

September 22, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### The Spiritual Life: Stewardship of Our Lives

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 *O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!*

Luke 16:10-13 *“Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.”*

The readings from Jeremiah and Luke may seem to have no connection at first glance. Looking more deeply, we can find a very important connection, one that speaks to us as we approach our time of recommitment. The grief of Jeremiah as he sees the suffering of his people and of the earth itself (4:23-26) finds a response in Jesus' call to be faithful in a very little, with whatever we have and whoever we are, so that we might be trusted with much.

Jeremiah grieves as he looks at what is happening and will happen in the days of the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem. He knows that injustice and lack of compassion have brought this upon his people and their leaders, and the destruction will have to run its course. It is a reap-what-you-sow situation. Even so, Jeremiah's flood of tears comes from his compassion for his people, though their suffering stems from their own and their leaders' actions.

Richard Rohr tells a related story in his book *SIMPLICITY: THE FREEDOM OF LETTING GO* (pp. 90-91). Rohr is a Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, NM. He writes about letting go of the things that keep us from a spiritually free life, so that we live joyfully, compassionately, and justly. Rohr asked his superiors if he could take a sabbatical retreat and stay in the hermitage of Thomas Merton, at the Abbey of Gethsemane, in Kentucky. He spent a spring living in solitude in that small, simple cabin in the abbey woods. He fasted from books, television, and radio, desiring only to have direct contact with his own life and life around him. One evening at sunset, while sitting in a chair at the back of the cottage, he put his finger to his cheek and was surprised to find tears. He realized, upon reflection, that his solitude had led him to two realities. One was the deepest of joys, at the beauty of the creation, the love of people, a joy beyond personal joy,

a “cosmic and spiritual joy” that we can touch when we are open. There was also the opposite feeling, yet connected to the first--a profound and painful sadness for what we are doing to the earth and to each other out of the emptiness and stupidity we fall into.

Jeremiah's lament helps us touch our deepest love and joy, and our deepest pain. It is joy for the world that God has made, and for our brothers and sisters, those close to us and those whom we do not even know. It is participation in the “cosmic and spiritual joy” of which Rohr spoke. Yet, there is also the grief of seeing the reality of what we have done and are doing to the earth and to one another. This joy and this grief are marks of our true humanity. When they are absent, we know that we have become something other than what God created us to be. We have strayed from our true nature. The destruction of the creation. Rampant and increasing gun violence. The inhumanity of leaders of nations who kill their own people, and, closer to home, leaders who would rob the poor and working-poor of food and health assistance they desperately need. The resurgence of racism, the increase of poverty on the one hand and the wealth of a few on the other...the list can go on and on. Jeremiah's song of grief leads us to those two essential spiritual emotions—an overwhelming joy and love for this world God created, and a profound grief because of the destructive ways we are living. The spiritual life includes the joyful embracing of the gift of life, on the one hand, and the awareness of our squandering of that gift, on the other.

It is not enough, however, to stay in our joy or our grief. How can we respond in a way that honors the gift of life and resonates with our true, God-created humanity? This is where the spiritual life that we work with in our community comes in. It is about giving disciplined attention to and taking responsibility for our lives so that we live in ways harmonious with life as God has created it to be lived, ways harmonious with our truest nature. In Jesus' words, it is about being faithful with whatever is entrusted to us, though in our eyes it seems very small. It is about ceasing to dream about the lives we wish we had and embrace the lives we have been given. The inward journey we talk about and work with has to do with looking at our lives and discovering ways we can be good stewards of them for our own sake and for the sake of the world.

