

January 12, 2014 / First Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

A Gentle, Committed, and Universal Faith And Life

Isaiah 42:1-9 *He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;
A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.
He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established the true way in the
earth....*

Acts 10:34-43 *Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality,
but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."*

Confession of an Uneasy Christian

I have always felt ambivalent about being a Christian. I mean, being identified completely with a particular religion. Some of my most significant spiritual experience and learning has been outside of the church. I have seen God as clearly in the lives of non-Christians and in nature as within the circles of organized religion, and often more so. I have often found a deeper commitment to humane causes outside than inside the church. I have encountered authentic spirituality in people who are not part of the Christian or, in some cases, any religion. I have spent most of my life being nurtured by and serving the church, and am profoundly grateful for it. Yet, over the years, I have learned that we can be deeply committed to the way of Jesus, while at the same time being open to spiritual truth wherever we find it. The deeper I have gone into my own spiritual tradition, the more open I have become to the wider manifestation of God.

One day a friend dropped by the office. He had been outside enjoying the interfaith prayer circle, reading the prayers from different spiritual traditions. He exclaimed with joyful amazement: "They're all saying the same thing!" He was right. The words and images may be different, but they point to the same sacred dimension of life, which is wider and deeper than can be contained in any one tradition. I have had the opposite experience sitting in a group of clergy, when the discussion turned to the subject of interfaith dialogue. Someone quickly asserted that we cannot overlook differences and pretend we are all about the same thing. All heads nodded approvingly, except mine. I realized again how our attachment to religion causes us to miss the Reality to which religion points us. With hearts and minds open, we see oneness everywhere. Clamping down around a set of beliefs and practices, we see differences

everywhere, and are always ready to pick a fight. My religion is better than yours!

The tendency is to defend and promote religion rather than live with humility, depth, and integrity one's own spiritual path. I am grateful to be part of a community that resists the former and embraces the latter. Religion is not an end in itself, but can awaken us to our lives as spiritual human beings in relation to ourselves, others, and the world. The readings for today from Isaiah and the Acts of the Apostles are examples of what is at the heart of our scriptures. They express the core of our own spiritual tradition and the spirituality, or lived faith, of persons and communities who are faithfully following Jesus. It is a servant life, characterized by gentleness, commitment, and universalism, the opposite of religious exclusivism or narrowness.

A Spirituality of Gentleness and Commitment

Isaiah speaks of the gentle, encouraging, and justice-oriented spirit of the servant of God. I like the translation from the Jewish Publication Society (Tanakh—The Holy Scriptures, 1988). The servant of God will establish “the true way”. This includes justice, but is a whole way of living that is in harmony with God and our authentic humanity. The text is probably speaking of Israel itself, the people and their leaders, as God's servant. We can see in Isaiah's servant poem Jesus and ourselves as Jesus' community. The servant is upheld, chosen, and anointed by God's spirit. We are to know our own lives in this same way--upheld, chosen, and anointed by the very Power that called the universe into being! This corresponds to certain aspects of the spiritual life that we lift up -- call, gifts, commitment to the inward journey of our relationship with God, and the outward journey of doing what we feel called and gifted to do in the service of life. The spiritual disciplines we commit to and work with are not ends in themselves. They are for the purpose of helping us touch every day the reality that we are upheld, chosen, and anointed by God's spirit. It would be good to say this each morning as part of our inward journey time:

God's spirit upholds (guides, sustains, comforts) me.

God's spirit chooses (calls) me.

God's spirit anoints (empowers) me.

The servant, however, does not “cry out or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street.” Being empowered by God's spirit does not mean being strident or exerting power over others. It means living with a humility that comes from always being open and teachable. The servant listens more than speaks, so that when it comes time to speak or act, there is the truth and love of God in it. This is why we believe that the practice of silence is so important.

The servant cultivates a deep, ongoing commitment to doing what is good and right. Supporting those who are weak. Kindling the light that is in people, no matter how faintly it may be burning. The servant does not bully or otherwise coerce. The servant touches the bruised reed tenderly so as not to break it. Here I think of Gandhi's core spirituality: *ahimsa*, non-harming, or non-violence, a way of life that seeks to diminish, and, at the least, not add to suffering. The servant is devoted to right relationships, which is the meaning of justice.

