

June 28, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Spiritual Disciplines: The Openings to Our True Nature

Wisdom of Solomon 1:12-15, 2:23

*For God created all things so that they might exist;
the creatures of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them.*

2 Corinthians 8:1-5, 7-17

...their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Why do we have spiritual disciplines as the form of membership in this community? Why did Gordon Cosby, back in the late 1940s, see that the church was failing in its life and mission, and eventually come to focus on the importance of a disciplined spiritual life? The simple disciplines—or practices, if you prefer—that we work with are not special or new or radical. They are not even as demanding as some think they are. They reflect the practices of people of faith through the centuries, in all major spiritual traditions, that have helped people awaken to their true, God-created, selves and to the sacred dimension of life. In John's gospel, Jesus speaks of it as being “born from above” or “born again”.

Why do we stress the importance of commitment and spiritual disciplines? It is not in order to be “good” or “religious”. It is not so that we feel righteous or superior. It is not a matter of legalism. It is only legalism if you think of it as legalism. As we take on and work with this kind of life, giving ourselves to it in a spirit of learning and growing, we learn in our own experience what Jesus meant when he said, “Come to me, all you who are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”. The disciplines of membership are the way we take our lives seriously and give attention to them, in the inward and outward dimensions. Far from being restrictive or narrowing, the disciplines become for us openings, doorways to our truest self, the person God created us to be. They help us perceive and be free from all of the false and empty voices and values that surround us in this culture of materialism, greed, violence, self-absorption. We awaken to our connectedness to the whole of life and our part in it.

I was thinking about all of this in the past couple of weeks as I worked with today's

texts. The portion from the Wisdom of Solomon rocked my world! The book is part of a spiritual view that runs throughout the Bible but about which we have not been taught. It is called the Wisdom tradition, and is found in more familiar books like the Book of Proverbs, and in some of the Psalms. The Wisdom tradition knows that there is a way of living that brings fullness of life and a way that brings separation from God, and we have the freedom to choose one or the other. We are created good. As our reading says, “God created all things so that they might exist; the creatures of the world (that includes us!) are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them.” This echoes the first story of creation in Genesis 1, wherein God pronounces everything that God made as good. My professor of Hebrew Scriptures, Dr. George Coats, told us that the sense of that is—God looked over all that God had made and said, “That’s just what I had in mind!” Perfect!

The writer of the Wisdom of Solomon was a Greek-influenced Jew who lived sometime in the middle to late first century BCE in the city of Alexandria, Egypt. The book was written in elegant Greek, not Hebrew. The writer was in love with Wisdom as an embodiment of God. Wisdom is personified as a woman, and the middle chapters amount to a love song to Woman Wisdom. The writer’s message is that our nature is good, for we share God’s own nature. Our separation from God is our own doing, with help from the human society that surrounds us. What the writer calls righteousness is the way of living that is harmonious with both God’s will for us and our own truest nature. And that, in the writer’s view, is immortality. I would say that it is also what Jesus called eternal life, fullness of life now, as well as forever.

This tradition carries over into Jesus’ life and teaching. Jesus never talked about our being lost sinners who are incapable of living as we were created to live. No. He said, You are the light of the world! You are the salt of the earth!(Matt. 5:13-16) He got upset with his disciples because he believed that they had it in them to be faithful, to live as God created them to live, and to live that way in order to help others live that way. Love God with all your being, and your neighbor as yourself, taught Jesus. Just do that and you will live, REALLY live. (Luke 10:25-28) That is your true nature, who you really are.

This, I think, is the backdrop for seeing the meaning and importance of spiritual disciplines or practices. They give our living a fruitful order. Yet, we are not used to discipline as part of the religious or spiritual life. We think it just comes naturally. Not so. We live in a human world full of distractions and what the writer of Ecclesiastes called “vanity”, that is, emptiness, fruitlessness, values, and pursuits that bring momentary gratifications which fade

away as soon as we grasp them. We live in a society saturated with racial fear and hate, a culture of violence and individualism that contradict the interrelatedness of life. In the words of the Wisdom of Solomon, we live in a world that lures us to choose death, which is separation from God and our true selves. That is why we need spiritual disciplines, practices that re-root us in God, in our true selves, that help us perceive what is worthwhile and what is worthless, that enable us to see the giftedness of our lives and feel the call of God in our hearts to serve the world in some way.

I want to talk about one of our disciplines in this light. In Community Membership it is the commitment to **give of my financial resources in support of this community's life and ministries**. In Covenant Membership it is the commitment to **support the life and ministries of this community of faith through the giving of at least a tithe of the income which is entrusted to my stewardship**. These disciplines are about our money. And we do not like to talk about money. In the churches I grew up in and those I served before coming here, money was a big secret. No one was supposed to know what you gave, and there was a reluctance to challenge anyone to give in a significant way. Generally, I learned that those who had the most financial resources often contributed the least. And those who had the least quite often were the most faithful, generous, and disciplined givers. Why? Because they had discovered freedom from materialism, and had found their own true nature as those created to give, not to take or to possess.