Our spiritual tradition bears within it the call to take a clear and honest look at our own lives and how we can live in ways that increase and nurture life around us, as well as within us. This is the contemplative life, the inward journey, that leads to the outward

journey of living in life-enhancing ways. Richard Rohr defines contemplation as *a long, loving look at what really is*. (*SIMPLICITY*, p. 92) *What really is* includes our own life in the inward and outward dimensions, as well as the world around us, its beauty and its suffering. And as we look contemplatively at ourselves in the context of life around us, we begin to sense what we are called to do, what we have to give for the well-being of life. In our community, this is what it means when we make a commitment to membership. It is a commitment to look lovingly and deeply at our own lives through the life of prayer, prayer in the broadest sense of the word. It is a commitment to growing in self-understanding and in love. It is a commitment to being part of a community of those who are working with their lives at this same level, so that our faithfulness to our spiritual work nourishes and encourages others, and theirs us. It is the commitment to seeing and embracing our own life as a gift from God to the world, who we really and uniquely are, and what the particular gifts are that God has given us to exercise for the sake of life around us. In short, the spiritual life, or the contemplative life, is taking our lives seriously, giving attention to our lives in the context of the needs of the world around us and what God wants to do for the world through us.

To me, this is what the reading from Luke is about, mainly verse 10: *Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much*. Let us hear these words in light of our upcoming recommitment retreat and commitment Sunday. In that context, I would render the word *dishonest* as being neglectful of our lives. As current Covenant and Community Members, we will be examining whether or not we feel called to commit to another year of the spiritual life as we express it in the disciplines or practices. Can we recommit with energy and integrity, really doing the things we say we will do? If we honestly cannot, then we should not recommit, and as we know, there is no judgment about that. Our commitment must always be out of complete freedom. It is much better to not recommit than to do so without the right spirit, without intention, or without a sense of joy about it. For how we work with our commitments affects not only our own life but the life of the community, of others who are working with their lives in the same way.

In Richard Rohr's terms, the commitment we make is to another year of taking a long, loving look at what really is, at our own lives within the context of life around us today. We see the big picture of the world and its needs, and sometimes we go off trying to do things to help that are not really God's call within us. Or we try to do big things, have a big impact,

when that is not how God works. What the world needs most from us is what we are authentically created to be and do, whether we judge it big or small. Throughout the gospels, Jesus' teachings often focus on the importance of the small or the one. Just last week, the reading from Luke was about the one lost sheep and the one lost coin, and how much it matters that the one is found. Just so with our lives. We begin with our own lives. We commit ourselves to being good stewards of what God has given and entrusted to us, starting with who we are and what our particular callings and gifts are.

I have been reflecting in recent months on one aspect of the spiritual life as we work with it. It has to do with keeping our focus, keeping in mind each day the particular things to which we feel most deeply called and for which we are gifted. It is so tempting to jump around, from this action to the next, from this need to another, from one commitment to something else that seems more important or “bigger” than what we feel we've been given. The history of this community has shown that faithfulness to the small is most important. Only in that way do we learn the spiritual lessons of faithfulness, of doing whatever it is we feel called to do while trusting God for the bigger picture. And it is only through faithful attention to the small that we grow in the capacity to embrace the bigger things. But in the long run there is no “small” and “big” when it comes to the life of faith, the life of the inward and outward journeys. We each need to drop our tendency to compare ourselves with others, and work on the spiritual vision, the long and loving looking, that enables us to perceive and then to embrace whole-heartedly who we really are, what we feel most called to do, to give to our community here, to the wider community of our city and world, to life.

As we consider our commitments for the coming year, let us take that long and loving look at the reality of who we are in God, of what God is calling us or has called us to be and to do, whether we judge it big or small. And then we must not postpone any longer BEING it and DOING it. To paraphrase some words by Gordon Cosby (SEIZED BY THE POWER OF A GREAT AFFECTION, pp. 81-82), if we have something we feel deeply called to do, we'd better get to it. If we have a poem to write, a book to create, a mission to call into being, a work of peace or compassion or justice to do, we'd better do it. If we have a song to sing or a dance to dance, we'd better sing it and dance it. If we have the sense of a human need we want to meet, we'd better be at it. Why? Because God's creative and loving energy is constantly breaking forth, and seeks to move through our lives in their uniqueness and goodness and beauty. This is the call to be stewards of these lives we have been given for our own sake and

the sake of all that God has created, and to not put it off any longer.