

May 11, 2014 / Eastertide / David L. Edwards

The Community of the Good Shepherd

Acts 2:42-47

...they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

John 10:1-10

...the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

The Church of the Covenant came into being in the early 1950s as a community in the Jewish/Christian spiritual tradition. The vision was to take seriously the life of discipleship to Jesus in its inward and outward dimensions. The inward journey is the life of prayer, cultivating a capacity for silence and meditation, study of our scriptures and other writings, deepening in understanding of oneself in relation to God, others, and the world, and giving time daily to the work of the inward journey. The outward journey is responding to some need in the community itself or the wider world to which we feel called, and discerning, claiming, and using the gifts God gives to each of us in the service of others and the world. This was to be a community of commitment--commitment to one's own spiritual life, to the community, and to the ministries to which we feel called. The Church of the Covenant has been and is composed of those who make this commitment on an annually-renewed basis and work with it as faithfully as they are able.

A spiritual community that is intentional in this way becomes a place of healing, renewal, spiritual growth, and effective, loving service. It becomes "heaven on earth", a phrase I borrow from an important book published by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, in 2008. The title is [Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire](#). The book is the result of research focused on churches of the first nine hundred or so years of Christian history. The authors discovered, to their surprise, that the dominant artistic images in those churches did not include the crucifixion. Instead, there were images of Jesus as shepherd, healer, teacher, and the church as a kind of earthly paradise. There was a sense of Jesus being present with his community, guiding and empowering it to be a place of healing, learning, hope, caring. Listen to these words: "Christians undertook spiritual disciplines together and looked to Jesus as the model of their own divinity and of their own agency in life...Spiritual disciplines were essential to being at home in the world as paradise. To experience the Spirit of God in all things and the beauties of this world, early Christians cultivated acute attunement to the life around them." (pp. XVIII-XIX) The communities did

not ignore or deny the reality of hurt and suffering in the world, but cultivated wisdom in dealing with life around them, developed systems of rehabilitation and caring, and practiced love and responsibility in community. It was in the second millennium that the cross began to dominate, along with the atonement theology that Jesus' death happened so that we might be saved from this world and enter the next, that is, go to heaven. Our spiritual tradition turned from the love and importance of THIS world to an emphasis on getting to the next world, with the church's hierarchical structure telling people what they had to do and think to get there.

The vision of the church that gave birth to our community is the spiritual tradition of those earlier communities. It is the vision that we really can live as we were created to live, that what Jesus was about was not starting a new religion, much less getting us out of this world into another, but calling together a community to live out God's love in our life together and our service in the world. These thoughts were aroused in me this week by our readings from the Gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke wrote the Acts as a sequel to his gospel, recounting the story of the early community. Today's reading is one of several cameos or summaries of the community's life. It shows a community in which the presence of the Good Shepherd is known and in which persons hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling each by name. In such a community we come home to who we really are, how we are meant and made to live together as God's children, and we come to know ourselves attuned to the world around us in its sacred dimension as God's good creation.

The Acts reading is the "golden text" of my own tradition, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I heard this text lifted up throughout my life as a kind of pattern for the life of the church. I see in it this community, what we are about and are endeavoring to be, a community of "heaven on earth" in which God's realm or kingdom is known, in which we hear and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. The word "devoted" (*proskartereo*) means to give attention to, to persevere in. It is what we mean when we talk about commitment. Our spiritual growth as human beings cannot happen without this "devotion", giving priority and attention to practices that help us touch and deepen our connection with the sacred, with God. All spiritual traditions have known the importance of a disciplined life of faith. This is why membership in this community was envisioned as a commitment to one's own life in relationship to God, and commitment to sharing our lives with others and to sharing responsibility for the life, work, and spirit of the community. It is why we commit to and work with simple, time-honored spiritual disciplines or practices. If we move in the direction of devoted spiritual practice, we discover that it is the most liberating of paths, for it leads us home to our true selves, to community with others, and to living fruitfully, gratefully, and joyfully in the world as God's good creation.

Devotion to the apostles' teaching in that time probably referred to both the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the remembered stories about and teachings of Jesus. For us it is reading, listening, reflecting, studying, not to accumulate knowledge, but to understand and be transformed by the good news about God's love manifested in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is so that we hear more clearly the voice of the Good Shepherd and become increasingly aware of and alive in our relationship with God as persons and as a community. This is why one of our disciplines is a commitment to daily reading of scripture and other writings that help us focus on our lives in relation to God, others, and the world. It is why we come together for worship, together listening to and reflecting on scripture and the sermon. Even the singing of hymns and songs is a way that we continue this learning, listening activity. The Christian community is devoted to learning that awakens and nourishes a living faith.

