

March 24, 2013 / Palm Sunday / David L. Edwards

A Listening Heart, A Servant Life

Isaiah 50:4-9a *The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.*

Philippians 2:5-11 *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus....*

I received with joy and gratitude the word of Gordon Cosby's dying and death this week. I say joy, because there is nothing to regret and nothing is lost. No one could live more fully and faithfully than Gordon did, and I include Mary because of their partnership in all things. Gordon faced and embraced his death the way he lived, as a call heard and faithfully followed, a further unfolding of the sacred journey that is our life. Nothing is lost because we have benefited fully from Gordon's vision and focus, his articulation in word and life of the essence of the Gospel—the call of Jesus to follow him and find our truest self in the way of loving God and serving others, the way of prayer and faithful living, the journey inward and the journey outward.

As I thought about Gordon, one very important thing stood out for me, which the two communities of the Church of the Saviour and Church of the Covenant are about. The spiritual life is very much about growing in our ability to stand on our own, to draw from the wells of our own spirit, to discover that what we most need for life we find beginning from within ourselves. The covenant life as we work with it here means embracing and taking responsibility for our own life and faith. It is “working out our own faith with fear and trembling”, as Paul writes just beyond our reading for today from Philippians. It is tasting and seeing the goodness of God, finding out for ourselves the reality and presence, the power and the leading of God each day. Those who help us most along the way of life and faith are those who call us to embrace our own lives, our own relationship with God, to find our own way, our own callings and gifts. No one can do it for us. Yet there is the gift and blessing of the community of those who are committed to the same spiritual work, are on the same journey-- a loving fellowship of encouragement and accountability.

All of us did not know Gordon personally, but that doesn't matter. Gordon would say quickly that the point is not to know Gordon Cosby but to know in Jesus what it means to find our truest selves in relation to God, the sacred Source of life. Yet we all know Gordon because

of the vision of being Jesus' community that he, with others, articulated and lived out. It is the vision that gave birth to this community, the vision of discovering and living out what it really means to be a community called by Jesus to the life of radical love, for ourselves, others, and the world.

The lectionary readings this week from Isaiah and Philippians speak directly of the life of faith as we know and work with it in our community. They are made even more vibrant in light of Gordon's life and death.

The Servant Song in Isaiah 50 is the portrait of the servant of God who first of all listens. *God has given me the tongue of those who are taught*, or we could say *a disciples' tongue*, because the disciple first of all is empty and open, always in a learning mode. The NRSV unfortunately translates it *the tongue of a teacher*. Within the context of this reading, however, it is the listening ear, the listening heart that makes the clearest sense.

Morning by morning God wakens me to listen, to hear so that I can live as one who is taught. So the first thing is the inward journey, which involves learning to quiet our inner life, our rampant thoughts and roller coaster emotions, so that we can listen deeply to our own lives, to life around us, and to God. The servant cannot be a know-it-all, full of ideas or beliefs or the sense of her or his own rightness or proficiency. The servant is, above all, open and receptive, attentive to what is going on, to what is truly needed, and what might be the right word or the right action in each situation. Listening is the first act and disposition of love.

Our disciplines include setting aside time each day for the inward journey. Whatever time of day we set for ourselves, the crucial thing is to make that commitment and stick with it, especially when we don't "feel" like it. Yet there is something about the morning. Isaiah pictures the servant listening to God first thing in the morning. Cassidy Taylor often prays, "Thank you for waking us up and clothing us in our right mind." The morning is when our minds are the most "right", freshest and most open. Henry David Thoreau wrote these words about his morning times on the shore of Walden Pond those two years: *The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour...and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night...Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me*. It is essential that we not start our day by rushing around, physically and mentally, girding ourselves up for battles and tasks and busy-ness. Our first "work" of the day, when we are freshest, is to open our minds, hearts, energies, and spirits to the inward sanctuary where we are connected to the Source of Life. There we will receive the sense of how we are to live the gift of the new day.

Our daily inward journey time is the fundamental practice for the life of faith and faithfulness. It is where we listen to what is going on in us and around us, perceive what is needed and what we are being called to do, as well as discerning clearly what we are NOT called to and what is NOT needed. God most needs our silence, our inward receptivity so that our lives can be channels of the love that gave us birth and seeks to express itself in the world through each of us and us together as a community.

