

August 23, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Where Else Would We Go?

Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-23 *And the people said, “No, we will serve the Lord!”*

John 6:56-69 *Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

Faithfulness: The Impossible Possibility

Joshua received the mantle of leadership from Moses, and then led the people of Israel across the Jordan River and into Canaan. Israel now inhabited the land that God had promised them. Yet, everything would always depend upon one thing—the people remaining faithful to God in all aspects of their lives. They understood themselves to be in a covenant relationship with God. As long as they maintained their part, things would go well.

Now Joshua is at the end of his life. It is time for a new covenant, a renewal of the people's will to be faithful to God. Joshua puts it to them: Choose this day whether you will serve the God who brought you out of slavery in Egypt or the lesser gods you have encountered in the land you now inhabit. The people unanimously and enthusiastically voice their desire and readiness to serve the God of their ancestors. We will serve the Lord who is our God!

Then Joshua says a strange thing. You cannot serve God! For God is holy, and does not allow for any other gods. Furthermore, God will not forgive your transgressions. If you make this commitment and then fall away from it to serve these other gods, it will mean your destruction. These are pretty hard words. Yet, the people respond even more insistently. No, we WILL serve the Lord! Joshua says, Okay, you are witnesses against yourselves. You now have ultimate responsibility for your own faith and commitment. We are witnesses, the people say. The Lord is our God, and God only will we serve and obey! So the new covenant is made. Joshua dies, having done all he had been upon called to do.

There are a number of important things in this story. First, there is the renewing of our commitment to the life of faith, to living out of our relationship with God. There are several stories in the Bible of the covenant relationship between God and the people being renewed. God's people lose their way, wander off, or fall into ways of living that are contrary to how God created us to live. Then a new covenant is offered and made. God's very nature is

steadfast love, love that is always there with us and for us. Our spiritual work is to harmonize our lives with God's steadfast love. Covenant is about choosing and re-choosing to live out of our relationship with God.

Our community has always tried to live according to this pattern. Each year we have a time for the renewing our commitments as Covenant or Community Members. For us, "church membership" is not something that just goes on and on, a kind of "status". The life of faith, of following Jesus, needs to be renewed, again and again. Therefore, membership here is only for one year at a time. We are given the opportunity each year to examine whether or not we still feel called to work with the spiritual disciplines, and with our inward life and outward service. It has to be something we choose out of freedom, not something done out of a sense of obligation or habit.

The story is also about Joshua finishing his work, what he was called to do. Aware that his time was up, he called the people to renew their faithfulness, not to him but to God. I think this speaks to what we are and will be going through related to my retirement. Joshua knows he is on his way out. The covenant renewal is not about Joshua. It is about the people and their lives in God. As we move toward this year's recommitment retreat and Commitment Sunday, we have the opportunity to clarify things. The Church of the Covenant, its vision and life, is not about David Edwards. It is not about Bev Cosby. It is about a community of those who are committing themselves to an authentic life of faith. The Church of the Covenant is composed of those who, any given year, commit or recommit themselves to living out of our relationship with God. It is not about personalities but living out of our awareness of the Sacred Oneness of the universe, which we call God, and about following Jesus on the path of love. That vision is here whether or not there is "a minister", because it is being lived out in the lives and life together of those who make a commitment to membership, whether their number be many or few.

Then there is something jarring in this reading. When the people continue to insist on their willingness to serve God, Joshua tells them that they cannot do it. You will not be able to do what you are saying! You do not really know what you are getting into! However, the people persist, and Joshua at last leads them through the renewing of the covenant.

The life of faith, the life of discipleship to Jesus, has about it something of the impossible. It is far more challenging, more demanding than we think. I have never known anyone who, upon beginning to give serious attention to their spiritual life, said, This is a piece of cake! And no matter how advanced we may think we are along this journey of faith, we will often be reminded that this thing is bigger than we are. There is always more that we

need to learn. There is always our need to shed the “answers” we thought we had, and to grow and deepen in our understanding. And we also want to hang onto those other gods—wealth, violence, prejudice, comfortableness, and so forth. We all have picked up some lesser gods we want to take with us.