They devoted themselves to **fellowship**. The word is *koinonia*. It means "being together" at a deep level of the sharing of our lives, even material resources, and a sense of oneness. It is being together in awareness of the love of God. We cultivate *koinonia* in our willingness to share our lives with one another, to be known and to know, to be understood and to understand. This is why being part of a smaller group, a mission group, is important, not only for the sake of the mission, but in order to experience *koinonia* as God's own love manifested in our life together. If we are not part of a mission group, we need to make other efforts to get to know others in this fuller way. Devotion to the fellowship means being willing to be and work with others, not holding ourselves apart, concerned only with getting our own needs met or with being a critic of the community. Fullness of growth as persons comes as we devote ourselves to the *koinonia*, life in community with others.

They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Here is the worship life of the community. The "breaking of bread", in this sense, is what we call the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, or simply Communion. Our community is a Eucharistic community, renewed, restored, reminded, and energized each time we share the bread and cup of Jesus. In this communal act, we continue to be reminded of and to know the continuing presence and spirit of the Good Shepherd.

Devotion to **the prayers** completes the description of corporate worship. Being together in worship is the heartbeat of our community. Whether our Sunday worship, Tuesday contemplative prayer, Wednesday morning worship centered on the lectionary readings, or worship in our mission groups, this is how we together open ourselves to the sacred source of our lives, our life together, and the ministries to which we feel called. This is why one of our membership disciplines is a commitment to being with the community in worship. Worship is to our community and mission groups what breathing is to the body. It is together breathing in the spirit of God, the spirit of Life.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. The question came to me this week, which I asked our group on Wednesday morning in our

lectionary discussion: What signs and wonders have you seen in our community as you have been part of this community? No one had a problem responding. The missions and mission groups that have been born out of this small community. The changes in peoples' lives as they work with a disciplined spiritual life. The sense of coming home to our true selves. I see it in those who come to stay in our retreat center, the expressions of gratitude and joy at touching peace in themselves in the quietness and beauty of this place. I see it in the faithfulness over years of mission groups, like The Haven Mission Group, being “devoted”, persevering, cultivating patience and remaining focused over long periods of time, until what they feel God is calling them to do is ready to be born. Signs and wonders are not flashy, Hollywood special effects kinds of things. They are the ordinary, yet extraordinary, events of healing, renewal, faithfulness, forgiveness, and the manifestation of God's love in and through people for the sake of the world.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Evi Kaiser is probably the only one of us who has lived in a community that strictly organizes its life around these words, as she grew up in a Bruderhof Community (Church Communities International) in New York. Yet there is in our community a commitment to the same spirit and practice. We do not accumulate money and assets. We try to be faithful to the truth that nothing belongs to us, but is entrusted to us to use for the enhancement of life and the needs of others. The Covenant Members, for instance, when working with the offerings and gifts we receive, are always deciding how to disburse, not accumulate, what we have to meet the needs of our community and the ministries we support. We try to live out the story of the Israelites in the wilderness and the *manna*, the lesson of which is that if we hold onto and try to accumulate what God gives us, it spoils and becomes a source of our own unhappiness. When we hold onto money or possessions, they eventually poison our spirits, our lives. If we live with open hands and hearts, sharing what we have, always on the edge where we trust God's providing, then life is multiplied.

The rest of the reading speaks of the early followers of Jesus, who still saw themselves as Jews, though following the messiah Jesus, worshiping faithfully in the temple, sharing meals together in homes, eating their food “with glad and generous hearts.” Not fast food, but the slow food of *koinonia* and mindfulness, tasting what we eat and drink as the goodness of the creation. This is knowing that the secret to fullness of life is having glad and generous hearts, living with constant awareness of God, the sacredness of life, and in ways that benefit the lives of others.

And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. It is by the community's life that God draws to it those who feel called to share in the same way of life. It is this kind of community that “saves” us, not for some far off other world we call heaven, but by calling us home to “heaven on earth”, life as it was meant to be lived by God's human creatures. It is not a

community without hurt or struggle or failings or suffering, but a community in which God's love is lived out in healing, teaching, growing, learning, and serving ways.

This is the community we call the Church of the Covenant, composed of those who are devoting themselves in this way. We have the sense that God adds to our community those who feel called to it. It is our hope that each person who finds his or her way here will consider making that same devotion, that same commitment, to be on the journey of being and becoming who we really and truly are, the devotion to being the community of the Good Shepherd.