

July 19, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

A Dwelling Place for God

Jeremiah 23:1-6 / Psalm 23 / Ephesians 2:11-22 / Mark 6:30-34

God, Our Shepherd

Jeremiah served as a prophet prior to and throughout the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of the people into Babylon. His words contain a judgment against the “false shepherds” of Israel, the succession of kings who were not faithful in their leadership. They did not help the people maintain their faithfulness to God, and allowed society to drift into empty worship and social injustice. God says through the prophet that the false shepherds will be removed. “I will attend to you for your evil doings.” In other words, they are going to get theirs!

Then there is this remarkable picture of God personally gathering the scattered people and bringing them back to their fold. They will return to their own land and be fruitful and multiply. These words are about the exile. The irresponsible shepherds are deposed, and God will personally care for the people through the suffering of the exile, and then lead them back to their own land.

Leaders, whether in the political or religious realm, are a mixed bag. They can help us, or they can hurt us. They can be selflessly devoted to the common good of all whom they serve. Or they can be driven by their egos, seeking power or recognition or wealth. I thought about our community as I read this passage this week. I was called to be spiritual leader of this community thirteen years ago. Now I am leaving. The Covenant Members, with the help of Community Members, are beginning to work with this change. Do we need another hired minister? If so, what sort of person does she or he need to be in order to serve our community? What is it that we need from a leader? Many questions.

This community was founded with a particular vision of being the church. Each person is called to take his or her spiritual life seriously. And we do it in community, supporting one another, holding one another accountable. We recognize that no one can do our spiritual life for us, including a minister. I think our community tries to live in that place where God personally engages us as our shepherd. The temptation, even with the best of spiritual leaders, is for us to drift away from taking responsibility for living our own lives in relation to God, and to begin looking to someone else to do it for us.

That is why this time of my leaving is going to be very important for you as a

community. It is the opportunity to return with freshness to that direct relationship you each and together have with God as those who have made commitments to your own spiritual lives. This is why I have said that you have everything you need, right now, to be the Church of the Covenant. As Psalm 23 says, God is your shepherd. God is my shepherd. And right there we have everything we need. We lack nothing. Is that not an exciting thing to hear? We each have a direct, personal relationship with the Power of Life we call God, who, or which, is present everywhere throughout the creation. And in that relationship, we have all that we need to live a full life. I came here after many years of working in situations in which it was difficult to devote my time and energies to helping people discover that essential truth—that they have it within them to live the way we are created to live, that each of us has a relationship with God to which we must give attention in order to live fully. This community seeks to embody that important vision, and practice, remembering and reminding each other that we each are called and able to live out of that relationship we have with God our shepherd. When we are working with that, we begin to realize that, indeed, we lack nothing!

A Dwelling Place for God

When we are working with our lives in this way, something powerful happens. As a community we become what the writer of the Letter of Ephesians calls “a dwelling place for God”, literally, a home for God. It has much to do with breaking down walls, walls within and among us. The writer is speaking, sometime in the middle of the first century, to non-Jewish folks, called Gentiles, who had heard the message about Jesus and felt called to become followers of that way. The Jewish followers of Jesus considered them aliens, with no access to God. Some of the Jewish Christians had put up a wall called circumcision. They thought that the non-Jewish men who became followers of Jesus had to be circumcised. (It is the old death-cry of the church--“That’s the way we’ve always done it!”) That was a big issue back then, causing much tension. The advocates of circumcision identified themselves strongly with their position, and saw everything through that myopic lens.

The writer of the letter, who may have been Paul himself or someone who knew Paul and his thought, cut through all of that. The whole meaning of Jesus' life and death was the breaking down of walls, especially those that made some feel that they did not belong to God because of this or that doctrine or practice or circumstance in life. Jesus was about abolishing of all the laws and commandments that we cling to, which separate people from each other and from God.

Most of you know the story of the swimming pool here. In the early sixties, rather than

integrate the public pools, the city decided to shut them down and fill them in. The little pool that was here at the time was the only one where all people, no matter their skin color, could swim. It caused an uproar in the neighborhood, and, coupled with the racial integration of the camp about that same time, brought a good deal of stress and suffering upon the Church of the Covenant. But the walls came down. They came down because of Jesus, because this community knew who Jesus was and what he was about. It was not about making people Christians, members of a religion, but a way of living. It was about abolishing the laws and commandments that keep hostility going. And those walls had to come down first of all in our own hearts and minds. That is inward journey work!

