

Scripture Readings and Sermon

January 23, 2022 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Nehemiah 8:1, 5-6, 8-10

After a disaster, the question is often posed, "How do we start again?". For those who returned to Jerusalem at the end of the exile, this question must have been at the top of their mind. We have only two books from that period, Ezra and Nehemiah. When Nehemiah heard that even after the exiles began returning home, Jerusalem was still in shambles, he requested leave to go and help "start again". After rebuilding the walls, Nehemiah turned to Ezra to rededicate the land to God. This passage comes from that re-dedication. Scholars argue that this section chronologically occurs after Chapter 8 in Ezra. To truly appreciate the story, the reader must imagine what it would be like to finally hear the word of God after being in exile so long. For some, they were born in exile or too young to remember but, for others, it was a hope of a memory they thought might never come true.

Nehemiah 8:10 "do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

When have you felt guilty or ashamed of something?

How did it feel when someone pointed it out?

What did it feel like when you were forgiven?

Did you experience an the joy of a great weight being lifted?

How do you react when you know that God has totally forgiven you?

Have you found the joy of the LORD to be your strength?

Commentary on Luke 4:14-21

If you attend a synagogue today, a large scroll will be removed from a cabinet. The scroll will open where the last person finished reading. While in modern synagogues, this is usually one large scroll, at the time of Jesus the local synagogue had only a few scrolls depending on their size. Along with the Torah, Isaiah was one of the most popular. When Jesus was given the scroll, the scroll was already rolled to the 49th Chapter. Jesus picks up the reading at verse 8 and 9. It was fitting, therefore, that on the day he is back from his time in the wilderness, that this passage from this scroll was to be read on that day. After reading the scroll, the people waited for powerful sermon since everybody else had "praised" his teachings. Instead, he proclaims that the Spirit has been given to him to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor! To proclaim that, after years of waiting, Isaiah was speaking about this hometown boy is scandalous. He has gone from teaching about God's message to being the Messenger of God. How would we feel if a member of the community made such a proclamation in church?

Luke 4:21 "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Have you ever been disappointed by the failure of someone to keep their promises?

Can you understand how some feel that God has failed to keep God's promises?

Have we come to expect that the second coming will happen after we die?

Have we given up on God's promises?

What does it feel like when a promise is fulfilled? Do we call it an unexpected miracle?

Do we expect the scripture to be fulfilled in our hearing today?

Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Continuing the lesson from last week, Christians are given a variety of gifts because they are meant to work together in community. Paul uses the image of a body to describe how the community is bound together and interdependent. Since there is one Spirit which binds us into one body, there is no distinction based on race, culture, or economic status. While this is a very familiar

passage, the implication are difficult to hear. Whether it was during the Civil War or the World Wars, much of our history is filled with Christians fighting Christians. Even social divisions such as race or immigration status divide the Body of Christ. There are a number of justifiable social reasons for these divisions but this passage seems to challenge all of them. Paul calls us to take seriously the claim that we are all children of God and that Jesus Christ died for us all. If we are failing to include "all" in our understanding of "all", we are reminded that we have all fallen short of the glory of God. For those times that we have fallen short, Jesus forgives but also calls us to do better.

1 Corinthians 12:26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

What does it mean to be in community?

Have we forgotten that we are only as strong as our weakest member?

Do we value individual achievement at the price of community health?

Do sports heroes actually make the team better in the long run?

When a member suffers, do we even pay attention?

What does this say about our community and our church?

Reflection on Nehemiah 8:1, 5-6, 8-10, Luke 4:14-21, 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Sermon "One suffers all suffer"

In a culture that focuses on individual rights and freedoms, it is difficult to fully grasp the implication of Paul's statement to the Corinthians about community. The recent pandemic, however, has highlighted the simply truth that when one part of the community suffers then all suffer. It is as true for the spread of a virus as it is for the global supply chain. Since 9/11, globalization is a fact of life. From terrorism around the world to a global financial crash in 2008 to the current pandemic, an isolationist view of individualism is no longer a luxury we can afford. If one suffers then all suffer together as Paul points out.

Now more than ever the Body of Christ needs to "bring good news to the poor.. proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." While there are those who like the people of Nazareth may reject the message, there are still more who are suffering and need that good news. One of the reasons the people rejected Jesus' message was because of their familiarity with him and his family. They thought they knew him so they did not take Jesus seriously and those that did were offended. The same can be said today. The message of Jesus has been wrapped in "majority right" moral agenda or medieval traditions so long that the newer generation no longer take it serious. The faith that sustained a generation through the great depression and World War II has been replaced by institutional loyalty and societal apathy. While more and more people are suffering, the church is trying to keep from tearing itself apart over issues other than the good news. Even when the Word is proclaimed, the people have stopped listening. We are not that different from Jesus' audience in Nazareth. And yet, it is only Jesus who can truly relieve the suffering that afflicts the world.

It is only when we leave our legalism and moral judgment behind that we can find life in the Spirit. Now is not the time to grieve but rather it is the time to find our strength in the joy of the Lord. A joy that leaves the ninety-nine to find the one and then rejoices when the one is found. A joy that runs to meet the prodigal son and wipes every tear from their eyes. A joy only found in the pure love of God in Jesus for all God's children. For when one of the children are suffering, then God grieves but when one lifts their heart in amazing grace all of heaven joins in. Now is the time to share that love to those who are poor in spirit, captive to dead traditions, blinded by old prejudices, and oppressed by a survival of the fittest world. Now is the time to acknowledge that despite our differences, when one suffers all suffer but when one finds the joy of the Lord then all find a renewed strength.