

January 10, 2016 / First Sunday after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

The Priority of the Inward Journey

Isaiah 43:1-7 *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned;
and the flame shall not consume you.*

In the beautiful words of Isaiah 43, God speaks through the prophet a message of comfort in the midst of Israel's time of exile. There have been words of judgment, as the people learned what had brought this suffering and disgrace upon them--their own injustice and lack of compassion, their worship that was empty of right living. Now, however, the prophet speaks words of divine comfort. I created you. Do not be afraid. I have called you by name. When you pass through waters, I will continue to be with you. And through raging rivers, you will not be overwhelmed. Even when you walk through fiery times, you will not be burned. No flame can consume you. And again, words that resound through our scriptures – Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

When I read these words this past week, in preparation for today, I immediately thought – What IS it that keeps us from falling into fear? What is it that enables us to live through turbulent times, as persons and as a community of faith, and not be overwhelmed? How is it that we are able to go through fiery experiences of hurt or loss, and not be burned or consumed by the flames?

The answer came immediately to me – It is what we call the inward journey. The silence, the prayer, the study, the growth in self-understanding and self-acceptance, the reawakening to our relationship with God...all that we mean by prayer, the time and attention given to our inward connectedness to God. That is what sustains and leads us through the challenges, difficulties, fears, and times of change.

These words must be heard deeply and clearly in these days when those who are calling themselves Christian are inciting fear and anxiousness, playing on people's insecurities, and creating an atmosphere of hate and violence. These words need to be heard by each of us within our own lives so that we know how important it is that we keep ourselves rooted and grounded in the Source of life itself, in God. That is what the inward

journey is about. It is prayer in the broadest and deepest sense. And it is what gives birth to and energy to the outward journey of serving life through the various callings and gifts God gives us. It is what keeps us centered, guided, energized, and hopeful when it seems there are no reasons for hope.

Coming to the close of my time with you as minister and having completed over forty years of ministry with congregations, I have been in a reminiscent and reflective mood. I would like to share with you this morning the path of the inward journey in my life. Perhaps this will encourage you to reflect on your own life with regard to your inward journey.

Three early experiences stand out with regard to my inward life, though I am sure there were many more. My mother always had a place in the house where she would sit quietly at some point during the day. By her was a table with a lamp, and with a Bible and a copy of *The Secret Place* or *The Upper Room*, two popular daily meditation booklets. I would see her sitting there, reading or with her hands in her lap, her eyes closed. It was only later in life that I understood the impact it had on me in my early years. Just that quiet presence, that faithful spiritual devotion.

Each summer, beginning in junior high school, I would spend a week in church camp, at the newly-acquired camp grounds of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), called Craig Springs. It is an old mineral springs resort nestled against the mountains not far from the West Virginia line. Each morning before breakfast, we campers were instructed to take our Bibles and our notebooks, and go to a place outdoors and spend about fifteen minutes by ourselves. It was called "Morning Watch". I would go to a favorite tree, sit on the damp ground, and lean my back against the trunk. I loved those times. I did the prescribed reading, but mostly sat in silence, my face warmed by the morning sun. Being alone and quiet in nature became a central part of my inward journey. It opened in me the awareness of being part of the whole of the creation, in relation to everything.

The third experience had to do with my life in the churches where my father served as minister. Most spiritually formative were my junior and senior high school years at First Christian Church in Roanoke. The worship, singing in the choir, and times when I would be alone in that old, warmly dark sanctuary—these moments resonated with my innermost self in ways I could not really articulate or fully understand. Looking back, I suppose I had always been a mystic, that is, someone who felt the presence, mystery, and reality of God

in a direct and wordless way. I think we are all mystics in that sense. We are born that way, and as young children are very close to God.

My inward life took a new turn when I was in college. I began plunging myself into theological studies, and separated myself from church life. The inward importance of “loving God with the mind” opened up in me, and never left. For this reason, it is very important that one of our spiritual disciplines has to do with regular study of the Bible and other sources for our faith. Questioning, seeking, studying, learning, growing in understanding—it is another way of loving God.

The Vietnam War became increasingly part of my awareness, and I faced the inward work of deciding how I would respond. Here is another important reason for our inward journey—it prepares us to make decisions that harmonize with our faith and our truest self. It was clear to me from the beginning that I could not enter the military and that I was opposed to war in any form, on the basis of my faith and the person I knew myself to be. It was my inward journey—though I did not know the term back then—that prepared me for all of this and that helped me navigate the troubled and troubling waters of becoming a conscientious objector, and encountering the indifference of the church, if not its rejection. During that time, this community became a place of refuge and support, particularly through the Lodge of the Fisherman coffee house.

