

September 7, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Waking Up to Love

Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another...

it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.

Matthew 18:15-20

“If a member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault...

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Yesterday we held a silent retreat to begin our “season of reflection” for the month of September. This is a time for us as a community to prepare for our annual recommitment retreat on Saturday, October 4. As current Covenant and Community Members, we use this time to reflect on our readiness and desire to commit for another year to work with the spiritual disciplines with fresh energy and integrity. For those considering a commitment for the first time, this is an opportunity to give more focused attention to what it means to make such a commitment. This is a time of re-centering ourselves as persons and a community with regard to our calling and our vision.

Paul says two things in the reading from his Letter to the Romans that can help us as we reflect on our life as a community of Jesus' disciples. First, he lifts up the commandment of love as the core of our life. He writes that we are to owe no one anything but to love one another. It is the one thing necessary for a full life. For Paul, endeavoring in love fulfills the whole law. Love God. Love the neighbor as yourself. If we center our lives in this, we are doing all that we need to do for a full and meaningful life as persons and as a community. Who is the neighbor? Jesus told a parable about a Samaritan, one who was considered irreligious, who surpassed the faithfulness of those who claimed to be religious. He simply stopped to help one who was in need, without regard to the person's race, ethnicity, religion, or anything else. In the end, the parable is saying that “neighbor” does not have to do with the other person but with me. The issue is, how am I to become neighbor to others, to love with an open heart and mind and life?

One of the most important purposes of the inward journey is to become aware of walls within us that separate us from others, that stir up our hostility toward others and yet create loneliness in us. What is keeping me from being neighbor to others in our community here? What fears, jealousies, hurts, prejudices do I harbor that prevent me from regarding those near at hand as brothers or sisters in God's love, or those not so near? This is difficult spiritual work. It asks that we pay attention to our own inner life and how it shapes our outward actions. This growing awareness of our inner life helps us toward being channels of God's love and forgiveness in every relationship, as one of our disciplines says. Doing this spiritual work is difficult, but the reward is that we grow into a fuller, freer, more joyful and less fearful life—the life into which Jesus calls us, the life of God's kingdom, the life that is our true humanity.

What is love? In scripture love is always more a verb than a noun. I do believe we are created to have a deep and sacred affection for each other and for this world as God's creation. Yet love is something that is to be lived out, a way of relating to others, to the world, to ourselves, beyond how we may feel at any given moment. We are to act toward toward ourselves and others as God relates to us, with compassion, mercy, respectfulness, and just dealings. The love Paul means is both deep acceptance AND being held accountable for the life of discipleship. God's love for us is unconditional; it is not prevented by anything we are or do. It is steadfast love, always there for us. At the same time, God's love calls us to be the persons and the community God created us to be. We are to grow up into who we most truly and deeply are.

To love in this way is to be open in each situation and relationship to what is truly loving. So love also includes wisdom and discernment. It is not one way of responding in every situation or to every person. Sometimes loving involves giving or receiving a warm embrace. Sometimes it means speaking or hearing difficult truth. Our reading from Matthew's gospel contains Jesus' teaching about holding one another accountable. Being in a community of God's love means having a willingness to be held and to hold one another accountable for the commitments we have made. A loving concern for one another brings with it the desire to help each other manifest more fully the life we are created to live. When we are together in this way, working with being a community of love, Jesus is with us and among us.

To live by the singlemost commandment to love means we are free from legalism,

moral obsessiveness, and perfectionism, toward ourselves and others. That, I think, is what Paul means by love fulfilling the whole law. We are freed to live the great adventure of the life of love. We grow constantly in our understanding of what it means to love, and what it means to be a community of love. Living out the commandment of love also means not giving up on ourselves or others. To love in this way as persons and a community bearing the name of Jesus can be hard work. It means paying attention. And yet it is also liberating. We drop our harsh demands of others and ourselves. We live out of God's grace, thus out of a profound acceptance of others and ourselves.

Then Paul says a second thing--it is time to wake up from sleep. The night is ending; the day is at hand. Paul is using these images to speak about the life we have in Jesus and the meaning of Jesus' life for us and the world. It is a new day. In Paul's time, the early Jesus community expected Jesus to return and establish once and for all the reign of God. That did not happen. However, Paul's words about waking up still ring true. Waking up is a wonderful image for the spiritual life. Every major spiritual tradition speaks of the life of faith as an awakening. It is waking up to reality--the reality of God, of ourselves and others, and the reality that love is the center of life itself. When we decide to commit ourselves to a disciplined spiritual life, to practice daily the inward and outward dimensions of our life in relationship to God, we are on the road to waking up. We begin to see how we have been sleepwalking through life--preoccupied with all sorts of things that really don't matter; lost in mental and emotional attachments to the past or the future; living out of other people's expectations; our mind a bird's nest of worries, fears, anger, and unhealthy patterns of thinking. The spiritual life, through the work of our inward journey, is about becoming increasingly aware of our inner life. This is not so that we can beat ourselves up about things or become perfectionists. It is so that we can have clearer self-understanding. Then as we become more aware, we begin to experience this "waking up." We are discovering the gift of our own lives, perhaps for the first time.

Paul talks about putting off some things and putting on some things. We put off, he says, the "works of darkness" and put on the "armor of light." This is one of Paul's favorite images--taking off and putting on, like clothes. We take off the clothes that no longer fit, and put on the ones that do fit who we really and truly are. As we work with our inward journey in growing awareness and understanding, we begin to see clearly the kinds of reactions, attitudes, and behaviors that we can let go of, or lay aside, as Paul says. I find it encouraging

and hopeful that as I become more aware of what is making me angry or fearful, simply understanding more clearly where these reactions and feelings come from, it is not so hard to begin letting them go. I discover that understanding and insight are themselves the first movement of letting go. This is practicing compassionate understanding in our own lives. When we are doing that, we find that our compassionate understanding for others grows.

Here is where this part of our reading connects with the first part. Our difficulties in loving are usually connected to some fear or anger or insecurity in us, more than something about the other person. We tend to project those inner conditions onto others, making them into enemies, perceiving them as somehow a threat. But when we practice the inward journey as a way of growing in self-understanding, awareness, and self-acceptance, we find that our hearts become more open. We create an accepting and loving space for others because we have been expanding the space within ourselves, untying the knots in us because of past experiences and our reactions to them, and the patterns of thinking and feeling that have been established in us.

Does this make any sense to you? This is the sort of thing we work with when we embark or re-embark on what we call the inward and outward journey of the life of faith, of following Jesus. When we work with it, we find that it does make sense. In the end, it is not about anyone else but ourselves and whether or not we are on that spiritual journey, that way of waking up to the life of God's love as we receive and know it in Jesus. Christian spiritual life is not easy. It asks of us a commitment, a willingness to look at ourselves, to take responsibility for ourselves as persons made for and called to the life of love. We have to do it for ourselves, but we don't have to do it alone. We do it in community. And that is what we are about—persons in community on the journey of love, inwardly and outwardly. It is what we are reflecting on prayerfully in this time as we consider renewing or making our commitments to this life of the practice of love. As we do all of this, we are “gathering in Jesus' name”, and we know he is among us.