

David L. Edwards / February 16, 2014 / Season after Epiphany

Living Well in the Land

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying God, and holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors....

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth....For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field....

The Book of Deuteronomy is a collection of the teachings of Moses to the people of Israel before they cross the Jordan River, into Canaan, the land of the promise. Moses was not destined to go with them, and so he felt the burden of impressing upon their hearts and minds the most essential things about the life that lay ahead of them.

Last week I spoke about our being, in Jesus' words, "the light of the world". We are created good, designed to live in ways that give light to the world—the light of just and right relationships, the light of mercy and compassion, the light of peacefulness and the sustaining of life. It is not true that we are born evil, or with "original sin". The vast majority of scripture assumes we are created to be who God made us to be, and we, with God's help, can fulfill who we truly are. Jesus' teachings and life, and his call to discipleship, confirm the same view.

We are also created with the freedom to discern and choose ways of living that lead either to life or to the diminishing of life. Human history is essentially the story of choices made in one or the other direction. This is what Moses is saying to the

people. You are about to cross the river into the land that God has promised us, toward which we have traveled all these years. Living in that land depends upon HOW you live. You must live with love for God, and follow the precepts or commandments of God. This is not legalism. It is not “live this way or you will burn in hell”. None of that sort of thing. All major spiritual traditions acknowledge the same truth: fullness of life is about living with a sense of reverent awe for the mystery and sacredness of life, and discerning and living in ways that enhance life.

We are rediscovering, in our own time, these truths, and are, we hope, returning to them. We have been and are reaping the disastrous effects of having lived without a reverence for the life of this world, the creation of God, and without just, fair, and compassionate relationships with one another in the human family. The way back, the way to life, is essentially spiritual. I don't mean religious, in the sense of people joining churches or religions. I mean all of us recognizing and living out of the essence of our spiritual traditions—love of God, of others, of ourselves, and of the creation, and living in ways that are shaped by that love. This is what Moses tells the people, that life will be good and rich and abundant as long as they, first of all, love God and live according to God's precepts, the ways that are in harmony with life.

Paul is talking about the same thing as he writes to the Corinthian community. The community has fallen apart, collapsed into ego-created schisms and groups, each centered on a personality. The groups had probably formed around the person who baptized them or otherwise introduced them to the life of faith. The point is, the church had become focused on persons and personalities, not God, not Jesus. Even Paul, to his horror, had become one of those around whom some in the church had grouped themselves (1:13).

Paul hits hard at this, because something essential is at stake--understanding what being a community is about, and what life is really about. Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that they are not yet ready for the solid food he wants to teach them. They are not able to grasp who Jesus really is and who they are created and

called by God to be because they are mired in the ego-centered life. They are consumed with quarreling and jealousy. Our group is right; yours is wrong. Our spiritual hero is better than yours. Our way is the true way. This is why Paul earlier wrote that he did not come to them speaking eloquently or with great intellectual power or anything like that (1:17-18). That's more ego stuff. It was not about him. He came with the message that God's wisdom looks like foolishness, God's strength looks like weakness. Everything is turned upside down because of Jesus and what he showed us about what it means to live as a true human being.

It is not about egos. It is about community, being human beings together learning and living the love God created us to have and to live. Not only love for one another, but love for ourselves, and love for God's creation. What then is Apollos, asks Paul? What is Paul? These personality issues don't mean a thing. It is a distraction from what really matters, from reality itself. Who is Paul? He just planted a seed. Who is Apollos? He came along with a watering can. Neither of them caused the growth. That would be God, the source and power of life itself. In the face of the ego-centered, personality-centered chaos in the Corinthian community, Paul says that neither Apollos nor Paul are anything. We are nothing! Remember, Paul feels that he has to hit hard to wake up the folks in Corinth. We are nothing. God is everything. We are only servants, gardeners, farmers, or as we put it in one of our disciplines, channels of God's love and forgiveness. And Paul ends this section by saying that he and Apollos and others are simply servants, working together. And the community in Corinth is God's field. Being in community means the difficult and yet liberating process of dying to the ego, the old self, and being born, or reborn, to our true, God-created selves.

When I listened to Paul's words being read at our Wednesday morning worship, I heard them speaking about us here, our life in this place and this community. This is God's field. We are God's field. Or garden, if you prefer. We are here on these forty acres where God has called, or planted, us to live in ways that bring life and enhance life and preserve life. We are called, also, to live here as a community of love. In essence, then, we are called here to learn and to live the way God intends for all

humanity—with reverent awe of and love for God, and with love for one another, ourselves, and God's creation.

What a blessing and gift it is to be here! We have these wondrous acres of urban forest and open land. They are here for us to tend and care for, and to make available to others for the enrichment of their lives. Just recently Pat Haley, Camp KBY director, has told us that the Master Naturalist board and program have adopted this place both as a meeting place for its board and as a place where its members can volunteer and gain experience, and help us with the stewardship of the land. This is added onto what is already happening here—the hundreds of children and youth who are here not only during the summer for camp but throughout the year with special activities and programs for learning in the outdoors. The times of retreat we have as a community, when we gather together or when individually we walk or sit in meditation, becoming more aware of our membership in God's creation. Here we learn what it means to dwell in the land that God has given to us and all people, the good creation of God.

Also, we have and are a community committed to growing in the life of love, the way God has created us and all humanity to live. We have the gift of this call to be a spiritual community in which, through our commitments to and work with minimal but important spiritual practices, we can experience the unfolding, or rebirth, of our truest selves. With the support of one another, we can discern the things in ourselves that keep us in the “life of the flesh,” as Paul called it, the life dominated by the ego and all its insecurities, defensiveness, dissatisfaction, and agitation. We can touch in ourselves and grow in the peace of God's steadfast love and the awareness that we already have everything we need.

So, what I wanted to share with you this morning is simply this vision of our life here, and what a blessing and gift it is. We are entrusted with this beautiful portion of God's creation and with a community of faith, both of which will teach us how to live fully the life God created us to live. As we are faithful in living in this way, with

reverent awe of God and God's creation, and the life of love for which we as God's children are made, we will continue to be a source of strength, hope, and peace for many others. We will live well in the land to which God has led us.