

January 25, 2015 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

### Living and Loving Without Possessing

Psalm 62:5-12      *On God rests my deliverance and my honor;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God...*

1 Corinthians 7:29-31    *...the present form of this world is passing away.  
I want you to be free from anxiety.*

Mark 1:14-20          *And immediately they left their nets and followed him.*

Jonah is called to go to Ninevah, a large Assyrian city with a reputation for violence and other wickedness. He is the only Hebrew prophet sent by God to Gentiles. The other, better known, prophets seem to have no success with their own people. Yet, Jonah walks only one third of the way into the city, speaks one sentence, and the whole place repents, changes, just like that! Seeing this, God changes the plan. No destruction of the city. No punishment. The most important thing has happened—people have given up their evil and violence, and are going in a new direction.

Jonah, however, is not happy about it. He thought things should happen the way God said in the beginning. However, God's compassion and love for all creatures--human and animal—had the last word and made for a different, better, outcome. The story ends with Jonah pouting, and God asking Jonah to think about why he is so unconcerned for the well-being of all those people and animals. Jonah got attached to how he thought things ought to go—punishment for bad behavior. He was attached to how he thought God should be and act. When it did not happen that way, he got angry and depressed. When we get depressed or angry or hurt or whatever, the thing is to look at ourselves. What was it we were so attached to that it aroused in us this or that emotional response? That's where the Jonah story leaves us, to look at ourselves, to see how we perceive and relate to things might be causing our own suffering. God, the Source and Power of life, is always about change toward new life, not punishment and death. We need to let go of all that keeps us from being open to that change and new life.

Paul writes to the quarreling community in Corinth, to wake them up to what it really means to be a community of Jesus. In Paul's day, there was intense expectation that Jesus

would return any moment, establishing once and for all God's reign. So, Paul writes that as a community of Jesus, they are to live in a different way. If married, as though not married. If grieving or joyful, as though they are not. If buying and selling, as though possessing nothing in the world. Dealing with the world as though they had no dealings with it. Why? Because all of this is passing away, and Paul wants them to be without anxiety about it.

We no longer expect that the Day of God will dawn any moment and suddenly everything will be changed. Understandings are not the same as in the first century. However, there is still something important about living in a way that is not attached to things, to people, to emotions that come and go, to circumstances that are always changing. We can say, in fact, that following Jesus and living out of our relationship with God does mean the end of the world as we know it. It turns everything on its head, and brings a new way of looking at things and a different way of living. It means detachment from things that are over-valued by the culture around us and seeking what matters most.

Mark's story of Jesus calling his disciples is sparse and concise, leaving it to us to find out what it means in our own lives today. Jesus walks along the seashore, sees two sets of brothers fishing and mending nets. He calls them to follow him and to fish for people. Just like that, they drop their nets and go with him, leaving home, work, and family. How do you just drop everything and go? Surely Jesus doesn't expect us to quit our jobs, sell our houses, leave our families? Jesus simply calls us to follow him, to make the journey of discipleship, the life of faith, the central-most thing, and to discover along the way what it means. This will mean letting go of something, maybe many things. And maybe not just once, but all through our lives, we will look at what we are holding onto that keeps us from the fullness of life Jesus talked about—our true humanity as children of God.

There is a thread in these readings. It is about the reality that to live fully and love fully, we have to learn to let go, and what to let go of. It has to do with the very nature of life. The form of this world may not be passing away in the sense Paul meant. Yet, the forms of the world are always passing away. Our own form is passing away, changing daily. Scientists tell us this. The great spiritual traditions tell us this. Life is always changing, dying, and being born. There is always resurrection, new life, but not without death. The two go together. Our unhappiness, our violence, our inability to live as we were created to live, are all rooted in our trying to hold onto, grasp, cling, make permanent, build up something for ourselves—wealth, security, power, some ideal world of our own thinking. We try to hang on to things and people, and we remain unhappy and dissatisfied in spite of our consuming, our possessiveness, and our dependencies in relationships. We have become insane enough to

destroy our own home—the earth—because of our attachments to owning, profiting, conquering, and just plain destructiveness. Jesus' life and teachings are about letting go so that we can receive, leaving behind so that we can journey into our true home, and dying so that we can be reborn.

