

March 22, 2015 / Fifth Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

Unless the Seed Dies

Jeremiah 31:31-34 *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts....*

John 12:20-26 *Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

The reading from Jeremiah speaks of a relationship with God that is direct, immediate, and inward. "I will put my law within you; I will write it on your hearts." "Law" means more than written laws or rules. It means a way of being and living, the most fruitful ways to live, for others, ourselves, and the creation. Awareness of God and the wisdom growing from it are to be found within us. I especially love the part about not having to teach or ask about God. Everyone, from the smallest child to the oldest adult, will know God. "Knowing" does not mean head knowledge, knowing about God. It is intimate awareness of and communion with that Reality we call God, the Presence and Power that pervades, sustains, and renews all of life. This is echoed in Isaiah 11, the vision of God's "peaceable kingdom"--the wolf and the lamb lying down together, a little child leading even the fiercest of creatures, no wounding or destruction, and "the whole earth being filled with the knowledge of God." This is not idealism. It is the way we are created to live.

Jesus' words in Luke 17:20-21 are in this same vein. He says to those who want outward signs of God's kingdom, "Stop looking outside of yourself; the kingdom is **within** you". It can also be translated **among you**, but in either case, it is something intimate and near and knowable. And didn't Jesus teach that young children already know the kingdom of God, that it belongs to them, and that we can't enter it until we become like them (Mk 10; Lk 18; Matt 19)? There are many other places in scripture that point to our capacity for knowing God as the near, yet ever-mysterious source and power of life, and for living out of that knowledge, that awareness. It fills our inner life with peace, joy, wonder. It shapes our outward living with compassion, peaceableness, care for others, especially the least and left out...in short, love.

What happened to make us feel so separate from God, that God is an "up there" being we cannot reach on our own? I think that we were taught to not trust our own hearts, our own experience, to not believe that we have in us the God-created capacity to know God. The story line of the Christianity most of us grew up with was called "the fall of man" and "original sin". It goes something like this: Adam and Eve (taken as historical persons), our original parents, sinned, became separated from God, and brought the punishment of death. From then on, we are all born essentially sinful, separated from God, and it took the death of Jesus to reconnect us. The problem

is that the more time we spend with scripture—really reading and studying these stories--the more we see that that view is on shaky biblical ground. There are elements in scripture from which one could create such a doctrine, but it is not by any stretch the major biblical understanding of who we are as human beings, the significance of Jesus, or the nature of death.

So many adults have confided in me over the years how close they felt to God as young children, clear and vivid experiences of the sacredness of life and their own lives, especially when they were out in the natural world, the creation. Young children are very close to God and to the world as God's creation. Sadly, we fill their heads with ideas and judgments and boxes in which to put everything. We do not nurture the most important thing—their awareness of themselves in relation to the wonder and sacredness of life, of the world, of their own lives. We make them cogs in the machinery of religion and society instead of helping them deepen and grow in the knowledge of God that Jeremiah and Isaiah are talking about. We think we have to put into them what they already have innately. No wonder we grow up feeling alienated from ourselves, from the world around us, and from God!

We are beginning, I hope, to listen more deeply to our own spiritual tradition. We are opening to spiritual traditions older than our own, including indigenous people who have known these things for aeons. We are part of the world. Our lives are integrated into everything around us—the air, the water, the earth. Spiritually we are created with awareness of the sacred source and power of life we call God, which is both intimately familiar and forever a great mystery. Such knowledge can help us to look with fresh eyes at our own scriptures. We are created by God in goodness(Genesis 1), with a capacity for knowing God all around and within us, and to live with joy, generosity, right actions, and love. Such knowledge and awareness can become distorted or buried deeply by experiences of pain, by actions and values that are violent, full of greed, and just plain evil. Yet there is always the possibility of touching again that most central part of us upon which is written the word and law of God, awareness of life as God created it to be lived, what Jesus called the kingdom of God. I think that is the framework for our spiritual work and life. We call it the inward journey, the regular, daily time we give that enables us to listen to that Voice within us.

I wanted also today to say something related about the reading from John's gospel. It is about death, not as a punishment by that “somewhere up there” God, not as an alien reality that has intruded upon what would otherwise be a perfect world, but as a part of the whole process of the life of the world, the creation. It is about our own dying and living.

Some Greeks were in Jerusalem and asked to see Jesus. Earlier in John's gospel [10:16], Jesus said that he had “other sheep” to bring into his fold, people beyond the boundaries of Israel. They would also listen to his voice and follow him as their shepherd. The arrival of these Gentiles signals the widening of the circle of response to the good news of God's love and kingdom, the Way that Jesus is embodying and teaching. When Philip and Andrew announce the visitors to Jesus, he

doesn't invite them in. Instead, he says that now it is time for the Son of Man to be glorified. This is the Gospel of John's way of talking about Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection. It is the final unfolding of Jesus' life purpose. Jesus now speaks of his impending death. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat, by itself, not yet fulfilling its purpose. But if it dies, it bears fruit.

