

October 5, 2014 / Commitment Sunday / David L. Edwards

**Forgetting the Past, Leaning Toward the Future,  
Living in the Present—The Journey of Faith**

Philippians 3:4b-14 *...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,  
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ  
Jesus.*

Paul's words to the Christian community at Philippi are perfect for the celebration of commitments made today. Paul writes, first of all, about the past. Past achievements and accomplishments. He climbed the ladder of success, jumped through all the hoops. He was a zealous "defender of the faith" to the point of violence toward those perceived as a threat. Paul had excelled within the social and religious structures of his day.

All of that changed when Paul encountered the living Christ. He saw that true life is about living out of God's grace and love, not our achievements or accomplishments. He saw that it is not about defending a religion, but rather embodying in your own life the heart of that religion. Paul now had seen deeply into the nature of things. Authentic life is not found by conforming to something outward, but through a vital, inward communion with God who is love. As he would write elsewhere, nothing will ever be able to separate us from that love (Rom. 8). No one had more to brag about than Paul when it came to doing the right religious things, having the right pedigree, and being full of religious fervor. Yet, now Paul sees all of that as part of human pride and self-centeredness, amounting to nothing, leading nowhere. None of it compares to what Paul knows now.

Paul's words mean to me that we are to live from the inside out rather than the outside in. Our life is to spring from a real and vital awareness of ourselves in relation to God, to others, to the world as God's good creation, and to ourselves. Always judging and measuring ourselves and others, distracted by all that our culture tells us is important--these things are discovered, sooner or later, to be empty. What matters is waking up to who we truly are as persons and as a community. To me, this is the meaning of the "spiritual life"--waking up, becoming aware, no longer sleepwalking through life.

Life as discipleship to Jesus means that we are on the journey of our true humanity. We are on the journey of becoming who we already, most deeply are. It is a life centered and rooted in God's love that awakens us to our true identities as God's people and empowers us to live as

God made us to live. It has to do with experiencing death and resurrection, the dying, or letting go of, the old, false person, and the birth, or rebirth, of the new, true person. The covenants that we commit to and work with are for the purpose of helping us stay on that journey amidst all the distractions and illusions.

Paul says that all of that stuff he achieved in the past, before he woke up, is worthless. It is garbage. The Greek word he uses is more explicit than that! What he is now learning, because of his encounter with Jesus, has to do with his own rebirth, a whole new way of living. It is living by faith and trust in God and God's love and power, and a growing awareness of God's presence, leading, and call. This journey has little or nothing to do with right beliefs or religious credentials of any kind, and everything to do with living each day awake to God, alive to God's spirit, and sensitive to the living Christ as he calls us to follow him in the life of God's kingdom, life as God created it to be. In Jesus we encounter and receive the fullness of God's love for us. In him, we hear, see, and experience what God intends for us—the life of love. We also embrace that life as something we already have, already are, but which has been buried beneath all kinds of what Paul calls garbage—false views of ourselves and life, illusions we have bought into that have been fed us by society or family, or even the church and religion.

The vision of the Church of the Covenant is that every person might experience and grow into the fullness of this new way of living. The commitment and discipline that are so important to this life of faith are for the purpose of pointing us toward and keeping us in touch with this kind of life. They are not ends in themselves. The disciplines, or practices, to which we commit as Covenant or Community Members are not heroic or radical. They are nothing to brag about and they don't earn us any points, especially with God! If that's the way we look at commitment and spiritual discipline, then they, too, are garbage. They are only means, instruments, guides. As is said in Buddhism, they are the raft that can get us to the shore of this new life we are seeking. We must not mistake the raft for the shore.

