

May 10, 2015 / Eastertide / David L. Edwards

All Creation Rejoices When Humans Get Their Act Together

Psalm 98 *God will rule the world with justice, and the peoples with equity.*

1 John 5:1-6 *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God
and obey God's commandments.*

John 15:9-17 *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

During my sabbatical month I worked ahead in our weekly lectionary readings, each morning reading the ones for today. I began to see a thread running through them, a clear and simple message to us as persons, as a faith community, and as a human family: The creation suffers because the human part of it continues to choose to live (no, I don't believe in "original sin") in ways contrary to our true, created nature. When Michael Morwood was with us in 2013, he spoke of our need to understand faith and spirituality in light of what science is telling us about how the universe really works. Clinging to the old mindset, for instance, of a heaven "up there" and an "elsewhere-God", who comes down to save or punish us, is no longer meaningful, or necessary. When we understand God not as a celestial being but as an immanent Presence of the Power of Life that permeates the world and our own lives, that brings freshness and solidity to our spiritual lives, our whole lives. Furthermore, Michael said, the everywhere-present God expresses itself in human beings as love, which includes justice, peace, compassion, self-giving. That is what I found in our readings for today.

In the psalm there are vibrant images of God's coming to bring just and right living, and equity to the world, which means the human world. This all springs from God's remembering or being mindful of steadfast love, or compassion, and faithfulness to Israel, to people. It began to dawn on me that the psalm is about the rest of creation rejoicing when the human world rights itself with just relationships and equity, or fairness, for all people. That is how we human beings harmonize with the rest of the creation. That message is relevant and urgently-needed today.

The Hebrew prophets speak everywhere of injustice, lack of compassion, and material greed ruling human society, and thus affecting the rest of creation [example: Jeremiah 4]. We

see it today in the pollution and destruction of the environment, and many of our leaders' refusal to listen and their commitment to being in denial. Reading our scriptures today through the lens of social injustice and inequity, and the destruction of the world in which we live, we can hear a voice of deep spiritual truth and a message of direction and hope. When we live in ways that foster justice and equity, compassion and mutual serving, in short, love, we are harmonizing with the rest of the creation. When the human world gets its act together, the sea roars, the rivers and oceans clap their hands, the mountains and hills break out in joyful song—the whole creation is filled with joy...and relief!

Where do we begin to respond to the Everywhere God who is the very Power of Life? The First Letter of John says that God's presence with us—and ours with God--expresses itself as love for one another. It begins right here. The Letters of John, as well as the Gospel, connect God's commandment and love in a powerful way. *God's love is this, that we obey God's commandments.* God's commandments are really one commandment, that we love one another. The word here (*entole*) can mean command or order, but also instruction. The word obey (*tereo*) also means keep, in the sense of giving our full and careful attention to something. Keeping or giving our attention to the command to love is the way we abide or dwell in God's love, as John's gospel will say. That is what our readings are saying. God's presence with us as love finds expression in the instruction or commandment that we live the life of love together and toward the world around us.

The writer says: *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ (or messiah, one sent from God to help us) is born of God.* This kind of statement in our scriptures has, in my view, been misunderstood and misused, and needs re-understanding. The word here (*pisteuo*) means putting our faith or trust in someone, or having confidence in someone or something. It is not holding a conviction in our heads, or even our hearts. Believing in Jesus does not mean having some special spiritual status and judging those who don't "believe in Jesus" as to their spiritual standing. To believe in Jesus means that we recognize in him—his life, his teachings, his spirit, his whole story, his living presence with us—the way of true life, of what it means to live according to our deepest, truest nature. It means that we give our life in that direction, to the way of love.

Let me say it this way: Believing in Jesus is not a religious statement, not about becoming a "Christian", a member of a religion. Believing in Jesus is about the path of our true humanity. When we are on that path, learning and growing in what it means to love, we are coming back into harmony with the rest of creation. There is no room in us for judging those who are on other paths. There is no longer room in us for the things that cause suffering

to others or the world.

In John's gospel we hear the same themes and echoes. Jesus is giving his last teaching to his disciples before his death. As God has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide, or dwell, in my love, which is God's love dwelling in me. And that love then, will dwell, will live, in you. And here it is again: *This is my commandment (or instruction), that you love one another in the way I have loved you. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, the same way that I have kept God's commandments (to love) and abide or dwell in God's love.* Keeping the commandment to love and dwelling in God's love are connected. Giving attention to the commandment of love—loving God, loving others as we love ourselves—we stay rooted in God's love that nourishes us and flows through us into the world. This, says Jesus, is so that we will have the same joy that he has. Joy in our lives and our living. Joy that comes from the freedom that love gives us from every attachment and burden that has been diminishing our true nature as those who are made to love.

