

September 28, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### Stars Shining in the World

Philippians 2:1-15     *...in which you shine like stars in the world.*

Next Saturday we hold our annual recommitment silent retreat, and on Sunday, Covenant and Community Members who feel so led and called will renew their commitments for another year. This is a time each year when our community is reborn. It is a time when we are open to God's spirit and leading in our lives, regardless of the decisions each person makes to recommit or not.

The reading for today from Paul's Letter to the Philippians is a perfect text for us in these days of reflection and recommitment. It is one of Paul's most eloquent, and important, passages. It speaks of the essence of Jesus' life and its meaning for us, and how that shapes us as a community and as persons.

Paul begins: *If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.* Paul is not doubting that these qualities exist in the community at Philippi. The "if" here has the meaning of "since"—since you already have some evidence and experience of encouragement, love, compassion and so forth. You already know something of the work of God's spirit in and among you. You have a taste of what the life of faith can mean to your own lives, to your life together, and to the world through you. No, you aren't perfect. You don't understand everything. You are still learning what it means to love each other, to forgive, to respond to God's call, to discover and use your gifts in service to the world. But you already know something of what it's about.

Paul is writing to a community, like ours, that is endeavoring to take seriously the life of discipleship to Jesus. Now, says Paul, just keep going toward the fullness of Christ. Complete my joy by having the same mind. Paul is not telling the community that its job is to make him happy. Paul's joy comes from seeing persons and communities growing and deepening their life in Christ, maturing in what it means to be persons and communities living out of God's love. Conversely, his greatest sorrow arises from seeing other communities caught in behavior and attitudes that contradict the spirit and teachings and life of Jesus.

Having one mind, one love, being in accord, is about our having awareness of a deep unity of purpose and attitude and intention. It means remembering that the call of Jesus is what constitutes us as a community, reminding ourselves and one another of what we are really about

when we wander off track. Being of “one mind” is awareness that as a community of Jesus, we are to embody in our life together who he was and what he was about. Being of “one mind” DOES NOT mean having the same ideas, experiences, or particular beliefs. It means how we work with being together as a community GIVEN our differences, even embracing and celebrating our differences. It goes deeper than ideas, personalities, and personal experiences. It goes to our unity in God’s spirit as we work with our discipleship to Jesus.

Paul then writes: *Do nothing from selfish ambition. In humility regard others as better than yourselves. Look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.* Other translations say look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. This is another way of talking about loving our neighbor as ourselves. Regarding others as better than ourselves does not mean denying our own personhood or putting ourselves down or letting others run over us. We are to cultivate a deep and healthy regard for ourselves as loved and cherished by God. However, this enables us, even compels us, in the same way to regard and to seek the well-being of others. Paul is talking about selflessness as shedding the small, insecure self that is always focused on its own needs. There is a profound security that comes from knowing God’s love for us in Jesus. It liberates us from the incessant search for securing our own lives, and frees us to seek the wellbeing of others.

Paul is not saying that we deny our own real needs. We are learning that self-care is important to caring for others. The two are intertwined. Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche international, writes that we may enter the community to get our own needs met, but we stay in order to meet the needs of others. Full and mature human life includes the same concern for others that we have for ourselves.

Why do we, as Jesus’ community, strive to live in this way? What is our essential motivation? Paul now moves from the practical concerns of being a community of God’s love to theology. He quotes what is thought to be an early Christian hymn that was probably known to the communities of Paul’s day. It is a poem that speaks of Christ as being in the form of God, but not grasping or holding onto his status. Instead, he emptied himself (literally, “poured out”) and took the form, the life of a servant. He humbled himself, which literally means something like being “lowly minded,” as opposed to “high-minded.” And he was faithful to God even to the point of his death.

This was the nature and the movement of Jesus’ life. Therefore, it is the nature and movement of our lives. It is our true humanity. Christian life does not move up the ladder but down. It does not seek its own status, but manifests in the life of servanthood. It is not prideful or arrogant, but humble and lowly-minded. These days we see all around us the futility of life lived on the basis of personal grasping and achieving and accumulating. We certainly see what religion,

Christian and otherwise, does when it becomes narrow and self-promoting. It is life that is headed sooner or later for collapse of meaning and harm to oneself and others. For the Christian community, the pattern and movement of true life is seen in Jesus himself.

