

October 7, 2012 / Commitment Sunday / David L. Edwards

Receiving the Kingdom of God

Psalm 8 *...what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

Mark 10:13-16 *“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God
as a little child will never enter it.”*

When I first read through the lectionary portions for today, I thought about chucking them for something that might seem more readily fitting to our Commitment Sunday. Something like Jesus' call to leave everything and follow him. Or what to me is the “golden text” for our community, Paul's masterful words in 1 Corinthians 12 about the one spirit of God giving birth to a diversity of gifts and callings.

I decided instead to live for a while with Psalm 8 and Mark's story of Jesus and the children. They began speaking to me of the most basic and deepest spirit with which we live our lives as a journey of faith, to which we commit ourselves today as Covenant and Community Members.

The psalmist looks out on the expanse of the creation, the universe itself, and is overcome by a sense of awed humility. The experience of our smallness within the whole expanse of life is essential to a mature spiritual life. I was flying back home this week from Indianapolis. It was foggy and raining when I left, but in a short time, the plane rose above the clouds, into a brilliant blue sky. White clouds spread out below the plane like an endless snowfield. I have this awareness every time I fly, the sense of the brevity and smallness of my life. It is not an unpleasant feeling. On the contrary, it brings a deep sense of reality and wholeness. It is the same for me hiking in the mountains, or standing at the edge of the ocean. I expect you have had something of the same experience.

Such awareness shows us the real context of our human lives. It is a true sense of our place in this enormous and wondrous thing we call life. Our egos, which cause

us so much suffering, are overcome. We are filled with wonder. That is what the psalmist is expressing. Who are we that God should even pay attention to us! Yet, we are cared for and loved by God, to be sure, but as part of the whole of creation, not as the center of it. And that is very important to remember.

Growing in this humble and awed awareness of our place in the universe is an important part of our inward journey work. We need to live our day to day lives with our feet on the ground, giving ourselves to the relationships and work that are part of our lives. And yet we do it with humble awareness of the whole of life, so that our actions and intentions flow less and less from the smallness of our egos, and increasingly from our true Self, who we are in God. If our spirits are growing in this way, the ways we live will be more gentle, wise, fruitful, loving, and less hung up on things that don't really matter.

Jesus comes at it in a different way. Once again, he lifts up children as our teachers. The disciples try to keep people from bringing their children to Jesus, speaking harshly to them. Maybe they think Jesus is only about adult stuff. Jesus turns the tables on his disciples. Let the little children come to me, do not stop them. The kingdom of God, this whole thing I am talking about, already belongs to them and those who are like them. They know what it is about. Furthermore, if you can't receive the kingdom of God the way a child does, then you can't enter it. The kingdom of God is not life after death. It is not some "other world". It is a quality of life, a way of life, here, now, and forever. It is life as God created it to be and to be lived, and is characterized by right relationships, peaceableness, generosity, forgiveness, joy. In human life it shows itself as love of God and love of neighbor as we love ourselves.

Young children already have it, for they as yet have not been loaded down with and distorted by the things we tend to teach them. Children have a natural sense of wonder and openness. I look into the eyes of our granddaughter Arabella, only two months old, and it is like looking into the portals of God. Someone described small children as having a "fierce dignity". Their intimate and direct belonging to God has not yet been compromised or distorted. I like the way Eberhard Arnold put it. The **childlike spirit** is a spirit of "confident trust, of humility and endurance, the spirit

that rejoices and loses itself in the object of its love and is released from self-contemplation.” By self-contemplation I think that Arnold is not talking about self-awareness or growing in self knowledge, but self-absorption or dwelling too much on ourselves. The childlike spirit “gives itself completely, unaware of strain and sacrifice, and spends itself as though absorbed in play.” I would add to this a sense of wonder, what the psalmist was talking about.

The inward journey is, then, touching in ourselves the childlike spirit that opens us up to life as the realm of God's love. It is, I believe, the spirit we were born with, but lost along the way. As we grow in understanding of our own lives within that realm of God, we begin to see what we are called to be and do, and the gifts God has given us to contribute our part to the whole.

The outward journey is the way we live in the world. Our relationships. The needs to which we respond. The ways we use the gifts God has given each of us. Let's go back to Psalm 8. First, the psalmist experiences humble awe, or awed humility, at the smallness of human life within the expanse of the universe. And yet, we are given responsibilities within the creation. We are made a little lower than God, or angels as other translations put it. We are “crowned with glory and honor”. We must not hear this as human beings being “better than” or “superior to” other creatures. The psalmist is merely unwrapping the gifted nature of our lives, lifting us up, not apart. What might it mean to us if, in those moments when we become so filled with self-doubt, self-hate, or a sense of worthlessness, we contemplated these words, that, regardless of how we feel about our lives, we are, from God's view, “crowned with glory and honor”?

The psalmist says that God has given us dominion over the works of God's hands. Here is an echo of the first creation story in Genesis 1. The human being is created last and is set within the whole of creation as a caretaker, a gardener. This is not domination, and in no way does it mean destruction of the works of God's hands. It is caring for something that does not belong to us, but is given into our stewardship.

And this is where I would like to leave things for today as we make our commitments. Each of us will be working with discerning and living out that portion of dominion that we have been given. We will be working with what we feel God has

called and given us to do to care for some part of God's world and its people. We will learn, I hope, as we go along that it has nothing to do with doing big things or little things, with judging and measuring what we or others are given to do. It has to do with the uniqueness of our own lives and the “place” we feel we are given to care for and to tend, to which we will bring love, right relationships, healing, or simply the enhancement of life in some way. As we work with our own outward journey, what we are called and gifted to be and to do, we will grow in the honoring of what others are giving themselves to, remembering that big picture of life, that we are only a part of the whole of God's spirit working in the world.

May this coming year be for each of us, and us together as a community, a year of growing in awed humility and wonder as we look out on the expanse of all God has created. May we grow also in the childlike spirit that makes room in us for the realm of God's love, and enables us to live in this world as those who know deep in our souls that it truly is God's good creation. Then let us also be accepting and living out of whatever piece of dominion to which we feel God is calling us, giving all that we can give, but always with joy and freedom, and the honoring and encouraging of others and their callings and gifts.