Kaye and I moved to Boston, MA, after graduation, where I began my two years of alternative service at Boston Children's Hospital Medical Center. It was a period of disaffection from the church. My work with children at the hospital, learning from them as well as helping them, became the most deeply formative spiritual experience of my life. When I entered seminary two years later, I looked back with gratitude that I had not gone straight into graduate studies, but had had those two years of experience with the children and the staff of the cardiac medical and surgical division of the hospital. It gave my studies a focus and “worldliness,” you might say, that I would not have had otherwise. I believed that church and religion had to mean something, to me and to others, in terms of real life. I was and have continued to be impatient with religion and church when they are occupied with their own perpetuation and status.

Based on my experience, I came to the end of seminary not expecting that a church would be interested in me because I had been a conscientious objector. I received a call, however, from a small Disciples congregation outside of Lexington KY that was interested in me precisely BECAUSE I had been a CO. This gave me a jolt in my spirit that could only

have come from God. I had found a small rural congregation with a history of compassion and concern for justice that was looking for a minister who was serious about the church really being Jesus' community!

After a year or so of work, however, I was burning out. It occurred to me that it was time to learn something about prayer! So I took my first three-day silent retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemane, a little over an hour from Lexington. It was Thomas Merton's monastery, and Merton had been one of the influences in my thinking about war and peace and Christian discipleship. It was on my retreats at Gethsemane that I truly began to develop an intentional spiritual life, an inward journey. And it was during these years that I reconnected with Bev Cosby and the Church of the Covenant, and found in the life and histories of the Church of the Saviour and Church of the Covenant the language and spiritual framework that made sense to me. Here were two protestant communities that took seriously what it means to follow Jesus, and did not shy away from putting specific spiritual practices down on paper and committing to them. It was the kind of spiritual life I had always longed for and thought the church was really called to be. It would be many more years before my life unfolded in a way that brought me here, to be part of a community that takes the inward journey seriously as the wellspring of the outward journey of service and ministry.

I must mention, at least briefly, how my study of and learning from Zen Buddhism helped me to see dimensions of my own spiritual tradition in a brighter and truer light. I was introduced to the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, in fact, through the Sisters of Loretto Community in Kentucky, where I made many life and soul-saving retreats through the years. In later times, I have just begun to learn from the heart of Islam through my Sufi Muslim friend and brother Shaykh Ahmed abdur Rashid and his community. Learning from other spiritual traditions is neither a threat to nor abandoning one's own tradition and faith. It only deepens and enriches. And I have learned, as well, that the major faith traditions have the same heart and essence—compassion, peaceableness, and a concern for justice. Anything other than that is false religion.

Through all the years, it was attention to my inward life, shabby and confused as it was at times, that rooted and grounded and guided me in meaningful ways. There has never been a lack of outward journey, of action. Far from it. What I have learned, however, is that the inward gives integrity, strength, purpose, and goodness to what we do outwardly. It is through our inward work—our prayer, reflection, silence, study, and so

forth—that we deal with the things that often fill our actions, relationships, and words with anger or fear or ego-centeredness. It is through our attention to the inward that we discover what WE are called, out of our relationship with God, to be and do, not what others tell us we should be and do. It is what the Quaker writer Parker Palmer calls “letting your life speak” to you, and listening to your life. It is by our attention to our inward life that we cultivate and nurture the “Island of Peace within the soul” that Howard Thurman talked about. It is how we go through waters and rivers and fire, and are not overwhelmed or burned. Instead, even our hardest experiences deepen our gratitude, our hope, our joy, our love.

I trust that this community will continue to value and practice faithfully the inward journey. In your own lives, each day. In your mission groups. In this service of worship. In these days that are so filled with loud and callous voices inciting hate, fear, violence, and doing it absurdly in the name of Jesus, it is crucial that there are communities grounded in the kind of inwardness, the kind of silence, that nurtures awareness, peaceableness, compassion, love, and the fearlessness that comes from truly knowing God and our relationship with and in God. My experience has been that it is easiest to neglect our inward journey and its work. And yet when we do that, something essential is lost. We become less the channels of what God is seeking to do through us, and more lost in activism that does not carry with it the redemptive love and power of God's spirit. The inward journey is our spiritual compass and wellspring.

The journey is never over, inwardly, or outwardly. I continue it even as I prepare to leave this place. It is what you have deepened in me, something that one does not “retire” from. It is our ongoing journey of faith, and we are always together in it.