Isaiah's picture of spirituality, or lived faith, raises helpful questions for us as persons and as a community. How can I be a person who does not break the bruised reed or quench the dimly burning wick, either in others or in myself? In my inward journey, what are the things that lead me to treat other people or myself harshly, impatiently, or angrily, or that cause me to withhold encouragement and acceptance when others don't meet my expectations? In what ways can I use my gifts and the gift of my life to ease suffering of other people and the creation? In the outward journey of doing what I feel called to do, how can I grow in patience and dealing with discouragement? This is very important for mission groups to reflect on as they follow the visions and callings entrusted to them.

In Jesus, God gives us the spirit of treating each person, life itself, and ourselves with care and dignity. That same Jesus-spirit enables us to sustain commitment to what is good and right over the long haul and through difficult circumstances, so that we remain open to the "new things" that God is doing.

God's Impartiality and a Universal Christian Spirituality

In the passage from Acts, we hear of God's impartiality and universality. Peter has been led to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Peter faces two prejudices--one against non-Jews, the other against Romans in particular. Cornelius has been led to send for Peter because of a dream. Cornelius is a man devoted to prayer, a reminder that there are many people of prayer throughout the world who are not part of our group! Peter is astounded that God's spirit is already with Gentiles. He has an awakening, and understands that anyone anywhere who is doing what is right is acceptable to God.

Peter is devoted to the gospel of Jesus Christ. For him, God has fully revealed in Jesus divine love and purpose, with forgiveness for all. But now Peter understands that Jesus and the way he embodied and taught are not the possession of one sect or group or religion. He is the expression of God's universal affirmation of and love for all persons. We see this in the gospels themselves, in passages that are not often lifted up. We hear a lot about Jesus as the only way to God, about salvation through Jesus alone. We need to hear of the Jesus who was

in someone's home one day when his family came looking for him. When told that his mother and brothers were outside looking for him, he asked, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He looked around the room and said, "Here is my family. **Everyone who does what God wants** is my family [Mk. 3:31-35]." That's universalism. Then there is Jesus' teaching that shows his frustration with those who love to call him "Lord" but do not do what he tells them to do, do not embody his teachings [Lk. 6:46]. And the famous parable of the Good Samaritan [Lk. 10:25-37]. Who did what God expects of us? Who found the way of eternal life as he cared for his beaten and abandoned neighbor? Not the professional religious types. Not the ones who saw themselves as holy. Not the adherents of the dominant religion. No. It was the Samaritan, the one judged as irreligious and spiritually impure.

To be exclusively devoted to Jesus means being devoted to him who embraces all anywhere who seek to love and serve God. Our exclusive commitment to Jesus will manifest itself in an inclusive attitude toward others. In other words, to be a dogmatic fundamentalist or a religious zealot contradicts the way of Jesus, "the true way" of which Isaiah spoke. It is the way of being a true human being as God created us to be.

In the parlor of the Church House hangs a work of stained glass that was commissioned by the Festival Center Mission Group years ago, in memory of Bev Cosby. It was created by Jack Glenn, local artist and friend of our community, and hung in the window of the chapel at the Festival Center until that mission closed. It contains many pieces of glass of all sizes, shapes, colors, and patterns. One notices after a while a light green cross, embedded within all the color and diversity, its lower stem broken. It is an expression not only of the kind of Christian faith that Bev Cosby and others held and lived as they began our community, but the kind of Christian spirituality needed today. One that is humble, gentle, nurturing of the good in people, and open to what others have to offer and teach. This kind of faith and life knows the patience, the struggles, the endurance that accompany a life committed for the long haul to being who God created us to be and doing the things God calls us to do. It is the life of the servant who is full of God's spirit.

As I think of the kind of life of faith to which we are called today, and which the world needs from us, I think of that stained glass creation. And I think of the interfaith prayer circle, created where the old camp water fountain used to be. Its prayers are the voices of different spiritual paths, all seeking and leading to a life lived in awareness of the sacred dimension of life. This is the context for us today, as we discover and grow in a Christian faith and life that is gentle, committed, and open to the broad scope of God's presence and work in the world.