These things are central to other, even older, traditions. *The Bhagavad Gita*, a major Hindu text, was Gandhi's most cherished spiritual source. In it he saw the principle of *ahimsa*, non-harming or non-violence. The God Krishna is in the guise of a chariot driver, who speaks to the warrior and spiritual seeker Arjuna. *They [those who know God] do not rejoice in good fortune; they do not lament at bad fortune; lucid, with minds unshaken, they remain within what is real.* Did not Psalm 62 advise that if wealth, or good fortune, increases we should not set our hearts on it? Krishna also says: *Pleasures from external objects are wombs of suffering, Arjuna. They have their beginnings and their ends; no wise person seeks joy among them.*

From the earliest text attributed to the Buddha, *The Dhammapada*, these words: *Selfish attachment brings suffering; selfish attachment brings fear. Be detached, and you will be free from suffering and fear.* Also this: *As a solid rock cannot be moved by the wind, the wise are not shaken by praise or blame.*

We have an ego that gets caught up in emotions and sensations, that experiences pain and pleasure, despair and hope. The ego also gets its feelings hurt and often wants to be a little dictator. Yet, there is also the larger Self, we might say our true Self. That's why we can be aware that we are hurting or happy, depressed or serene. Though our emotions are very important and real, we are much more than our emotions, or our thoughts. The larger, true Self can keep us from sinking into despair or fear or anger. I think it is that larger, truer Self that Jesus makes us aware of, the person we are in relation to God who created us. That is why, I think, he could tell us that, as messed up and confused and self-absorbed as we might get(ego stuff), we are still the light of the world and the salt of the earth, because God made us! (Matt. 5:13-14)

When we lose something or someone, it feels as though our world has come to an end. Our emotions overwhelm us, and our minds follow, until we can't imagine anything other than emptiness or unending grief. When we love or admire something or someone, it is good, enjoyable, wonderful, inspiring. Yet, there is always the tendency to possess, to hold onto, to control, and this will always lead to unhappiness. When we become attached to some idea of the way we think the world should be, it can be a good thing, until we start defending it against any criticism or question or doubt or challenge. Then we become angry, violent

defenders of ideas, political agendas, national, racial, or religious identities. The anonymous author of the Letter of James put it dead on: *Those conflicts and disputes (literally, fightings and wars) among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts (4:1-2).*

It is not a matter of not feeling anything, or not enjoying things or people. It is not a matter of hating the world or becoming austere and dry, afraid of having a good time or delighting in this good creation. It is a matter of realizing the whole of who we are as human beings created of earth and spirit. It is a matter of learning how to truly love and have compassion.

I think all of this invites us to look at our lives and our attachments, and to see how and to what, or whom, we have become attached in ways that keep us from the journey of fullness of life, the journey to which Jesus calls us. Maybe it is attachment to security that keeps us from taking the risks of doing something we feel called to do but are held back by our fears. Maybe it is attachment to some view of ourselves that keeps us stuck in a sense of worthlessness, self-hate, or inability to experience joy in life. Maybe it is attachment to someone we have lost or are losing, a painful letting go, to be sure, but one that can open up in us a deeper connection to life than we thought possible, if we remain open to it, with the help of others, our community, I must say. Maybe it is attachment to our own ideas about things that keeps us from really seeing the world as it is, or people as they are instead of how we want them to be.

I am learning more and more that our happiness and unhappiness, as well as the inward and outward journeys of following Jesus, have a great deal to do with attachments, with seeing them and understanding them, with letting go of things in order to find what Jesus called eternal life, fullness of life. And it has to do with what I think the Jewish/Christian tradition especially, but not exclusively, brings to the understanding and living of the spiritual life. It is the call to repent, to wake up to God's kingdom right here and now, and to "fish for people". Not making people, or ourselves, religious, but living in the ways of a love that heals, uplifts, comforts, frees, advocates. It is a life of loving others, the creation, and ourselves in ways that do no control, possess, or exploit. This kind of non-attaching, non-possessing love can grow to delight in and enjoy, and to look with compassion and understanding on everything and everyone, including ourselves, in this world, which is God's good creation.

Listen to these words from Elizabeth O'Connor, who was for many years a member of

our sister community in Washington, DC, the Church of the Saviour. In CRY PAIN, CRY HOPE, she has a chapter entitled “Letting Go.” She writes: “Every day, as well as every new stage of life, offers opportunity for that work [of letting go]. To relinquish the people one loves is especially hard, and yet this is the nature and requirement of love. While I cling to another, I can never truly love that person. When I love the other I will free him or her to follow a path that is not my path, to hold opinions that are in opposition to my own, to have friends that will never be my friends, to live in a city that is not my city, to leave the circle of my love for another’s love.” She ends the chapter by talking about how this letting go kind of love enables us to stand on our own, to live our own lives fully and freely.

We go about this work of letting go as we establish in our lives an inward journey of prayer, of silence, of self-examination, of a quietness that enables us to open to our new, our true life. Psalm 62 counsels to become quiet and to wait on God. I take this quite literally to mean we sit each day for our time of inward journey and let our inner life, swirling with emotions and thoughts, settle down. “Wait silently for God, my soul, for my hope is from God.” Waiting silently is the foundation of our spiritual practice. When we grow in our capacity to sit quietly, we grow in our capacity for self-understanding and for listening to God’s call in our lives. We are able to see where we are attached and where we need to let go and create more space in our lives for God’s presence and guidance and love.