The outward journey is rooted in and springs from the inward, the listening heart. Let's put Isaiah's words this way: *God has given me the life of those who are taught*. Not just our speaking but our living, the whole outward dimension of our lives is to become a response to what is heard in that Island of Peace within us, as Howard Thurman called it. Within and out of inward silence and listening, we begin to perceive how our decisions, relationships, commitments, actions, words, and our material lives can express God's love for the world.

As we become increasingly attuned to that inner word, that inward connection with the Source of our lives, we begin to know with greater clarity what we are given to be and to do in the service of life. There is nothing more important than that. Whatever it is, we then give ourselves to it with focus, discipline, and for as long as it takes. The servant in Isaiah endures all kinds of roadblocks, resistance, and suffering for the sake of faithfulness to the call. That is why the servant "sets his face like flint". Gordon Cosby had a flinty face and a flinty spirit. He showed us that true humility shows itself in deep and strong resolve, and sometimes in impatience with things that are superfluous and distracting from the essence of the Gospel, the life and teachings and spirit of Jesus.

As we more fully experience our lives connected to and embraced by God, as we deepen our self-understanding as created and loved and sent by God, as we become more skilful in knowing what we are and are not gifted and called to do, and more focused and disciplined in doing it, we touch in ourselves this flinty-ness. We become less concerned with others' opinions of us, less needy of admiration or approval. We increasingly give our lives to that which we feel ourselves made to be and to do. We move from doing things out of obligation, guilt, or the need for recognition, to the joy of having the time of our lives doing what we feel put on this earth to do and to be. Psalm 118 talks about taking refuge in God and not putting our trust in human beings or princes, that is, politicians and others lost in the power, money, and status game. Our peace, strength, courage, and capacity to love come from God alone. We belong first to God, not to others. I am not talking about arrogance or haughtiness or holding ourselves aloof and apart. I am talking about an inner peace and strength that is available to us all, that enables us to mature in spirit and in faith, and in the

life for which God has created us and to which Jesus calls us.

The listening life is a servant life. The reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians is a poetic expression of the meaning of Jesus' life. Paul has been calling the community at Philippi to continue embodying the spirit and to have the mind of Jesus. A shared love that fosters harmonious living. A concern for others that is greater than, but does not exclude, concern for oneself. A servant mind. It is not mind in the sense of thinking the same thoughts, or agreeing on everything. It means having the same way of looking at one another, the world, and ourselves, that is, through the lens of God's love for the world, embodied in Jesus.

Paul quotes what is thought to have been an early Christian hymn. It pictures Jesus as equal to God, and yet not exploiting or taking advantage of his status. Instead, he pours himself out and lives as a servant, literally a slave. His humility, his utter faithfulness to God's purposes leads to his crucifixion at the hands of religious and political power. It is that humility and servanthood to which God responds with resurrection. He does not elevate or call attention to himself, but is raised up by God. His elevation and honor is only because of his humble servanthood.

In Buddhism there is the "way of the *bodhisattva*", the most revered way of life. A *bodhisattva* is one who seeks not only her or his own enlightenment, but at the same time also, in compassion, helps others do the same. This early hymn quoted by Paul is the same thing. It is the life of Jesus who was faithful not only for himself but for us, as well, even to the point of death. This is what Gordon was about. It is what we are about. The journey of faith and faithfulness not only for ourselves but also for the sake of others, including the creation.

There is the inward journey. There is the outward journey. And there is what we can call the downward journey of servanthood. It is the journey from ego into the true Self that knows its connectedness to all things and all people. It is the journey from the empty pursuits of status, recognition, achievements, and power, to the nurturing and nourishing of life around us, both people and the rest of creation. It is the journey of liberation from narrow preoccupation with ourselves to the awareness of being part of a diverse and yet whole fabric of life. It is the journey of discovering what we are called and gifted to be and do in the service of life, and giving it all we have and are.

Let us pray:

We give You thanks for all of the servants who have helped us along the way of true life.
Amen.