

March 23, 2014 / Third Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

The Journey Into Our Own Hearts

Exodus 17:1-7 *“But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses...”*

Romans 5:1-5 *“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”*

John 4:5-15 *“The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”*

Yesterday was the United Nations' World Water Day, focusing on the need for and uses of water to benefit all people. The problem is not a lack of water, but water distribution and control and treatment. It occurs to me that the issue is not about physical water but spiritual water. If we had right spirits within us, so many of the world's people and so much of the land would not be suffering. This is basically what the story from Exodus is about. It is the “inside water” that is most important.

The Israelites complain to Moses about lack of water. God pities Moses, who is catching grief from the very people he had led out of slavery. Water is provided, but the central spiritual lesson of the forty years of wandering in the desert was for the people to learn how to live by trusting God in all things, living in harmony with the sacred. That is an inward state of being. There are many things in our city, nation, and world that need to be changed. Yet our inward life, what we call the inward journey, is the fountainhead of our being truly able to change the things that need to be changed. It is also where we must find our peace, our true and deep happiness, our capacity to love and act in the right ways, and stop blaming others or outward circumstances for our unhappiness or lack of peace.

The inward journey that we talk about and work with in our community can be easily misunderstood. It is not “turning in on ourselves”, away from the needs or joys of life. It IS, however, taking refuge in our relationship with God, which means grounding our lives in what is most important and real. Following Jesus is not only DOING things, but BEING persons and a community centered in our relationship with God, the source of life. Working daily with our inward journey is how we grow in awareness of and living out of that relationship in all the

dimensions of our lives--our life with others, with the world around us, with ourselves.

We come into the world with our inner connection with God clear and untroubled. Young children have this awareness, but as we grow older, it gets buried beneath layers of concepts, doctrines, prejudices, fears, and a multitude of distractions. We lose touch with that rich inner life with which we were born. The inward journey is a returning, not to childhood, but to that fundamental relationship we have with God and life. It is what Jesus meant when he said that we must become like children in order to enter the kingdom of God. It is what he meant when he said to Nicodemus that we have to be born again or afresh by God's spirit to be fully alive. We find in Jesus this authentic way of living—out of our renewed awareness of and inner relationship with God, the source and power of life, not somewhere “up there” in heaven, but everywhere around us and in us.

I think this is what Paul is saying in the reading from the Letter to the Romans. Paul sees Jesus' life as re-opening or re-awakening our relationship with God. When Paul says that we are “justified by faith,” he means that our relationship with God is not something we accomplish by doing good things or having the right religious thoughts. It means simply receiving the gift of God's love as we experience it in Jesus. Paul uses a powerful and vivid image: God's love has been poured into our hearts. In Jesus God has given us a direct infusion of love.

Unfortunately, Christianity has continued to tell people that they are not good or spiritual or moral enough. We also have made Christian faith a matter of the head, of having the right ideas. Thinking is very important, but intellectualized religion has starved people, or made them fight with, and sometimes kill, each other ideas and doctrines. Paul doesn't say that God's love has been poured into our heads, but our hearts. Heart, soul, spirit, mind. These biblical words all mean the same thing—the core of our being. The spiritual life, the life of faith, has to do with awakening to God's love poured into our innermost self, and then responding with our whole being.

This is why Paul says that we can boast in our relationship with God and in our hope of sharing God's glory. He is not talking about the religious arrogance that we see so much of today. Boasting, in the sense he is using it, means claiming our dignity and freedom, because we are made and eternally loved by God. We can even boast in our sufferings and struggles, and find in them a hope that cannot be destroyed. Boasting in our relationship with God and even in our struggles means that we never need to be ashamed, either of who we are or of our most painful experiences and circumstances. We can live with a deep, unshakable confidence in life itself because God's love is at the core of life.

