

January 23, 2022
Epiphany 3-C
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

Corinthians 12: 12-31

Luke 4: 14-21

This mornings' readings are an interesting collection of public reading of scripture in Nehemiah and Luke, and Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians on how we all make up the body of Christ, and all parts of the body are essential.

This Nehemiah passage takes place after the people of Israel have returned from the Babylonian exile, sometime after 537 BCE. It is also the time of Ezra the priest, which of course is another great book of the Old Testament set in this period. The passage this morning tells the story of the people gathered by the Water Gate and calling for the Law of Moses to be read. Now you have to remember that this was a time of great renewal for the people of Israel. When they were defeated by Nebuchadnezzar, the great Babylonian King, in 597 BCE, and the nobles and many people were carted off to slavery in Babylon for 60 years, the priests and people attributed this to God's wrath with the people because they had fallen away from the Law.

It seems as though the people had learned their lesson and were hungry for the Law of God. For faithful Jews, keeping the law was not only their personal salvation, it was the salvation of their state. The Law showed them when they broke relationship

with God, when they 'sinned'because, as we know, the best definition of sin is that which breaks relationship with God. The people of Israel had a much more heightened understanding of corporate sin and how it affected them all and their relationship with God. We have more of a tendency to think of individual sin. When the people heard Ezra reading from the Law, they began to weep. The scripture doesn't really say whether it was from joy at hearing the holy words once again in their native land, or from conviction about the sins of Israel---maybe it was a little bit of both. I've often thought that my presentation wasn't too good because nobody wept when I read and preached....except maybe when they were wondering desperately when it would be over!

It is also interesting to note how when the Law was read, all the people stood. In some sense this is the precursor to how we stand when the gospel is processed and read in a Eucharistic service. Did you ever wonder why? Of course standing is a sign of respect. In our civil life court proceedings start with all rising when the judge comes in, and there are other examples. But the custom of rising for the gospel goes way back. We stand for the reading of the gospel because the gospels are about the life of Christ, so it is symbolic of Christ coming into the midst of the people – we stand because Christ is in our midst. In Eucharistic services we have recovered this tradition of standing during the Eucharistic Prayer for the same reason, though the old custom of kneeling was also representative of honoring the Christ in our midst.

And of course we read that the priests 'gave the sense' of the reading. Even in the 6th Century before Christ, the priests gave a sermon! And I love how this passage ends.

Ezra, seeing the weeping of the people, tells them to stop weeping but to rejoice in the Lord and feast and send food to those in need, ‘for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ Isn’t it interesting that joy should be our strength! Do you feel the joy of the Lord these days? It is hard, I know, but there is something to be said for contemplating on this grace and goodness of joy, and practicing it, if you will!

In the gospel lesson this morning we have the account of another public reading at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in his home synagogue. He reads from the prophet Isaiah and claims the passage for himself. In Jesus’ reading of this Isaiah passage he sets the stage for his whole ministry, but very few understood this. Jesus reads a passage from Isaiah that foretells the coming of the Messiah and what he will bring. The language can be understood at a very material, literalistic viewpoint – good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. Can you imagine how the Jews of Palestine at the time, under Roman domination might have heard this – especially to ‘let the oppressed go free’.

Yet all of Jesus’ ministry was really about another ‘kingdom’ and not about re-establishing the Davidic kingdom. And you know how all through his three-year ministry the disciples, the general population, and ultimately the Sanhedrin and Pilate still misunderstood him...until he was crucified based on that misunderstanding. The blinders were on and they could not hear him calling to the spiritually poor, the spiritually captive, the spiritually blind, the spiritually oppressed – yet, that is what he

came to show us. This was 'the way' and why the early Christians were called followers of 'the way' long before they were called Christians.

So I have just done what Jesus did, I read scripture and commented on it, though he was much briefer in his comment (!).....well, until we get the rest of the story next week where he comments more and is then run out of town. The whole practice of reading and commentating on scripture, which we in the church take for granted, is interesting if not odd from an outsider's point of view. But this is how we make these holy words live – by reading and studying the context, the original languages, the intent as best we can understand, and then how the timeless wisdom might apply to us today. Even odder, in the Christian tradition of *Lectio Divina*, we actually pray and meditate on these holy words to ground us in wisdom.

Of course it is hard, in one sermon, to give the sense of why we do this and why it has been done for thousands of years, but I'll try to give a little perspective. That it has been done for so long by so many people the world over, and for which there has been such strong emotional response like the weeping and joy we hear of in Nehemiah, must have something to say for it. At the very basic level, it is for us, like for Jews before us, the telling of a story that we claim for our own. There has always been something about wanting to know who you are and where you come from. Witness the popularity of the DNA diagnostic tools to find your ancestry and television shows like "Finding Your Roots." And for us, though we have little in common with Jews from the 5th century before Christ, the story becomes our story because it reveals something about our growing understanding of our relationship with God.

For us as Christians, the Hebrew scriptures become the context for understanding Christ, and how Christ went beyond the Law and the Prophets to show us a deeper way to be connected to God and live a life more alive and awake to the beauty and power of the Holy all around us. And in reading and re-reading and having an ongoing conversation with these holy words we are constantly formed and reformed and steeped in the light of Holy Wisdom.

As you go on in life, you begin to realize the goodness and strength common words begin to take on. There is something about the Lord's Prayer, the well-known parts of the Book of Common Prayer, the Sanctus, the Gloria, and so on, that take on a depth that goes beyond the mere words. And in sharing them together we feel connected to one another and to God. This 'holy weave' can also be experienced in well-known hymns that can bind us together.

One of the things I feel sad about in our common life in this country is that as church attendance has dropped, people have less in common. One of the few hymns that hangs on in popular culture is of course, Amazing Grace, and maybe The Battle Hymn of the Republic. But there use to be so much more. The World War II generation, regardless of which church they came from, could all rise and sing 'Abide with Me' with no hymnal in front of them. It wasn't too long ago that my parents and Doug's mom and sister and I could gather around the piano while Doug's mom played old familiar hymns and we could sing at least the first verse from memory, and even in our various parts. That didn't just happen, but came from years of singing together. I suppose this could be written off as simply nostalgic or sentimental, which, to be sure, it

partly is; but there is something more there too. We definitely need more things that remind us of our common bonds, even if, or especially if it is at an emotional level!

In our fractious times when we are constantly manipulated by the media into tribal camps, where outrage and vilification seem to be our only common bonds (think about that!), we would be well served to meditate on the lesson from Corinthians this morning where Paul exhorts us to understand that we are all part of the same body with different gifts, and all are necessary and have their function. And in fact, for us, it is not just so that we have are a cohesive organization, but it is because we become the Body of Christ for the world – we bear Christ to the world.

I've been compiling and writing the annual report in preparation for the annual meeting next week, and each year I am deeply reminded of the many parts of the body that make us whole and one, and become the body of Christ in our community. And in all our work, when we all do it as if we were serving Christ himself, we will be further knit together in common cause and understand ourselves as one body in Christ. As Jesus said to his disciples when talking about their arrival in the heavenly kingdom, 'I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was hungry and you fed me.' To which they responded, when did we see you hungry, naked, thirsty,' and he responded, 'whenever you did it to the least of these brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.' As we say at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer:

"We break this bread to share in the body of Christ"

"We who are many, are one body, for we all share in the one bread"