

December 6, 2015 / Second Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

The Inward and Outward Life of the Community

Malachi 3:1-6 *I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.*

Philippians 1:1-11 *And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best...*

Luke 3:1-6 *...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*

This morning I will look briefly at our three readings, keeping in mind our call to be a community of those committed to the inward and outward life of faith, the life of prayer and service. We are called as a community to have an outward journey of serving the needs of others and of God's creation. We are also called to have a community inward journey of growing in the life of love toward ourselves and one another, as beloved children of God. Both are essential to our true life as human beings created by God.

Our outward journey as a community has to do with understanding where and how God is present and working in the world. Malachi is a prophet serving in the middle of the fifth century BCE. The people of Israel have returned from exile. The temple has been restored and dedicated. Already the worship and social life of the people has disintegrated. There are two major themes in the writings of Israel's prophets. One is the necessity of right worship, that is, worship that goes beyond offerings and sacrifices to the hearts of those who are worshipping, so that they are completely open God. The other theme is that the society of Israel must be characterized by compassion, justice, and peace. Right worship and right living go together.

Through Malachi, God announces the coming of a “messenger of the covenant”, one who will prepare the way for God's very presence in the temple. This messenger will denounce the impurity of Israel's temple worship and the injustice of Israel's social life. The messenger will “bear witness” against specific things. Sorcery—we are not exactly sure what this means, other than abandoning worship of the one God for other kinds of spiritual endeavors. Against adulterers. In the prophets' writings, adultery means infidelity, either in human relationships or in relationship to God. Against those who swear falsely, who lie and manipulate to achieve their own agenda. The messenger will “bear witness” against, or denounce, those who oppress their workers by not paying them a living wage. Against those who oppress the widow and the orphan, those who are most vulnerable, taking away what the elderly and children need to keep them from poverty and hunger and suffering. Against those who “thrust aside” the alien. The “alien” in Hebrew scriptures means the sojourner in the land, the stranger, the immigrant, the resident alien, the refugee. This is because Israel herself was once a stranger, an alien in the land of Egypt. This commandment of hospitality is central to the laws of God. And finally, the messenger will speak against those who do not fear God. This does not mean those who do not go to church, or those who do not affiliate with a religion. It means those who do not live in reverent awe of the sacredness of life and of God's creation.

The outward journey of our community, therefore, is the call to serve the needs of those who are most vulnerable, those who are treated unfairly, those who are hurt and lost, those who are lonely, to welcome the stranger, alien, immigrant, refugee. In other words, if we claim to be Jesus' community, our outward life is shaped by where God is present and working. At the entrance to the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Loretto Community in Kentucky there is a large sign. On it are written the words of Jesus: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” A red line is drawn through the word “stranger”, and above it written in red is the word “immigrant”. That is what Malachi is talking about. The everywhere-present God, the sacred source and power of life, manifests in the lives of human beings when we live in the ways spoken of by Malachi, along with the other

prophets, and by Jesus—justice, peace, compassion, mercy, purity of heart and life. When we are engaged in living outwardly in these ways, as persons, a community of faith, and a society, we experience and know the reality and presence of God. Today we must say clearly that a life lived contrary to this, that promotes hate, fear, exclusion, and violence, cannot bear the name “Christian”.

Turning to the story of John the Baptist in Luke's gospel, we find the same theme, or message. How and where is God present and working in the world? John is pictured by Luke as the one God is sending to prepare the “way of the Lord”. John will point to Jesus, the one who will teach and fully embody (incarnate) what it means to live as human beings the way God created us to live, that is, to LIVE the kingdom, or realm, of God.

Luke begins with a list of political and religious leaders of the day. The Emperor Tiberius. Pontius Pilate, who appears later, at Jesus' trial. Regional rulers acting on behalf of the Roman Empire. And the high priests of the day. We are prepared to hear Luke say that THIS is where it is going to happen, where God will bring in the new day, the new era, in the halls and offices and temples of power. Luke writes, “the word of God came to....” Tiberius Caesar? Philip the Tetrarch? Surely, to the high priests Annas and Caiaphas? No. The word of God comes to this guy John. And where is he? Not where politicians and military leaders wield power. Not in the sanctuaries where the priests hold forth. But to some unknown, strange character out in the boondocks, where nothing ever happens. He is in the wilderness, the desert, the place where one is alone and naked before God. He owns nothing. He has no religious or political status. Yet, it is through John that God will inaugurate the true kingdom—the realm of God in the lives of people.

When John appears, he is, let us say, not dressed for success. Mark's gospel describes him as wearing a wild animal's skin and eating locusts and wild honey. When he starts speaking, he offends the powerful and self-satisfied by telling them they have to change the ways they live because the new day of God's reign is dawning. They have to start living RIGHT NOW the kind of life befitting God's realm. God's message through John is clear and pointed because

John has been in the desert, where one is completely open to God.

