

October 20, 2013 / David L. Edwards / Season after Pentecost

### **From Religion to Life: Receiving the Kingdom as a Little Child**

Jeremiah 31:31-34 *...for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.*

Luke 18:15-17 *“...whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”*

The reading from Jeremiah speaks of a new time and a new way of being, after the exile. The prophets understood the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of Israel in Babylon as the consequences of losing touch with God and the ways of living that flow from true spiritual knowledge and awareness - just and right relationships, compassion for the poor and those in need, peaceable relations with one another. Now the exile is coming to an end. The prophet Jeremiah has a new message, one of joy and hope.

Jeremiah's message is not simply that the exile is ending and the people of Israel will be returning home. There is something much more important. The people now can find and choose a new way of being. It is no longer the way of religious externals, of being “religious” people abiding by commandments and laws. It is not the way of worshiping in the temple only to go out to oppress and exploit. It is a way of life that flows from deep, genuine awareness of God, of the sacred dimension of life. In the former days, it was about religion and conforming to something outside of us—religious laws and beliefs and practices. Now Jeremiah speaks of the internalization of what religion is about. It is not about being religious or being an adherent of a religion, and it is certainly not about defending a religion. We are to live with the vital, keen, deep sense of God's presence in us and around us. “I will put my law within you,” says God. “I will write it on your hearts.” Law, in this case, does not mean what we normally think of as laws set down on a page. It is not about rules and regulations. In Judaism, “law” is something life-giving. It is a path, or paths, ways of living that are harmonious with the creation, and with our true, created nature. Jeremiah is saying that from this point on, a completely new way of life is possible for Israel, one that comes from inner awareness and love of God. It is no longer something outside us, to which we conform. It is a reality within us that enlightens, motivates, and energizes our daily lives and all that we do and are.

People no longer will need to teach each other about God, or remind each other to know God. Knowing, in this case, means deep, inner awareness and connection. It means a relationship with God, not as a doctrine or idea or principle, but as a reality within and around us. Jeremiah's message is a perfect fit for our time. We are beginning to see, I hope, that we must move from "religion" to life, from focusing our attention on belonging to and promoting one religion or another, one church or another, to authentically living out the kind of life to which our religious tradition points us. That's all religion is, a pointer, a guide. It is not an end in itself. In Buddhist terms, it is the finger pointing to the moon. We don't get fixated on the finger; we look at the moon. It is, in another saying, the raft and not the shore. It can get us to the shore, but once there, we don't carry it around on our backs! What matters is moving from externals to internals. Or put another way, we use the externals in order to awaken inwardly. That is the essence of what God is saying through Jeremiah. The old way was focused on externals—laws, rituals, and so forth. The new way is internal, a reality within us, an awakening to our awareness of God as the sacred Presence permeating, energizing, and guiding all of life, including our own lives. This inner knowledge, this kind of awareness is IN us, but has gotten covered up. We have gotten caught up in being religious and lost touch with our true Self, which is aware and knowing.

This is where the story of Jesus and the little children comes in. People are bringing little children, even infants, to Jesus. They want Jesus to touch them, to bless them. Loving parents want all the blessing for their children that they can get. The disciples tell the parents to keep the kids away from Jesus. Religion is adult stuff! Spirituality is adult stuff! The world is for and about adults. Children are only potential adults. We ask children: What do you want to be when you grow up? We are really saying to them: You are not worth much right now, but come back when you are grown up and then we'll take you seriously. In the meantime, we try to shape children into the same things that make us miserable and lost. Jesus once said to the religious leaders of his day: You are making people twice as fit for hell as you yourselves are!

Jesus explodes all these views of children. He tells the disciples to stop getting in the way of children. The kingdom of God belongs to children already. They know what it's about. Ever wonder why there are no stories of Jesus teaching children? They already get it. They are already where Jeremiah is talking about. They know God. It's the adults who have gotten

lost! So Jesus says that unless we become like little children, we cannot enter that kingdom, living the life that is truly living. This story of Jesus and the children is the most radical story in the gospels. I think that only now are we as the church beginning to understand how profound it was, and is, that Jesus welcomed children as those who are closer to the kingdom of God than we adults are. They are our teachers. They know the way.

