

June 16, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Making Ourselves Small

Psalm 32 *Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven...and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

Luke 7:36-8:3 *“If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is....”*

“We must make ourselves small so that others have room to breathe.” I believe it was Pastor Leni Immer who spoke these words in a sermon at First Christian Church when Kaye and I were there. We had met Leni in Germany while visiting sites and people connected to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the church resistance to Hitler, beginning with the Barmen Conference of 1934. Leni Immer's father Karl was pastor of the host church for the conference. The Barmen Confession that came out of that meeting of pastors and theologians voiced opposition to the Nazification of the church, and to the so-called German Christians, who put nation above obedience to Christ. Leni was a young girl at the time, and remembered serving coffee to the great theologian Karl Barth!

“We must make ourselves small so that others have room to breathe.” This powerful spiritual insight came out of the experience of Nazi Germany, when leaders and the people made themselves very large and took the breath, the life from millions of Jews, and thousands of others—socialists, homosexuals, pacifists, persons with disabilities, and others who did not fit the insane dream of a pure, militaristic Aryan race. It is about the ego, the small self that tries to make itself big, that grasps, desires, seeks domination and recognition, is always hungry for something or someone. It is the wounded ego that is always looking for love and affirmation from others, and often in inappropriate ways. Or it is the ego that simply wants to be the center of the universe, heedless of the interconnectedness of life. It is all the same. It is the source of the same suffering, the same endless unhappiness, the same destructiveness.

Leni Immer's words have lingered in my heart for nearly thirty years. I thought of them again this week as I re-visited this story of the “woman of the city” who washes Jesus' feet

with her tears. Jesus makes no distinctions. Rich, poor, men, women, powerful, ordinary, the religious and the irreligious, the respectable and the social failures—Jesus encounters all people with respect to their relationship with God. All are beloved children of God. All are susceptible to drifting from our relationship with God. Yet Jesus treats us as capable of returning to that relationship, thus to our original, true self, the persons God made us to be. The center of Jesus' preaching and teaching was “repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand, near you, even in you.” Repentance means waking up to our true selves. And when we do that, we are in the kingdom of God, life the way it really is and is meant to be. Jesus faced most resistance from those who saw themselves as righteous, or in a right relationship with God, and distanced themselves from others. They were lost in illusions about themselves. Those who were maligned by the so-called “righteous” had no illusions about themselves and were most open to God's love. No wonder Jesus preferred their company.

Jesus had issues with Pharisees, but he did not treat them as enemies. He didn't mind having dinner with Simon. He appreciated the Pharisees, but knew they were on the wrong track. They tried to make people “religious” instead of helping them become fully human as God made them to be. Pharisees tended to be more concerned with being right than with loving, with being religious than with being true human beings. Our true nature is to love, not trying all the time to be right or superior or holy or anything else. Our true nature is to practice forgiveness of others and ourselves, not to be better than others. Our true nature is to live in a spirit of humility and grace rather than lording it over others in one way or another in order to feel that we are “somebody”.

Simon's evening is ruined when an uninvited “woman of the city” shows up. She is described as a “sinner”, her sin assumed to be prostitution, but we don't know that. Whatever it is, she is looked down upon by all “respectable” and religious folks. She stands quietly weeping as Jesus reclines at the table, her tears wetting his feet, wiping them with her hair, massaging them with oil.

Simon can't stand it any longer and mutters under his breath: “If this guy were a true prophet, a genuinely spiritual person, he would not let such a woman touch him like this.” Jesus overhears Simon. He always overhears when we mutter about this or that person we find distasteful or inferior, or who disagrees with us about something. The National Security Agency has nothing on Jesus, who hears every prejudiced, hate-filled, judgmental thing we

mutter aloud or in our hearts! Unlike most of us, who want to be nice and not upset anyone, Jesus does not let Simon go unchallenged. “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Say it, teacher.” Jesus tells a brief parable. One person is forgiven a small debt, another an enormous debt. Which one would have more love for the one who forgave the debt? It’s a no-brainer. The one who was forgiven the most, says Simon.

