discern where we are fearful and clinging, where we are trying to secure ourselves, where we are resisting the kind of dying, of letting go that bears fruit of new life. The work of our inward journey is the daily,

patient, loving work of untying our knots, unclenching our hearts. It is the inward journey that helps us begin to see more clearly how our lives and our gifts are meant to serve life around us. And in all of this, as we are on this journey inward and outward, we are able to come to that point where we are no longer afraid of death. It is not an ending but a changing of form into something far greater than we can know from where we are now.