

June 9, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Faith as Remaining Open

Psalm 30 *Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.*

When I was a young boy, one of my favorite movies was “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea,” Walt Disney’s version of the Jules Verne novel. There was the monster-looking submarine *Nautilus*. There was James Mason, Peter Lorre, and a young Kirk Douglas singing and playing the ukulele. It didn’t get any better than that! I sympathized with Captain Nemo and his desire to live deep in the sea, away from all the storm and stress on the surface, the insanity of human beings and their wars and profiteering and cruelty. At the bottom of the sea was peace, tranquility, and all the wonders and beauty of life he had discovered there. Of course, by the end of the movie you realized that we cannot escape life on the surface. We cannot withdraw to a place above or below, where we are untouched by the difficulties that are part of life. Life IS change, and change IS life. And much of that change is challenging, some is painful.

To be a human being, as God created us, means to live the joys and hurts, the challenges and disappointments. There is no escape from life and all its experiences. As the psalm says, sometimes we have tears that last all night long, and we wonder if joy or peace will ever return. And then joy rises in our hearts like the dawn. The African American spiritual says it so simply: *Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down*. When the psalm says that weeping may linger through the night, but joy comes in the morning, this is a simple statement of the way things are. Our experiences and the emotions that accompany them rise and fall, ebb and flow. Our spiritual work is to remain open and not collapse into our fear or distress or hopelessness or whatever it is. The challenge when we experience joy and so forth is to not try and make it permanent.

Seven years ago Psalm 30 came up in the lectionary the week of Vince DiBattista’s death. Vince had come here to be Head of House for the L’Arche Blue Ridge Mountains community. He was dearly loved, embodied the L’Arche spirit and could impart that spirit to others effectively and infectiously. His sudden death was a huge shock. When I arrived at the house that evening, I found a quiet atmosphere that was deep and rich with suffering and caring, both at the same time. Core Members and Assistants were there helping and consoling

each other, even in the midst of their tears. A candle burned on a table in the living room for those who might wish just to sit and let the light soothe and calm them. There were these intense human emotions, and yet underneath them something else, something deeper, an unseen yet solid Presence.

Last week a friend and colleague died as the result of a major heart attack. Michael Fitch worked with me at the first congregation I served out of seminary, Antioch Christian Church, Lexington, KY. I was young; he was even younger, a music student at Transylvania University and part-time music director. We worked together well, and even wrote a song together. We had been in touch just a few weeks ago about collaborating on something musical. Michael was Associate Minister and Minister of Music at First Christian Church, Bloomington IL.

Michael was 54 when he died, with three fine and talented grown daughters, and a congregation that loved him. Their shock and grief have been intense. It is one of those times when we wonder if the weeping will ever end, if life will ever make sense or bring joy again. Michael's daughters have been surrounded by a spiritual community that reminds them by loving presence that there is something deeper in which we participate, something beneath the storm and sometimes chaos of our life experiences, something that grounds and anchors us.

We live on the surface where the waves rise and fall, and sometimes feel as though they will overwhelm us. Yet we also live below the surface, as it were, able to touch the quiet, peaceful deeps where we are grounded in God. To be fully human is to experience both dimensions of our spirit—the emotions and feelings that come with life's experiences, and the deep, central part of us that opens to God, who Paul Tillich called the "Ground of Being." The spiritual life has to do especially with becoming more aware of that deepest part of us, opening, nurturing, and expanding it. The soul. The spirit. The true Self. Our innermost being. We give it many names. It is where we are in touch with God, where we gain insight and wisdom, where we are able to glimpse the wider and deeper context of life.

The psalmist says that he was strong as a mountain, but then he was dismayed, lost. The psalmist expressed a popular view that when your life is good, going well, God's favor is upon you. However, when things do not go well, it means that God has withdrawn divine

presence and favor. That view of our relationship with God still persists. When people have something good happen to them, they exclaim, “God is good!” Nationalism says, “God has surely blessed our country and is on our side!” Wounded spirituality says, “I must be a terrible person for this to be happening to me. God must hate me!” Such a view no longer holds or makes sense, and needs to be set aside. The reality we call God is an everywhere, all the time loving Presence, permeating the world. It does not “go anywhere” or “hide its face,” though we certainly close off to it and lose awareness of it.