It also seemed hard for people to understand that THEY were responsible for the financial support of the church and its life and work, not "someone else" whom they assumed was taking care of it. It was enough to drop a little something in the offering plate whenever they remembered or were in town. On the other hand, those who had cultivated the discipline of giving usually showed in other ways that their spiritual lives were real, vital, and growing.

In my first full-time congregation, Antioch Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Lexington KY, it was John Hawkins who taught me a great lesson about giving. He worked for an insurance company, was an Elder, taught Sunday School, and took his turn chairing the congregational board. John told me that the first check he wrote each month for expenses was to the church. This discipline of giving stood for the way John lived his life, a life of service, both to the congregation itself and to others. Over the years, I gave more and more

weight to the importance of financial giving through the church as a spiritual practice. I began to see that this practice was a doorway opening to our truest nature, as God created us—a people of generosity, of giving so that life around us might be increased and that we might know the freedom of trusting God in all things.

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians includes a couple of chapters in which Paul was urging non-Jewish, or Gentile, churches, to take part in a collection for the relief of the “mother church” in Jerusalem, which had fallen on hard times. This was a beautiful reversal of things. The Jerusalem church had disapproved of Paul reaching out to the Gentile world with the message about Jesus. Now those little communities, which were themselves struggling with hardships, were giving to help the Jerusalem church which had been initially disapproving of them!

Paul was having a hard time getting the troublesome bunch in Corinth to do their part. They were so caught up in squabbles over beliefs and personal loyalties that they had lost sight of their identity as a community of Jesus. So Paul does a little shaming! Let me tell you, says Paul, about the churches of Macedonia. They are suffering so much, and yet they are already giving abundantly out of their poverty. And they are doing so with joy, begging for the privilege of participating. All of this is because they “gave themselves first to the Lord”. Think about that. They gave abundantly even out of their poverty because they had first given themselves to the Lord, that is, to following Jesus in the life of faith. Paul is saying to the Corinthian community that they need to remember that they are a community of Jesus, a community centered in his life and teachings and spirit. That is why they were not yet giving—they had forgotten who they are!

When we give ourselves first to following Jesus in the life of faith, then we are re-orienting our lives in God, in our true nature. Then our material giving flows out of our connectedness to God and to our true selves. You see what I am trying to say? It is our discipline of giving that reconnects us with God as we center our lives in Jesus, who embodies our true humanity. The portion of our reading today from Paul's letter is filled with one particular word in the Greek. It is *karis*, which is translated as “grace” or “gift”. It is the word used to describe the nature of God's love for us and the world--grace, or free gift. Paul is saying that we are able to have that same grace in our own lives. We are able to express in our own giving the giving nature of God's love. It is because it is the way God made us! Our

true nature is not to cling to material things for security, living fearfully and defensively. Our true life is living according to our nature, which is, as the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon says, the very image of God's own nature.

When we are giving in this way, it becomes more and more a part of who we are, and feels less and less like a “discipline”. We discover we do not need as much as we thought we needed, thus simplifying our lives. And we increase life for others. This is what Paul meant when he said that this kind of giving, the giving that is God's own nature in us, creates an economy in which those who have more do not have too much, and those who do not have as much do not have too little.

We often see this kind of giving in human beings. This past week I learned of the death of another deeply loved person in my spiritual history. Stuart Euster also served as an Elder in the Antioch congregation. He, too, was an insurance man. He took his life of faith very seriously, but not in a way that was judgmental or prideful. It had simply become who he was. Because of the depth of Stuart's commitment, his life was full of meaning and joy. Stuart and I, along with another member of the congregation, joined together to establish Housing Equality for All Lexington, a non-profit for the building of houses for ownership by low-income persons. We did it in the spirit of a mission group so that the ministry was rooted in prayer and in love for each other. Stuart was the dynamo at the center of it. His will to serve and to overcome obstacles was indomitable. When it came time to remember who we were as a community of faith, Stuart kept it crystal clear, and sometimes uncomfortably so. A member of our church, who also was a friend and fellow student who had been denied his seminary degree because he was gay, had decided, reluctantly, to sue the seminary. The thing would soon become public, so he and I decided it was time for him to share everything with the congregation. When the Elders met prior to the congregational meeting to talk and pray about it, it was Stuart who finally said, “Well, we have to be realistic.” There was a pause, during which I thought, Oh, boy, here it comes! Here it came, all right. “As Christians, we have no choice but to accept and support this man who is a child of God like us!” Boom! That was that.

I share all of this because I loved Stuart Euster deeply, and notice of his death filled me with gratitude for this man who lived out of his true self, the generous, loving, perfect self God created all of us to be. I saw in Stuart, and have seen in so many others, what the writer of the Wisdom of Solomon meant—Righteousness is immortal. When we live as we were

created to live, we know what is meant by eternal life. That is what our spiritual disciplines help us to do.