

October 4, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Commitment Sunday

Psalm 8 *You have made them a little lower than God....*

Mark 10:13-16

"...whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

We live in a sick society. The Oregon killings are only the latest in daily incidences of gun violence, in a nation that is awash in guns and obsessed with guns. I ask a simple question: Why would a Christian own a gun? If all who say they follow Jesus asked themselves that question, measured their attachment to weapons against Jesus' clear and central teachings that would be a huge beginning toward a much less violent society. We live in a society full of anger and hatred directed toward our black brothers and sisters, as well as immigrants, Muslims, and even Native Americans. We have not yet faced our genocidal past with regard to African Americans and Native Americans. And in the midst of this, we have a public, culturally shaped Christianity that justifies affluence, discrimination, and injustice, and bears no resemblance to the spirit and teachings of Jesus.

In all of this, I find myself struggling with discouragement, even despair, particularly about what it means to identify myself these days as a follower of Jesus. However, this past week, as we were preparing for our commitment retreat, I rediscovered a book from my seminary days. I found it in the Church House as I was cleaning bookshelves and culling through the books. I had donated it to the retreat center. The title of the book is *IN MAN WE TRUST*, one of the earliest books by the renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. Some of you are familiar with his work. In brief, the point of the book is that there is a prominent biblical theme that human beings are created by God and entrusted with responsibility for society and the creation, and can avail themselves of the wisdom it takes to fulfill that responsibility. Far from the view of "original sin", this portrait of human beings shows that we are trusted by God to make decisions that foster the well-being of all people and the creation. That is the meaning of the Hebrew word *shalom*. It is not just an absence of conflict and war, but the presence of equality, compassion, justice, and overall welfare. As I was reminded of this truly biblical message, I began to regain my sense of hope and purpose as one who was shaped by and continues to choose that biblical view of human life.

Today we have made our commitments as Covenant and Community Members to live the life of faith inwardly and outwardly, responding to God's call to serve life and to use the gifts God has given us to enhance life around us and the ministries to which we give ourselves. That very commitment arises out of the inward sense that we, indeed, are trusted by God and entrusted with the care of life around us and our own lives. It is a commitment to the life of love, to the stewardship of life. The lives God has given us are gifts to be used and shared, not grasped and defended as though they belong to us. We are called not to protectionism and material prosperity, but to give our lives for the sake of life. Regardless of how others are choosing to live, this is the way to which Jesus calls us, the way we were created to live. This community of faith was founded out of that vision; that we are to live deliberately the life for which we were created by God and to which we are called by Jesus. That is why membership in this community is not about putting our names on a roll and receiving religious services. It is about committing ourselves to give deliberate attention to our lives in God, and to the lives God created us to live. It is about being in community with others who are working with the same journey of faith in its inward and outward dimensions.

Look at Psalm 8. It clearly says we are trusted and entrusted. First, we are, or should be, awed at how small we are within the vastness of the universe. Out of that sense of humility, then we are filled with wonder that God is even aware of us. More than that, we are created just a little lower than God, and we are given "dominion" over what God has created. This echoes the Genesis 1 creation story, wherein the human being, male and female, are given dominion. The word means stewardship, care-taking, not using and abusing the world for our own gain. Our lives and our relationship with the world around us must be infused with wonder and awe, with humility and sensitivity toward all that God has made. So our commitments today are the way we claim this view of life. We are created good, and entrusted by God with the stewardship of our own lives and the life of God's world. So we can say with Walter Brueggemann, in human beings we trust, in spite of how badly the human world is behaving. In spite of the stories we hear daily of the irresponsibility of human beings, I know that there are unnoticed, untold millions who are living their lives this other, true way. Kaye and I have had the privilege of visiting several countries where we met and learned from those who, out of their faith, are devoted to lives of responsibility, service to others, peace-making, and the bringing of fairness and equality to those at the margins of society. That is what it means to live deliberately as those created by God. And today we have decided to continue to be among them.

Then Jesus reprimands the disciples, yet again, for their lack of understanding of what he is about. Parents are bringing their children to Jesus. They want him to touch them, to bless them. The disciples stand in their way until Jesus tells them to get out of the way and to make way for the children come to him. The kingdom of God belongs to young children. They already know what it is about. And unless we become like them, we cannot enter that kingdom, that way of life that is true life.

As we make our commitments today, we acknowledge that, like the disciples, we do not yet understand what Jesus is about, but we are willing to learn. And we make our commitments to the life of becoming like small children. It is not about returning to our childhood in a sentimentalized way. It is returning to our truest self, the self that is filled with wonder “at the moon and stars that God has made”. The self that trusts life and is not always trying to secure itself, that is open and giving. The self that loves without judging. Young children are not yet prejudiced, are not yet discriminating against this or that person. We teach them those things. Young children like to share and love being of help. Simply put, young children are still close to and open to God within themselves. When we stay close to children, they can help us recover and return to that same child-likeness that is our true self. Some of our inward journey work, I think, is perceiving in ourselves where we are acting and thinking like the disciples, getting in the way of the child within us, the true self that wants to come to Jesus, that already knows what the kingdom of God is about. These are the ways we were socialized to make distinctions and to discriminate, to fear and to grasp our lives. When we perceive these parts of ourselves, understand where they are coming from, then they lose their hold on us. They begin to stand back so that the true self, the child of God in us, can re-emerge.

In a few moments we will share the bread and cup of Jesus. We will come to the table where he offers his life to us. It is our true life, the life of those created and trusted by God, and entrusted with the care of life around us and our own lives, called to serve the needs of others and the creation. It is the true life of the child in us who knows where we come from and to whom we truly belong, who knows what God's kingdom is about—the life of love, of *shalom*. As we have made our commitments to this new life, which is our true life, let us now prepare to receive into ourselves and to share with one another the true life of those created and loved by God eternally.