I would say that we can be established as a strong mountain at all times. We do it through our spiritual practice, the daily inward time we take and work that we do. The most common description of God in Hebrew Scriptures is *hesed*, steadfast love, love that never goes away. If we lose a sense of God's presence and love, it is because our experiences become so overwhelming that we collapse into our fear or hurt or some other feeling. God's presence and love are what we call Grace, God's unconditional love toward and presence with all whom God has made. Our spiritual practice is to remain open to that gift, that love, that presence.

The tears and joys, the challenges we face or are called to face, are part of our life as human beings. These are the waves on the sea, sometimes rising to the heights, sometimes plunging down. Yet the waves on the surface are part of the ocean deeps, the untroubled and peaceful waters below. We can dwell there, as well. When we do, we become strong mountains. It is not the false strength of trying to be unaffected by things. It is strength that comes from our connectedness to God, the Source or Ground of our Being, the steadfast love of God. It is the strength we find at the center or deepest dimension of our being, where we experience faith as remaining open to God, to life, in the midst of the things we experience on the surface.

Our inward journey involves working at both levels. Embracing, not rejecting, fearing, or being ashamed of our emotions and thoughts. We accepting them non-judgmentally and look into them to gain self-understanding and awareness. What are our responses to life teaching us, about ourselves and the world? We can do such spiritual work because we are also made to be strong mountains. We can sit in quietness, prayer, meditation, and reflection, looking at our inner life without fear, as we ground ourselves more and more in God, in steadfast love itself. Growth in our spiritual lives comes as we find, each in our own way, how

to do this. It takes practice or discipline. Here I prefer the word practice over discipline. It simply means we keep trying it, keep working at it, until little by little our capacity to sit quietly and look compassionately and insightfully at ourselves and our inner life becomes more developed. It is not something foreign to us that we have to import. It is who we really are, but we have neglected or avoided it for a long time. It just takes practice and a willingness to make it important in our lives for the sake of ourselves and others.

Let me share with you an image of the growth in my own life in this regard, growth that has happened over many years of learning and practicing a disciplined spiritual life. When I first began to work with silence, contemplation, meditation, and prayer, my inner self felt very small and cramped. The world around me, including people, seemed at times overwhelming. My responses of fear or anger or anxiety were significant and sometimes debilitating. Over time, as I gradually learned for myself this way of what we call the inward journey, I noticed that the balance had begun to shift. There was more room, you might say, in my spirit, my soul, whatever you call that central or core part of us. And the world was losing its fearfulness. I still, of course, felt anger or fear or anxiousness, but I had begun to know how to accept these feelings without trying to drive them away, ignore them, or sink into and attach to them. I was more able to look into them in order to gain insight and understanding. This was happening because I was, at the same time, learning how to sit or walk peacefully, breath mindfully, and look at myself and the world with calm eyes. I was learning how to be both the waves and the mountain.

All of this points us to the importance of our inward journey practice. Each day when we are alone, practicing and expanding our capacity for quietness, reflection, awareness, and in all of it, opening to God who is everywhere present. Also when we are with others, in our mission group or together in worship on Sunday mornings. Just as there is our personal inward practice, which helps us grow in openness to God and to life, there is our group, our community inward practice. We come together in our mission groups or our weekly worship to touch that deeper dimension of our life together, to become a community that is growing in inner openness, strength, and solidity. When we are working together and personally in this way, we grow in insight, wisdom, strength, and the openness that enables us to be channels of God's love and loving work in the world. We are practicing and growing in faith, an openness to others, the world, to God, and to our true selves. This is what enables us to become channels of what God is seeking to do for the world.