

August 12, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

## Living Faith

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; 12:1-2

Faith is what we are about as a community and as persons. Faith is not some “thing” we have in our heads, a set of ideas or beliefs to which we cling. Faith is a way of living. The Letter to the Hebrews describes faith in just that way. The writer speaks of faith as an attitude of the spirit and mind and soul that leads us into a particular way of living. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things we cannot see*. Faith is the awareness that what we see around us, the world of the senses, arises from, is born out of that which is not seen, which we call God. Faith perceives that this life, including our own lives, is an expression or manifestation of a deep, sacred mystery. Faith, then, is the inward sense and awareness that there is more to life than we know, than we see, and that what life holds in store is abundance, goodness, peace, if we will open ourselves, making our lives into a journey of faith. That journey will lead us into possibilities, potentialities, and promised blessings that only await our willingness to open to them.

In the eleventh chapter of the letter, the writer speaks of those throughout the history of our spiritual tradition—Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and countless others-- who lived this journey of faith, giving their lives with openness, risk, trust, willing to leave behind the old for the sake of the new, to let go of the familiar and move into the unknown on the basis of that inward sense of the promises of God. The journey of faith also includes struggles, challenges, sometimes pain, as we live inwardly and outwardly toward our true home—our true selves as God made us and the ways that we become channels of God's loving will for the world. Anyone who has committed to and worked seriously with the spiritual life, in the way we try to do in this community, will recognize dimensions of the life of faith pictured in our reading. The response to a sensed call. Leaving behind the familiar and opening to the unknown. The struggles as we grow spiritually and as we work together with the ministries to which we have felt called. Yet overall, there is the growing and deepening sense that this journey is our true home, our true life as human beings.

About two weeks ago, I underwent back surgery for issues that have been with me for

years. Coming to the decision for surgery and then preparing for the experience seemed to me to be the process of living by faith. I did my research. I talked to professionals whose opinions and experience I trusted. I listened to others who had been through similar surgery. And finally, when the time was right, or when I felt there was really no other choice, I met with the neurosurgeon to set the date. It was at that point I experienced the kind of thing the writer of Hebrews was talking about. I made the decision to move forward into what was, for me, the unknown. I stepped beyond my fears. I entrusted myself, or surrendered, you might say, to those who would perform the surgery and care for me during and afterward.

The dimension of faith as surrendering came to have much meaning for me. I have been reading a book written by a friend of ours and of our community, Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid. He had given the book to Kaye and me a few weeks ago when we visited his community in Bedford County. Shaykh Rashid is the founder and spiritual leader of the World Community, a Sufi Muslim community that has been here for 30 years. He is also director of Legacy International, a non-profit founded for purposes of education, peace building, community leadership development, and more. One of Legacy's programs is Global Youth Village, which brings young people from many countries, including the U.S., together for leadership training, peace building, and other learning activities that equip them to return to their homes and work for their communities' well being. Kaye and I were at Legacy when Global Youth Village was completing a two week session, with 40 Iraqi youth involved, as well as youth from other countries and the U.S. I have invited Shaykh Rashid to be with us one Sunday in the fall and to speak to us about his community and its life and work.

I am part of the Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center Mission Group. One of our group disciplines is to acquaint ourselves with spiritual traditions other than our own. So I have welcomed my personal friendship with Shaykh Rashid and the opportunity to study his book. Sufism is an expression of Islam especially devoted to the kinds of things we talk about and work with as the inward and outward journey of the spiritual life, the life of prayer and of loving God through service. The chapter of Shaykh Rashid's book entitled "Journey to Surrender" came to mean a great deal to me in the past two weeks. The word "Islam" itself means surrender or submission. Surrender, however, is also part of the Jewish/Christian tradition. Surrender means giving ourselves to an experience or decision or person, just as I gave myself to the experience of surgery. Surrender, most profoundly, means entrusting ourselves completely to God and making our lives channels of God's love for the world. Shaykh Rashid's book is entitled APPLIED SUFISM. And that is what we are about in the Christian

spiritual tradition - applied Christianity. In fact, there is no such thing as un-applied Christianity, if it is truly the life Jesus taught, lived, and embodied. It is not about a set of beliefs. It is not really about a religion. It is about making real in our daily lives this journey of faith, of surrender, growing into a keener, fuller awareness of God, and discovering the ways we are each called and gifted to serve God.