Jesus consistently speaks of detaching from all things that would hinder our following him faithfully in the love and service of God. In Matthew 10, for instance, he uses the image of a sword. He has come to bring a sword, not peace. The sword is a symbol of cutting ties with whatever or whoever keeps us from following Jesus. Attachment to the way of Jesus means detachment from everything else. Jesus also spoke of the impossible possibility of faithfulness Joshua was talking about. It keeps us humble. It keeps us open. It keeps us growing in the life of love.

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In the reading from John's gospel, Jesus also speaks in jarring language about our eating and drinking him. John may have meant these words to refer to the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper. Or the words may be symbolic, referring to the life of following Jesus, drawing nourishment from Jesus' life and teachings and spirit. In the first chapter of John's gospel, we are told that the Word became flesh and lived among us. Not God became flesh, but the Word. So eating and drinking Jesus is taking into ourselves God's Word of life for us. There are other places in the Bible where this kind of imagery is used. In the second chapter of Ezekiel, God gives the prophet a scroll. It is the word that the prophet is to speak. Then God tells Ezekiel to eat the scroll, which he does, finding that it tastes sweet, like honey. In our reading from Proverbs last week, Woman Wisdom invites us into her house for a feast. It is the feast of wisdom that comes from God.

My own understanding is that these words are about the meaning of the Eucharist and the life of faith, of following Jesus. They speak of taking into ourselves each day the nourishment of Jesus as God's embodied Word. And these words are, indeed, difficult to hear, as some of the disciples said. They are about the life of faith embracing every aspect of our lives. I think that is what the disciples found to be a stumbling block. Jesus' words were not about a comfortable religion that we can tuck into our pocket alongside everything else. The life of faith, the life of following Jesus, is full-time and all-encompassing. When we eat and drink the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, we are reminded of this in a dramatic way.

Many of the disciples turn back and no longer accompany Jesus. Jesus' words are too hard, too challenging. Jesus asks the twelve if they, too, want to leave. Peter speaks up.

Where else would we go? To whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life, the words that carry ultimate meaning. We have come to know that you are the Holy One of God, the one is able to show us the way of true life. I find this to be a deeply moving scene. Peter may well have felt the same way about Jesus' difficult words, the difficulty of following Jesus. Maybe he also felt an urge to turn back. I believe that he felt the impossible possibility of discipleship. He had been with Jesus long enough to know that Jesus "has the words of eternal life", the words of our true, authentic humanity. Jesus' words are about our truest nature and the most fulfilling ways to live. Peter speaks on behalf of the twelve, the inner circle of disciples. Following Jesus, learning from him, was the most difficult thing they could face. And yet, how could they NOT remain with Jesus? They had come to know him as one who was full of God, and whose ministry was to help them become full of God, as well. It seems impossible! But how can we NOT remain on this journey?

When I was a student at Lynchburg College, I came to know this church community through the Lodge of the Fisherman coffee house and volunteering as a tutor with the Kum Ba Yah program at 412 Madison Street. To me, it embodied the "impossible possibility" of the life of faith. It was about loving God with our whole being, with our inward life and our outward life, and doing so in an extravagant, radical way. It was a call to be who I was really created to be, and the realization that such a path is not easy. It is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it "the cost of discipleship" or "costly grace". God's love for us is unconditional and everlasting, not something we have to earn. Yet that very grace that surrounds and enfolds us calls us into a covenant relationship, the living of lives shaped and reshaped by that steadfast love we call God. This was, and remains, a spirituality to which I could respond with my whole life. It was a call to the impossible possibility of living my whole life as a response to God's presence and love. No, it is not easy. And it is never finished. But...where else would I go?