In the last portion of this reading, there are a number of things Jesus says to his disciples. I go through them very briefly.

No one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. Jesus is speaking of his own life and impending death. Yet he is also speaking of the heart of God's love in us, which is to give for the sake of life around us. It is this self-giving that frees us from the self-concerns and preoccupations that bring us so much misery.

You are no longer servants of a master. You are my friends. You know everything I know. The greatest spiritual teacher and guide is one that does not create dependencies, but who helps us know that we already have everything we need to have fullness of life. This is one of many places in the gospels where we see Jesus empowering people, liberating them to find the relationship with God, the source of life and love, that is already theirs but which has gotten covered up.

You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I chose you to go and bear fruit that will last. And as you are doing that, you will discover that God will provide everything you need. We come into the community because we are drawn to Jesus by the love we may see in the community. We want that for ourselves—a community where we feel loved and accepted. So, in this sense, we “choose” Jesus. However, we are not here long before we hear this other word—we are chosen, or called, and sent to bear the fruit of love. That is why we have felt called to be a community not only of God's unconditional love for us but also living out God's love toward others and the world. We move beyond what the community gives to me, to what I can give to the community and the world. This shift happens as we move toward making a

commitment to membership, working with the disciplines or practices that can keep us both dwelling, or rooted, in God's love for us and living out God's love through our outward journey of service according to our callings and gifts. And we discover as we move out in the direction of call, or chosenness, or being-sent-to-bear-fruit, we will have everything we need. Not everything we thought we would need, but everything needed as we seek and receive gratefully whatever we are given in order to do what God has called us to do, and to be.

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. Jesus comes back to the sum of it. It is all that we are about as a community which began out of a sense of call to actually live this life Jesus is talking about, this life he embodied and reveals in us. It is the life, the love we already have, but have lost along the way because we have been raised in a human world full of confusion and forgetfulness. Our community is about the recovery of who we truly are. Here growing in our understanding and practice of love is ongoing.

I want to leave you with a collage of what I am talking about—all of creation rejoicing when God's presence expresses itself in and through the lives of people who are endeavoring to live in a community of love, and through their diverse callings and gifts are being channels of God's love in the world.

On Friday I went over to the Cafe for breakfast. There I witnessed what goes on every Friday. People talking with one another, not staring into their iPhones and iPads, but looking into each others' eyes and listening. Conversations about what is important to their own lives and to the world. I was in one such conversation with Dwight Mays, who has preached here and been part of the former Lodge of the Fisherman Thursday night dinners. And he agreed to speak here again at the end of May when I must go visit my sisters in Indianapolis. Dwight is a lovely, warm, intelligent pastor, now retired, and living fully each day because he knows each day is a gift as he lives with cancer. I also saw three “older gentlemen”, including our own Don Morrison and Curtis Harper, who have become regulars at the cafe, forming deep and loving friendships. I watched the three of them pile into Curtis' car to take coffee and breakfast to Lewis Keller, another friend who is no longer able to come to the Cafe or to worship here on Sundays. This happens just about every week so that Lewis stays connected and knows he is remembered and loved. And I talked with Ann and Mike Mayer for a bit at their table somewhat later in the morning. Before long Ann will finish her approval process to volunteer in the pediatric unit of the hospital, holding and rocking babies who are at risk for different reasons and who are helped and nurtured simply by being held and rocked. Mike was pretty fired up about the many volunteers who will be all over this property on the United Way Day of Caring a week from this Wednesday. We could not do what we do and take

care of this property without the volunteers who come, not only annually for this special day, but throughout the year. What they do benefits the camp, the retreat center, and the church, too. The past two days, three from our community—Sandy Fisher, Randy Layne, and Randy's friend and work colleague Danny Campbell—participated in the Wake County Habitat for Humanity build in Raleigh, in partnership with the Islamic Association of Raleigh, to construct a home in honor and memory of the three Muslim young people murdered in Chapel Hill in February. In response to those killings and hearing of this project, the three felt called to go and help. I could go on and on with such pictures of what I am talking about.

Just one more. On Friday evening I met our guests who would be staying in Kitty's Cottage. Farhat Kamran is a graduate student at Liberty University, graduating this weekend with a degree in health sciences. He will return to Pakistan to work there to help people. Farhat worked as a volunteer work for the camp this year. He introduced me to his family by saying, with a bit of humor, that I was the pastor and in charge of all that goes on here. I laughed and said, No, not in charge at all. I do my bit as part of the whole. That is what I believe is going on in our readings for today. The whole creation sings joyfully whenever we are discovering and doing our part in a spirit of justice and equity, compassion and service. Love is the way we join in the song of creation. When we are living more and more this way, we will hear creation singing. I heard it all day on Friday, and have heard it many times. You will hear it, too, along this path. I guarantee it.