Jesus brings the parable home. Think about it, Simon. Look at yourself. You invited me to your house, but failed every duty of hospitality. You may be very smart, very religious, very accomplished, but you failed to act like a true human being. This woman, condemned by everyone, has not stopped expressing her love. Her sins may well be great and many, but she knows how to love. She has no illusions about herself, and this makes her open to God’s love. That’s where her love is coming from. Simon, you may know a great deal ABOUT scriptures and God, but this woman KNOWS God. Better one who knows little or no scripture, yet loves, than one who is full of scriptures, but whose heart is hard and closed.

Our responses to other people teach us about us, not them. Simon labels this woman a sinner, separating himself from her and others like her. This reveals the sad state of his relationship with God. He has reduced his relationship with God to obedience to external things--religious laws, beliefs, and rituals. In reality, he is out of touch both with his true humanity and with God. Here is a very helpful spiritual question: What is my response to this person saying about my own inner life--my insecurities, fears, judgmentalism, feelings of inferiority or superiority, festering hurts and wounds? What part of my ego has this person pricked? This opens up a world of spiritual growth for us, growth in self-understanding and in love. The walls we erect between others and ourselves are the same walls that block our intimacy with God and our true selves.

Jesus says to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.” Now ALL the dinner guests are grumbling! First Jesus refuses to separate himself from sinners. Then he claims to forgive sins, something only God can do. Jesus ignores them and speaks to the woman again: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Faith in scripture always means an attitude of the whole person, a complete opening of oneself to God in love and trust. Faith does not mean believing ideas about God or Jesus or the Bible or anything else. When Psalm 32 says “steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord,” it is talking about faith as trust in God. That is what “saves” us, what brings us wholeness. It is the difference between having ideas about God,

and KNOWING God, being open to God. It is the difference between religion as a head trip, and the life of loving God, others, and oneself. It is the difference between being ruled by our hungry egos, and living out of our true Self, the humble, open Self that is free of illusions, that is open to God, to others, to love.

“We must make ourselves small so that others have room to breathe.” This woman's ego has grown very small. She lives out of the true Self, free from illusions. She is not trying to prove something or achieve something. She is no longer trying to impress anyone, if she ever did so. I get the sense that the condemnation by others has had the effect of liberating her. She has self-awareness. There is nothing left in her for the ego to feed on. The ego, the small self that tries to make itself big, has become very small. She has complete room for love.

The ego-centered life is “trying to make ourselves big”. Whether the ego is wounded by hurt or a lack of being loved, or puffed up by arrogance and the illusion of being the center of the universe, the suffering we create for others and ourselves and the world is the same. The ego is always hungry for attention or recognition, or demanding that others meet our expectations or needs. Our spiritual work, the work of our inward journey, is becoming aware of the ways we are living out of our egos, and then growing in awareness of our true Self, the larger Self that is open to God, to others, to love. We practice seeing through and dropping all of the things we thought we just had to have to feel good about ourselves or to “be” something. When Leni Immer said we must make ourselves small, she did not mean some kind of psychological diminishing of ourselves, self-hatred, or anything like that. She meant finding our true Self, the persons God made us to be—humble, aware, open, loving.

Think of a time, an experience, when you made some achievement, received some recognition or approval, or got something you thought you just had to have in order to be happy or fulfilled or whatever. How did that feel? Good, right? But how long did it last? Until the shine wore off, or until someone said something critical of you, or until someone held up the next hoop for you to jump through. That's ego stuff. Then, think of a time when you felt very aware of your limitations, or the things you had done or said to cause hurt. You felt your smallness in the grand scheme of the universe, and yet in the midst of it you also felt accepted, no illusions about yourself, open to beauty, to awareness, to a love that accepted all things, all people. You stopped, even for a moment, judging yourself or others. You had a

taste of being free from the ceaseless demands and longings of the ego. You felt small, and yet found a true Self that was wide enough, open enough to make room for everything and everyone in the universe to breathe. You experienced and were filled with love.