About a year after I came here, Mary Jane Withrow, one of our Covenant Members at the time, whose daughter Shana is gay, asked why our church was not listed on the UCC website as “Open and Affirming”, that is, welcoming AND supportive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. She brought it up at the Covenant Members meeting. As I remember, it took about 10 minutes for that group to approve us as an Open and Affirming congregation! How different this was from Kaye's and my experience with congregations where the dividing walls were so strong and deep that it was difficult to even have a discussion about the subject.

You know what the difference is? Why these things can happen? Because some people, usually small in number, are willing to make a commitment to their own lives in God and to one another. And when that happens, walls start coming down because we are working with our own spirits, our own minds and hearts. We are, through regular inward journey work, seeing the fears and hostilities and so forth that are in us. We are letting the love of God our shepherd dismantle within us the walls, dispelling the fear, the hostility, the lack of understanding. Room is made, and we become a dwelling place for God. It happens because we are learning how to open ourselves more and more to God who is near at all times, permeating all of life with steadfast love. This is why people who come onto this property, to the camp or Cafe or retreat center or the church itself, tell us they “feel” something special here, something holy and sacred. I say this not to puff us all up, but to remind us how important it is that we continue, each of us and together, to embrace our own lives in God and to do the inward and outward work that God leads each of us to do. It is not just for ourselves, but for the sake of the world around us, that we continue being and becoming a home for God.

The Inward and the Outward

We come to the gospel reading. Jesus has sent the disciples out to teach and to call people to change their lives and live according to God's ordering of life, the kingdom of God. Mark calls the returning disciples "apostles", meaning those who are sent out on mission, representing the one who sent them, in this case, their teacher Jesus. Jesus must have seen that the disciples needed rest, physical and spiritual. So he directs them to "come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Mark says that they were so busy with people and their needs that they did not even have time to eat. So, since they are nearby the Sea of Galilee, they get into a boat and head for retreat.

Jesus calls us to a life of service to others and to the world of which we are part. We find fullness of life, not in isolating ourselves from the needs around us but in discovering the particular way each of us is called to serve, using the gifts which each of us has been given. We, too, are apostles, those who are "sent" as emissaries, as servants of God's love for the world. It is what we call the outward journey. Our reading from Mark's gospel capsulizes the situation beautifully. The outward journey can overwhelm us because the needs of people and the world around us are so many and great. Once we decide that we will give ourselves in some way in loving service, we will likely find ourselves in the situation of Jesus and the disciples, feeling overwhelmed and exhausted.

This is why there is also the inward journey, the going "away to a deserted place all by ourselves to rest for a while". It is essential, and we see in the gospels Jesus taking time to withdraw from the needs, from the outward journey, to be alone with God. The disciples and Jesus did not have a very long retreat. Basically it was whatever time they spent out in the boat on the water. For when they got to their destination, the people were already there with their wants and needs. They got out of the boat, and Jesus looked at the crowd and was filled with compassion.

The inward journey, the time we make each day to be in solitude with God, is essential to the outward journey. Resting is as important as doing the work. Prayer is as important as action. Silence is as important as speaking. If we are not doing the inward journey, the outward journey will suffer. In the time we spend in spiritual and physical rest we maintain our connection to the love and compassion that come from God. Spiritual rest and renewal, which are part of the inward journey, are our letting the shepherding God lead us to those still waters of rest. Jesus thought it was necessary, and so do we as his community.

It seemed to me that our readings were related in a dynamic way. We are a community that affirms the primary relationship each of us has with the everywhere present Power of

Life we call God. God alone is our true shepherd; we are cared for at the deepest of levels. As we work with and nurture our relationship with God, we find that we need less and less. We find, in fact, that we have everything we need right now to live as we were created to live. Jesus' life and death mean for us the breaking down of all the walls that separate us from one another, including religious ones. Jesus embodied God's shepherding love, gathering together all who had become separated from each, creating a new community of God's love. It is that kind of community that expresses our true humanity and becomes a dwelling place for God. In such a community we are called to the inward and outward life for which we were created. Both are essential to fulfilling our true nature. We find fulfillment and joy in serving others and the world in some way. And yet our outward life of service must be rooted in the inward life of prayer, reflection, quietness, and rest.