Jesus doesn't really explain what it is about children that they already possess God's kingdom. Yet if we read and study the gospels for long enough, we will begin to see it. To me the most vivid aspect of the lives of young children is their sense of wonder and trust, their openness of heart. They really see things around them. There is nothing too small to escape their wonder-filled attention. They see this flitting, chirping, feathered creature hopping along the ground, and they are filled with wonder and joy. Then, as Anthony De Mello writes in his book *AWARENESS*, we tell them, "That's a sparrow." We slap labels on things. So the next time they see one, they say, "Oh, that's a sparrow; I've seen sparrows; I'm bored with sparrows." You see? Young children see things as they really are, before they are named, classified, put in boxes, and robbed of their mystery and splendor. Henry David Thoreau wrote in *WALDEN*: "I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born." So he spent his adult life devoted to regaining the capacity to really see what was around him, not the way society or religion wanted him to see it. Thoreau was a true mystic, one who was able to see deeply into reality and to be really present to life. He became like a child, and he entered the kingdom of God, though he seldom set foot inside a church.

Being with children brings us closer to the life of God's kingdom, life as God made it to be lived. Children help us recover a spirit of wonder and joy, a spirit of openness and humility, and they keep us honest about many things. They take us very seriously when we say things, so they make us look deeply at how we speak and what we say. They watch us closely, taking very seriously what we do and how we act. So they make us look carefully at the way we live and the things we do. Maybe we need to just leave it where Jesus left it. Don't keep the children away. Welcome them. And see them in a whole new way, as those who know what God's kingdom is about and can teach us. Because the kingdom of God belongs to them and they can lead us into that kingdom.

God's law written on our hearts. Each of us knowing God, in the deepest awareness, without having to tell each other about it. Not ideas. Not knowledge in the way we usually

mean knowledge. But the kind of knowing that is wide-awake awareness of life and of the sacred dimension of life, and of our own lives. To me, that is what it means to love. It means to be truly present and aware, to see things and people without blinders and judgments and prejudices and preconceptions. When we do that, we live more carefully and caringly, and with more joy and gratitude. This is why I am so glad we have a small retreat center, where people can come and be by themselves and with themselves. We don't talk to them. We don't try to put anything in their heads. They come, they quiet down and become more peaceful within themselves. And then they open up to the wonder of the world that is around them, the REAL reality of this world as sacred. It has been my experience many times through the years that when people are able to be on retreat in this way, they awaken on their own. They know, down deep, what to do, and it changes their lives.

That is what we are about as a community. It is difficult to explain because we have all been so accustomed to thinking of religion, of church, in external ways. Ideas to believe. Doctrines to hold onto. Rituals to go through. Institutions to belong to and support. Keeping the thing going. It is why we urge those considering a commitment within this community to take at least one year before that commitment is made. Because it is about a commitment, not to an institution, but to your own life, your own awakening, It is about living the life to which religion points. Religion is very important. The sacred writings. The worship. The study. The spiritual practices. All of these things that we do are very important. However, they are important because they can point us to life, to living as we were created to live. They can help us awaken to our true selves and living that is really living.

Do you want to see the kingdom of God? The children of Greenfield Christian Church in Indiana gave us a going away party when we left for Lynchburg. There were refreshments and games and activities. One of the children was very involved in her project—coloring, cutting, critically examining, and cutting again a piece of paper. She finally had trimmed it down to a tiny diamond of yellow and orange, pasted it on the paper, and presented it to Kaye as her gift. “Here,” said Katie, “this is for you. It’s the kingdom of God.” Katie could give Kaye the kingdom of God because it belonged to her and she knew what it was about. And the wonderful thing was that she knew it was hers to share, and she wanted Kaye to have it also. God has written it on our hearts. We already know God. As Jesus once told the religious leaders of his day, Stop looking outside of yourself for the kingdom. Stop saying, There it is, or Here it is. The kingdom is near you. It is among you. It is within you. Our spiritual work is

to uncover what is already there.