Now, let's look at Jesus sitting by a well in Samaria. He's tired and thirsty and hungry. The disciples have gone into town to get some take-out. A Samaritan woman comes to draw water. Jesus asks her for a drink. She is shocked. Jews don't have social dealings with Samaritans. And rabbis don't speak to women. Jesus is always crossing the lines, the boundaries that we set up between us. He's coming from a whole different place. How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan--and a woman--for a drink? Jesus responds: If you knew the gift of God and who is asking for a drink, you would have asked for and received living water. "Living water" in the literal sense means flowing water, as in a stream or a spring, as opposed to well water that can become stagnant or dry up. Jesus means "living water" as the life that comes from God--the water of life. They are talking about two different kinds of water. This happens a lot in John's gospel. The woman does not yet get it, but if this Jewish rabbi has the guts to talk to her, a Samaritan woman, she will hang in there with him!

Sir, you have no bucket. Where do you get this living water? Jesus responds: Whoever drinks of this water will just get thirsty again. The water I'm talking about quenches thirst forever. It will be a spring of water inside you gushing up to eternal life. The woman still does not get it, but it sounds like a great deal! She will not have to keep coming to this well every day to draw water. Maybe she's thinking indoor plumbing! And in a way, that's what Jesus is talking about--our inner life, journeying to that center of our being where we tap into the ever-flowing stream of God's love. There is in us this never-exhausted source of life and love.

Maybe that's what the inward journey is about--indoor plumbing! We don't have to run around here and there, looking for the perfect place or community or teacher or religion or whatever it is. It is not about externals, but internals. We live in a culture obsessed with the false belief that the full, good life is about externals--things, money, power, entertainment. We even collect relationships for fear of being alone or not feeling loved or valued. Most people in the world are right where this Samaritan woman was--not understanding that the source of real living is within us. We understand, because we experience it in our own lives. We know how difficult it is to stop, quiet ourselves, and become aware of our inner life. We know the pitfalls of pinning our happiness on fixing, changing, or clinging to other people, or on changing things around us to fit our ideas of how things should be. So we are constantly anxious, on the run, never fully present to others, the world, God, or ourselves.

God's love poured into our hearts; a never-ending stream of living water within us. This is why it is so important that we commit ourselves to an inward journey, giving attention daily to awareness of our lives in relation to God. Jesus points the way and calls us to this

journey. Without this growing and deepening awareness of our lives in God, we cannot really know who God made us to be and what God is giving us to do for the sake of the world. This is eternal life. In the scriptures, eternal life does not mean life after death, at least not that alone. It means a quality of life here and now, a way of living with awareness of our lives in relationship with God and living out of that relationship. Being in touch with that life-giving water IS to participate in the eternal life Jesus is talking about. It is life both now and forever. The more we become aware of it and live it, the less afraid we are of death, and the less we are afraid...period.

Here is something very important for us to remember and to make clear to those who are exploring what it means to become part of our community as a Covenant or Community Member. It is not a matter of joining the church and pitching in to keep the church running. It is not even a matter of persons deciding which of our ministries they feel they should join. It is first and foremost making a commitment to our own lives, to this journey of giving attention to, becoming aware of, and deepening our relationship with the living God. When we are doing that, the rest will follow. We will begin to see the things we feel called to do and the gifts we have been given to share in the service of life.

The spiritual disciplines that we commit to are for the purpose of helping us make that journey. Daily times of prayer, silence, study, meditation. Regular worship with the community. The practice of financial giving. The discerning of our gifts and using those gifts to serve our community of faith or the world around us. Sharing our journeys with others, seeking help and guidance from others. These are not rules to be followed for their own sake, as though we are somehow earning or achieving something. They are the shape we give to our lives so that we continue to touch that living water within us, so that it becomes more and more the very fountain of our living.

This is essentially what we are about—being persons and a community making and working with that decision to give ourselves to a journey of faith, a journey into our own spirits, our own hearts, discovering there that we belong to God and what that belonging means for the full unfolding of our lives. When our living becomes this kind of journey, our lives will blossom with the gifts God has given us and unfold in ministries to touch some need in God's world. Along the way, we will find, to our happy surprise, that we will complain less and love more.