We are open to God when we discover and go to that desert place, where we are not distracted by the material possessions, the cacophony of loud and pretentious voices that surround us all the time, where we become inwardly quiet and empty so that we are resonant to God's voice within us. I am not saying that we are to run off to the mountain forests or the western wilderness. The story of John says something to us about the importance of solitude, silence, and the letting go of our distractions and attachments so that we can really be attuned to what is true and valuable and of worth, so that we can "hear" God's voice in our own lives. The reason we as members of this community practice silence, alone and together, is so that we can enter that "desert" where we are able to hear the voice of God amidst all the superficial, distracting, and false voices that fill our society and world, and which we have allowed to fill us, as well. In the desert we are able to discern where and how God is present and working in the world, thus where we are to be.

Last Thursday afternoon I sat in the Lodge before the meeting of my mission group. It was my turn to lead the meeting and to share my accountability report. This would be my last leading, my last reporting as a member of the Chrysalis Mission Group. I have a habit of being early for things, like our meetings. I like to have time to prepare the room and to sit in quietness for a bit before others arrive. That afternoon I lit our candle and watched as it burned in the late-afternoon sunlight that fell across the table. In the quietness, I became aware of how important to my life it has been to meet with others over these thirteen years, in mission group or other meetings, to be together in silence so that we can listen. Listen to our own hearts. Listen to one another. Listen for what we believe God seeks to do through us. This is one way that we go to the desert, where we can be open to what God is saying to us, where God is leading us. This is how we together make our lives transparent to God.

This brings us to our inward journey, as a community and as mission groups. **Our community inward journey goes by the name of LOVE.** I found our reading from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi to be a continuation of the

1 Thessalonians reading from last Sunday. Paul writes: "And this is my prayer, that your love may *overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best*, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." (1:10-11) In Thessalonians, Paul prayed that the God would "make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you." (3:12) Now, in Philippians, Paul prays that the love that abides in that community might "overflow" with knowledge and full insight. The verb is the same in both cases (*perisseuo*). What a profound and wonderful thing Paul is saying! The love that abides in the community, which is the very love of God made known and revealed in Jesus, has the nature of inexhaustibility. It is never exhausted, never completely understood or lived out. It is love for one another that is not only affection, but respecting and honoring one another as brothers and sisters in God. But in Philippians, Paul is adding wisdom and insight to love. What we understand love to be and how we are to love is always in need of growth in learning and insight. If we live on the basis of having all the answers, we are closed off to love itself. If we come to the community full of our own ideas of how things should be and push that agenda, we do not yet understand love as the primary work of the community. If we are not open to getting new insights and understanding, we are closing ourselves off to God. If we have reduced Christian faith to a few ideas or doctrines to which we hold vigorously and press upon others, then we are not the community of Jesus living out his commandment to love one another and to grow in that love (John 13:31-35).

The words Paul uses here are dynamic. Knowledge (*epignosis*) is not just knowing about things, having a head full of ideas. It means full comprehension, and that is something we never fully attain. Full insight (*aisthesei*) means wisdom, judgment, perceiving the deeper meaning of something. That, too, is ongoing, never-completed. To love in this way means that everyday we open to learning, to seeing what we have not yet seen or perceived, to be humble enough to always grow in our understanding of what is needed.

These words are very important to us as a community in this time of transition. As I am preparing to leave, you are to continue and be even more intentional in this growth in love for one another. It is a love that is not only genuine affection as brothers and sisters in God's love, but also a love that remains open to learning, to discerning, to understanding what is needed now and in the days ahead.

The outward journey of the community of Jesus is shaped and directed by God's own presence and loving activity in the world—compassion, justice, peace-making. The inward journey of the community is shaped by the living out of God's own love toward one another, and growing all the time in our understanding and insight of what that love means and where it is leading us. If we keep these things clear in our hearts and minds, and in our working with the disciplines that guide us, we will be able to discern, as well, the false voices of religion these days, which are promoting an outward life of exclusion, rejection, and violence, and stirring up an inward life of fear, hate, and self-preservation rather than self-giving for the sake of others.

The life to which this community has felt called from its beginning is really quite simply put. It is the inward journey of prayer and the outward journey of service. It is the inward journey of loving one another and the outward journey of expressing that love in and toward the world. It is simply put, but, as we know, challenging to live, for it calls for continuing growth in insight, wisdom, and understanding. It is a journey that is never fully completed, but it is the journey of our true selves as God created us to be. The journey is, indeed, our true home.