At the same time, we must not imagine we can get to the shore without the raft. The life of faith does not really begin and get traction until we give to our lives a form, a shape that keeps us pointed and moving in the right direction. I have always been interested in the fact that we readily accept the necessity of discipline in the areas of physical fitness and sports, or academic study, or with our jobs and professions, but seem to think that when it comes to religion or spirituality, it should all just "happen". Commitment and discipline assist us in our deep desire to live as full a life as possible. It is how we devote ourselves and give fuller attention to opening our lives more completely to God and God's world, and to letting ourselves be brought into harmony with God's love. Our practice of spiritual disciplines is not for the sake

of being different from others or, God forbid, thinking we are somehow better. It is only for the goal of becoming more and more awake to God and our authentic selves, and clearer about what we are given to do and be for the sake of the world. Commitment and spiritual discipline express our deep desire, as Paul says, to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, the power of new life, within our own lives.

Finally Paul writes that he has not already gained all the things he is talking about. He has not "made it". The life of faith is not something we achieve, not some place we finally arrive, though we do find ourselves making important changes and progress along the way. It is an ongoing journey. Paul says that he lets go of the past and leans toward the future, "pressing on" along this path of God's call in his life. That's journey talk, and yes, sometimes we do feel that we are simply "pressing on"! The spiritual life is a process, just as life itself is a process. The point is not to constantly measure our progress or whether we are achieving a goal. The point is to let ourselves be in this process of opening to God and following Jesus each day.

Paul says he presses on to make Christ his own because Christ has already made Paul his own. We are already where we seek to be. That is the paradox! If we are going to live in this realm of faith and spirituality, we have to acquire a taste for paradox—two realities that seem to be in conflict with each other, but are not. We already have what we seek. We already belong to God. We are home. And yet we strive to let this belonging to God in Christ unfold in all aspects of our lives. The spiritual life is not about becoming something we are not. It is about letting our truest nature emerge and unfold. It is about uncovering what has been buried, forgotten, lost touch with.

Then, on this very day of our anniversary as a faith community, Paul says forget the past! We want to hang onto the past, be proud of it, even live in it. This community has a rich past. Memory in the right sense is appreciating and being aware of what has been the guiding vision and the heart of the Church of the Covenant's life and work. The problem is that we tend to dwell in what seem to be the good old days. Or we want to superimposed memories of what the past was like upon the present. Paul still says forget it! Let go of it! We are not to cling even to the past that is rich and good and laudable. To hang onto the past in any way is to be unresponsive, individually and as a community, to what God is doing in our lives and our community right now and toward the future. Letting go of the past. Leaning toward the future. Yet always living fully in the present, where God calls us to be, to love, and to serve. What the Church of the Covenant was in the past was perfect for then. What is important is what the Church of the Covenant is right now—those who are making and working with their commitments, the ministries in which we are engaged, the mission groups that are meeting and

working, and those yet to emerge. This is what God is doing in and through us today. And that is where we are to be.

One last word about why we work with all this stuff--commitment, spiritual disciplines, the inward and outward journeys, call, gifts. For me, it is because this is the most urgent and important thing in our lives. Spirituality or the life of faith is not something you do when you have time or leisure, after you take care of more important things. It is THE thing, and if we go through our lives without ever having learned to center our lives in God and live from that center, we will have missed it.

In the Chrysalis Mission Group, one of our disciplines is to become familiar with religious traditions other than our own. I am no great student of world religions, but I have on my desk, along with my Bible, English translations of several ancient texts (*The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Tao te Ching*, *The Dhammapadam*, and *The Upanishads*). I read them regularly, and find that they add richness and depth to my understanding of my own tradition and scriptures. I also find that they are all, including my own Bible, pointing to the same deep truths, in different "voices", with different images and ways of speaking. Over the summer, as time drew near for our recommitment, I was re-reading *The Upanishads*, the four thousand year-old wisdom writings that gave birth to the spiritual traditions of India. These words spoke strongly to me:

*Those who depart this world without knowing who they are  
or what they truly desire have no freedom here or hereafter.*

*Those who leave here knowing who they are and what they  
truly desire have freedom everywhere, both in this world and in the next.*

(The Chandogya Upanishad, *The Upanishads*, translated by Eknath Easwaran, p.142)

In the Church of the Covenant we might put it this way: Those who are on the journey of discovering who they truly are and what they are given and gifted to do with their lives are finding what Jesus called "eternal life" both now and forever. It is the kingdom of God, the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field. It is that which will never be taken away from them.