I spoke on this text one Sunday early in my ministry, around 1976 or so, at Antioch Christian Church, in the horse and burley tobacco farmlands outside Lexington, Kentucky. After the service, Jimmy Gragg, one of the several farmers in our congregation, spoke to me about what Jesus said. He had that quiet and wise way that came from a lifetime of working and living in partnership with nature. "You know," he said with a slight smile, "the grain doesn't really die." Jimmy heard Jesus' words in a deeper way than I had. The grain doesn't die. It changes form. It goes into the earth and becomes something new, yet something inherent within itself--a seedling, then a stalk of wheat or corn. Jesus was talking about our true nature, which is to give ourselves in the service of life. With all of creation we share in this pattern. We are made to give, to be part of the greater whole.

It is not just about our final, physical dying, but how we live. Those who love their lives lose them. Those who hate their lives in this world keep their lives forever. By "loving" our lives Jesus meant clinging to them, refusing to change, resisting transformation. He meant living only for ourselves. And when we do that, death DOES become a problem for us, something fearful and dreaded, an enemy. By "hating" our lives, Jesus did not mean emotionally despising ourselves or the world. These teachings are in all of the gospels [Matt. 10:37-39; Mk. 8:34-35; Lk. 9:23-24]. If you try to grasp your life, you lose it. If you let go of your tight hold on your life, you find it. That's what Jesus meant by "loving" or "hating" our lives. If we try to hang onto our lives, try to build a wall of security around ourselves or our church or our nation or whatever, it has the opposite effect. It doesn't bring life, but destruction and unhappiness. Look at our obsession with personal security, with handguns, with amassing wealth, with armies and armaments. What has it brought but death and fear, injustice and more acute insecurity? Only by letting go do we find life. Only as we die to our ego-centric and possessive ways of living do we find true security and joy that comes from entering fully into the process of life itself. Hating our lives in the world means letting go of our efforts to control everyone and everything, including ourselves. It means opening ourselves up to God and God's spirit. It means laying down the burdens of fear that keep us from living fully and freely the lives God has given us to live. If we are living in that way, we eventually realize that there is nothing to fear about our actual dying.

Two stories from this past week that, to my mind, speak of both the "law" of God written on our hearts and Jesus words about the dying that brings life. The state of Oregon's legislature voted to register automatically all its eligible residents, to make voting easier, more accessible, not harder and more restricted. In a climate in which some are trying to limit people's right to vote and to stir up

fear and distrust, here is a ray of light. It is trusting people, and entrusting people with their rights, not seeking to diminish and control. It is an example of living by the vision of life that includes everyone, every voice. On the internet I saw a video of a wonderful story. A private prep school was to play a home basketball game against a team from a correctional facility for juvenile felon offenders. It was the only time these young prisoners were allowed to leave the facility. Two players from the prep school's team decided that they would not play this visiting team and convinced others of the same. Why? Because they refused to play a team that had no one to cheer for them, no one to sit in the stands on their side. So the prep school decided to divide up—students and parents and others supporters. Half would be there to cheer for the visitors, even wearing t-shirts bearing that team's name. They even had cheer leaders ready to cheer for them. The young people from the prison had no idea this would happen until they ran onto the court, between lines of unexpected fans, slapping their hands, giving them high fives. The two instigators were interviewed and said that everyone got so into it that by the end of the game everyone in the gym was rooting for the visiting team! Three of the young people from the prison who were interviewed said that they would never forget this for the rest of their lives.

Those two students were in touch with something different, a different way of looking at life and of living. They saw beyond the boxes, the boundaries of things like competition and winning, being better than someone else, having the advantage. They saw something more important, that everyone needs someone to cheer for them, who helps them believe in themselves, and they made it happen. In the end, everyone won! They won something far more important than a ball game. The legislators in Oregon saw something more important. They saw the way of building trust, not distrust and fear, of empowering people instead of robbing them of their power. I think these are good, real examples of what Jesus and Jeremiah were talking about. Dying to old, futile, and destructive ways of seeing, thinking, and living, and being reborn to what is good and true and life-giving.

This is what our inward and outward journeys are about. The inward journey is the way we come to know the law that is written on our hearts, how we come alive in our knowledge, our awareness of God. It is how we discern where we are fearful and clinging, where we are trying to secure ourselves, where we are resisting the kind of dying, of letting go that bears fruit of new life. The work of our inward journey is the daily, patient, loving work of untying our knots, unclenching our hearts. It is the inward journey that helps us begin to see more clearly how our lives and our gifts are meant to serve life around us. And in all of this, as we are on this journey, we come to that point where we are no longer afraid of death. It is another letting go, another changing of form so that we can bear more fruit.