

August 12, 2012 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Find Out For Yourself

Psalm 34:1-8 *O taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are those who take refuge in God.*

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,
and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,
a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

In eight weeks we will hold our annual re-commitment silent retreat. It is not too early for all of us who are presently Covenant or Community Members to give attention to our commitments and possible re-commitments. Do I feel called to another year of responding to Jesus' call to the life of faith in the inward and outward dimensions? Do I feel called to take up with renewed integrity my daily work with the disciplines of membership?

I am looking at our Sunday worship and the sermons between now and that time of re-commitment from the perspective of my own call to commitment and ours together as a community. I ask you to join with me in this journey, as we together and as individuals listen for God's call in our lives at this point and respond as we feel led.

A single verse from Psalm 34 provides a fruitful prelude to this season of preparation for commitment. *O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God.* Two words are spoken to us. *O taste and see that God is good.* And then, *happy are those who take refuge in God.*

Taste and see that God is good can be more literally translated *find out for yourself that God is good.* I like that translation very much. It makes faith a matter of experience, of living, instead of an intellectual exercise in ideas and doctrines. Faith in our spiritual and biblical tradition always has to do with our lived experience, not with accepting things that are "hard to believe". Faith is about finding out within our experience the reality of God, of love, of the life Jesus taught, embodied, and to which he calls us. Faith is the nature of our lives as we strive to love God with our whole being within the fabric of our daily lives.

Faith is more a verb—something we do--than a noun—something we have. Faith is about paying attention to our own lives. It is about being in a process of rebirth, discovering and waking up to our true self. Faith is coming out of the deserts and sleepwalking of the

false self, or ego, that has been conditioned by our culture and by religion that forgets what it is really about.

Find out in your own experience the reality of God and God's love. Take responsibility for your own life of faith. Don't look to others to do it for you, or to always provide you some external stimulation or assurance or whatever. In our community here we talk about **integrity of membership** when it comes to the church. It is our response to the call to discipleship, committing ourselves to our own spiritual lives. It is finding out in our own lives what it means to trust, to love, to forgive, to be on mission, to discern and use the gifts God has given us in the service of life. It means faith moving from the head to the life we live as we respond to Jesus' call to follow him each day. This is what our community has held up and offered from the beginning. It is why membership is a matter of commitment, not just putting one's name on a roll. When we make a commitment to Covenant or Community Membership, we are taking responsibility for our own lives and faith, so that we might grow into the fullness of the persons God made us to be, and the community God calls us to be.

I was listening recently to someone share with me his story of addiction and recovery. The turning point, he said, was when he became suicidal and could no longer hold everything inside. He had to reach out for help, and share for the first time his despair and feeling of hopelessness. The church had not provided him the environment for that, for it too often is caught up in pretense rather than reality. When he was desperate and found himself in the hospital emergency room, he opened up and began to receive the help he needed. Faith changed from being words and doctrines and intellectual ideas, to being something experienced and lived. He began to find out for himself that God is good as he learned to share his life with others.

I thought about this in relation to our reading from Ephesians, the first three verses. Couldn't this be what it means to speak the truth to our neighbors? Couldn't this be what is meant by our being members of one another? When we share our lives with each other, openly and honestly, we discover that deeper level of connection, of community. We discover that we are members of one another, not enemies or competitors. And when the writer talks about being angry but not sinning, could this not mean accepting the reality of our anger and then dealing with it in a way that does not harm ourselves or others? The thing is, once we acknowledge our anger, without judgment, and grow in understanding where it comes from, it starts to leave us. It loses its power. The sun goes down, and our anger has stopped controlling us.

All of this has to do with tasting and seeing that God is good, finding out for ourselves,

within the inward and outward realities of our lives the goodness of God, of love, of life. It doesn't have to happen through trauma. It happens as we make and work with that commitment to take responsibility for our own lives, paying attention to our own lives in relation to God, others, the world, and ourselves. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from his prison cell in Berlin, wrote about what he called a turning from "phraseology to reality" that had occurred in his own life and needed to happen in the church. It is faith moving from our heads to our experience, religion giving way to the spiritual life, the life of living out of who we are in our relationship with God. Ideas and thinking are important, but they are not the real thing. Faith is not about accepting ideas that are hard to believe, or living life through a grid of religious doctrines or ideas that keep us from perceiving and touching reality. Faith is about experience. It is about following Jesus within the realities of our daily life as part of God's creation.

The Letter to the Hebrews gives us the image of Jesus as the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith". The word "perfect" in the Greek (*telos*) means fulfilled, completed. Jesus is the one who leads the way, blazes the trail, and shows us the fullness of what we are created for. He doesn't do it for us. And it is not just a matter of "believing in him" in the sense of accepting doctrines or ideas about Jesus. It is about following him, our lives becoming a great adventure of living out the love of God. It is not about succeeding or failing. It is about learning from every experience, painful or joyous, something of who God is, who we are as God's beloved children, and what it means that this is God's good creation and we are integrally woven into it.

To me, this illuminates in a fresh way what we call **accountability** and why it is so important. When we meet with someone we choose as a spiritual friend or with our mission group to report on how we are doing with the disciplines to which we have committed ourselves, we are giving a kind of field report. What have I found out about God? About love? About myself? What am I learning through the pain or joy of this or that experience? Where am I being challenged and experiencing growth as I work with the commitments I have made and the things I feel God has called me to do? It is essential that we have someone with whom we meet regularly who is willing to listen to us and be supportive, yet honest. It is essential that a mission group provide adequate time for each member to share on a regular basis. There can be no short-cutting on this. Mission groups are not just to get things done, but to support each member in spiritual growth and deepening. This is the way we help one another taste and see, find out for ourselves the goodness of God. This has always been the mission of this community, not just to get things done but to become the persons and community God

has made us to be.

Finally, a brief word about taking refuge in God. The psalm says, *Happy are those who take refuge in God*. I don't think we are comfortable with the idea of being happy! It feels too...superficial, or bourgeois, or indulgent. I think we believe that if we are happy, we are avoiding the serious realities of life. Are we supposed to be happy? Yes, according to this psalm, as well as in other portions of scripture. The first word of the so-called Beatitudes of Jesus (Matt. 6) can be translated both "Blessed" and "Happy". It is the down-deep happiness, the joy that comes from knowing ourselves rooted and grounded in the Love that is at the heart of the universe. It is experienced as we ground our lives daily in God and our relationship with God through the set aside time we have for our daily inward journey. We do this through the awareness we carry with us throughout the day, the openness at the center of our being to God's presence with us and around us. And we take refuge together as we devote significant time in our mission groups to the group inward journey—silence, prayer, readings, personal sharing, and so forth. Taking refuge in God is what we are doing as we worship together as a community.

Taking refuge is essential to the life of faith. It is not running away. It is not hiding. It is not avoiding. It is returning to our true home. When we are afraid, confused, overwhelmed, when we lose our bearings or become lost in the trivialities and distractions that surround us daily, we take refuge. We come back to our true self and our relationship with God. Finding out for ourselves the goodness of God is nourished and under-girded by our taking refuge in God and growing in the happiness that comes from it.

This, I think, is what the inward and outward journeys of the life of faith are about, as we work with them in our community. We are finding out for ourselves the goodness of God. We are touching the deep happiness that comes from taking refuge in God.