The hymn or poem now speaks of Jesus' elevation by God, of every knee bending, every tongue confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. But this elevation comes ONLY on the basis of what was said before. This not Christian triumphalism, that "ours" is the only way and everyone who does not make a confession of faith in Jesus is going to hell. It was only because of Jesus' utter humility and self-emptying that he experienced God's power of new life, of lifting up. And that is the only way we can experience it, as well. The world and persons of other faith traditions hear the Christian Church talking a lot about the truth that it has. However, what is not often seen is that truth embodied in Christians themselves. Other religious traditions are not the problem. WE are our own problem, when we are not embodying in our lives and our life together the truth we proclaim. That truth is the life of self-emptying, of not seeking our own status, of taking the form of a servant. That is how we experience the power of resurrection, of new life.

Paul then urges the community to keep on with the life it has undertaken. They need to keep working with this life of faith, making it their own. They can't do it just because Paul might show up! I remember seeing a bumper stick many years ago: "*Jesus is coming back. Look busy!*" We are to live this way, not because somebody is watching or checking on us, or because of fear of punishment. We do it because it has to do with our own wholeness and deepest happiness. Paul counsels the Philippian community to *work out their own salvation with fear and trembling*. That is a powerful statement. We are to work out our own salvation, our own wholeness, our own fullness of life. It is not just a matter of God's love accepting us unconditionally, and the thing is over. We have to DO something with that. We have to make it real in our own lives. I have a new love for the word "realize". It is used in a Hindu prayer, from The Upanishads, in this way: *May we realize the Lord of love*. The word does not simply mean becoming aware of something. It means embodying it in ourselves, our lives. We have to work with realizing this new life of God's love within the realities of who we are and where we live and the challenges we face. To me, this is a very exciting statement, not something dreadful and heavy. God's love for us and the world is to become embodied within our own real lives. The decisions we make. The relationships we form. The work we choose to do out of our sense of God's call. The loving acceptance we extend to ourselves and others. The growing awareness of the world around us as God's good creation. We are to realize these things within the fabric of our own lives.

Not long after coming to be part of this community, I noticed members talking about "working with" this or that. Working with my inward journey. Working with prayer. Working with my depression, or my fears, or whatever. Working with figuring out what I am called to do and

what my gifts are. It sounded like a lot of work! However, we talk that way in the sense Paul means. God's already-given love for us is the foundation of our lives, thus of our freedom and our joy. Yet, we are called to work with that reality so that it infuses our own lives, inwardly and outwardly. We realize for ourselves and in our own unique lives, as well as our life together, the life Jesus taught and embodied, and to which he calls us.

*With fear and trembling.* Paul is not talking about being afraid God is going to punish us if we mess up or if we are not perfect. It has to do with what Hebrew Scriptures mean when they speak of “the fear of God.” It is not being faithful because we are afraid of getting clobbered. It is about awe and wonder at the sacred, surrounding mystery of God who made heaven and earth, God who made our very own lives. It has to do with living our lives within and with awareness of that mystery and sacred dimension of life.

I added some verses to the lectionary portion for today. Paul is a realist. He knows that the world in which the community at Philippi lives is messed up. It is a “crooked and perverse” generation. Paul is talking about human beings and societies who have lost their way, who are perpetuating suffering for themselves and others. I think the Christians at Philippi and in other early communities of Jesus had the same experiences that we have as we work with living faithfully in today’s world. Periods of hopelessness. Bouts of anxiety and severe doubt as to whether this life of faith stuff might just be a house of cards or a wish-dream. Why bother, when we are awash in a world of violence, corporate greed, growing poverty of many and the increasing wealth of few, religion that loses its soul and becomes destructive? Why try to live this kind of life when the human world seems bent on self-destruction, as well as destruction of the creation itself?

Paul’s word to the community at Philippi is that in the midst of all of these things, when you are devoting yourself to following the way of Jesus, to realizing the love of God in your life, you are shining like stars in the world. When we are grounding our lives in God and God’s love, when we are striving to work out our salvation, when we are living with compassion for others and a concern for justice, when we are faithful to the downward path of self-emptying and servanthood, as poorly as we think we are doing it, as hard as it may be sometimes, we are shining like stars in the world. Or as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount – We are the light of the world. To me, this is what we are doing and what happens when we commit ourselves to a disciplined spiritual life, when we give ourselves to the inward journey of prayer and the outward journey of service. We become our true selves, shining like stars in the world.