Unfortunately, surrender sounds negative. Giving up. Losing a battle. Or losing our freedom or some such thing. Yet, in reality, when we entrust or surrender ourselves to God and what we feel God is calling us to, it fulfills who we truly are. Shaykh Rashid writes that when we say to God (Allah), *“Okay, this is my life, and I give it,” we become able to tap other resources of energy. We find sustenance, and grow, and expand our ability to give...It is almost as if the design or flow of events starts to adjust to our good intentions. Why? Because, having accepted that we are not the doers, we have stopped rowing against the current. We are rowing with the current.* (p. 52) The life of faith as surrender does not rob us of something, it fulfills us. In it we discover sources of life, strength, and love within and around us, and learn to draw from them. We have experienced that in our community. When we come to the point of making a commitment to our own spiritual practice or to a particular mission, we open to the help, the energy, the resources we need coming to us almost as gift. It does not happen until we make the commitment, until we begin the journey. This, too, was part of my surgery experience. Once the decision was made to surrender to the experience, I was able to draw upon my own inner resources and strengths, as well as my physical preparation, to enter into the experience. Though I was entering into the unknown, going to an unknown land like Abraham, I could prepare myself for whatever might come.

Living by faith is the way we were created to live. We are born with this capacity for surrendering to God, to life, for being open and trusting. However, we lose it along the way because of the way we are socialized, educated, molded by our culture, including, I'm afraid, much of religion the way it is promoted. Shaykh Rashid writes: *Every child is born in fitrah* (an Arabic word meaning a state of essential goodness and submission or surrender). (p. 48) We are born at peace, trusting in God, enjoying security and safety, the sense of being “at home”. This is what Jesus meant when he taught that the kingdom of God belongs to young children and those who become like them. Trusting. Open. Surrendering. So, the journey of faith becomes a returning to our true home, our true being, the way we were created to live. I find echoes of this in our reading, when the writer speaks of those who are seeking a

homeland, but not the literal one they left behind. A spiritual homeland, their true lives in God. The life of faith as surrender is re-discovering, re-learning, and living out of this original goodness and trustfulness with which we came into this world.

Three years ago Hannah Herward, one of our Community Members, died. She had only been with us about three years, yet what a gift she was! When she came into the community, she was again struggling with cancer. Hannah saw in the spiritual life as we practice it something that could help her deal with the resurgence of cancer and prepare her for what would ultimately lie ahead. I have known no one who worked more intensely, seriously, and fruitfully with the disciplines of membership than did Hannah. It showed in the way she grew in peace, inner strength, and trustful openness to what lay ahead. In her final weeks, Hannah met with Sandy Fisher regularly to plan a gift Hannah wanted to make to us--a butterfly garden. She said that when she was a child, because of the abusive environment of her home, the one place she felt safe was her grandmother's garden. Hannah died just as the work group from New York was arriving and beginning its work. Within the week, the group had, for the most part, finished the garden, which now graces the hillside across from the Youth House. When I think of this journey of faith, this journey of surrendering ourselves to God and opening ourselves to God's love, peace, and service, I remember Hannah and feel her presence. She, along with many others, has been a gift to us, one who encourages us in this journey. This reading from the Letter to the Hebrews showed up in the lectionary for the Sunday after her death and the construction of the garden. Hannah is part of that great, living cloud of witnesses that surrounds us all the time.

The reading closes with the call to let ourselves be encouraged by that surrounding presence of all who have lived their lives in such a way. It is a call to continue working with and letting go of those things that weigh us down, that clutter our lives, that keep us from responding to the call, the call to life, to surrender and trust, to being who we were created to be and doing the things God gives each of us to do for the world. We look to Jesus, who is called the "pioneer and perfecter" of our faith, the one who has gone before us, experienced all that we will ever experience, and fully entrusted his life to God and what God had called him to be and do. In that way, he becomes the one who goes before us, blazing the trail, showing the path. He is the "perfecter," the literal meaning of which is that he fulfilled all that we are to be as human beings, and empowers us to likewise be fulfilled, to likewise be perfect.