

Sermon: Epiphany 3

The Rev. Mike Wernick

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Year C

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

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Our lectionary stories begin with a reading from the book of Nehemiah... in which Ezra plays the prominent role... Ezra has his own book... but the two books are as different from earlier books like Samuel and Kings... as are from the times they narrate... Ezra and Nehemiah are both leaders of the Judean community... and representatives of the Persian rulers who sent them to provide spiritual and political leadership for the struggling Jerusalem community... Nehemiah is the governor... and Ezra is a priest and scribe... the two of them rarely appear together... and there is even some speculation that they may have been active at different times...

But in this story... they gather with the people... not at the Temple... but at the Water Gate... the entrance to the city... Ezra reads from the Book of the Law of Moses... a possible reference to how one entered Judaism... and this passage emphasizes that it's not just the priests... Levites... or even just the men... but all the people... men and women... who listen and seek interpretation and understanding... they gather on the first day of the seventh month... which we know today as Rosh Hashanah... the beginning of a new year... for a rededication to follow God's Law...

Patricia Tull... who's a professor of Jewish Scriptures at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary wrote: the occasion could have been marked by dismay... as it was for King Josiah... when he first heard the words from the Book of the Law found in the Temple... he tore his clothes in mourning... because he recognized that the nation was neglecting God's divine commands... and he feared God's wrath...

Instead... when Ezra's people begin to weep... he and others tell them instead to rejoice... *because this day is holy to the Lord*... and rather than fasting... they're told to feast and share their food... as we will later this morning... because *the joy of the Lord is your strength*...

The story in today's Epistle... is one of being pointed to a broader perspective... because the church is intended to give us a taste of the final reconciliation that God promises... Paul calls the church to start acting that way... so although many congregations are very homogenous... although Sunday morning is said to be the most segregated time of the week... diversity within the church is not a problem to be avoided... but a sign of grace... and our willingness to let the Spirit work in and through us... an expression of how deeply we belong to and need each other...

And the story in today's Gospel... takes place just after Jesus has returned from being tested in the wilderness... the Spirit rests heavy upon him... and he rejects the accusatory and divisive ways of evil... he returns to Galilee... to his hometown congregation... and teaches... and the first thing he reads... is Isaiah 61... a reading of restoration and reconciliation... a reading about Jubilee...

Jubilee happened every 50th year... it was to be set aside as a time for liberation and restoration when all Israelites would return to their ancestral land... those who became poor were not to be taken advantage of... or taken as slaves... but rather treated as hired hands and released during this year... and let's remember that Isaiah was written 800 years before Jesus was born... it was interpreted in first century Judaism as a reference to the restoration that Jubilee envisioned...

What stands out for me... is that our two churches... have our own book of the law... a covenant... and letter of agreement with me... which prescribes how we live together... that talks about our relationship and our expectations for each other...

What stands out for me... is that our two churches are made into one body through the Spirit... and that each congregation needs the other... for the gifts we bring... and for the whole to which we contribute... what stands out for me... is that Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah... that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him... and proclaims that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing... and the Spirit that's here helps us... but what also stands out for me... is that there may still be more letting go... more giving up that we need to do...

When Joel and I talked about my going to seminary... we did it in a partial vacuum... I did at least... there was a detail about paying for Patrick's college... and when I stopped working... so I could attend school full-time... and when Joel had to absorb the loss of my income... that meant he could also not share in those college expenses any more... and what that also meant... was that his former wife began subsidizing my seminary education... it took me a while to see that... to realize that... but Ann was right... my partner's former wife was helping to pay for my seminary education... so by default... and really without prior agreement... the circumstances of which she was a part... required her to give up something... so I could have something... it was a form of Jubilee...

Ruth Anne Reese... who's a Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary wrote... we can imagine a hometown congregation filled with all the characters of Jesus' village... rich and poor... sighted and blind... oppressed and oppressor... and wonder what this liberation might look like for them... did they anticipate the good news would come first to the poor... the prisoner... and the oppressed... or did they think it would come first for those with inside connections... the rich and the religious... would they hear it and receive it as good news to be shared with all... especially the vulnerable... or would they hear it and hope that it's a message for them alone... are they hoping that as Jesus' hometown they'll receive special favor... do they serve themselves... or does their hope extend to the whole world... are they willing to give up something too...

In the four years since I've been here... some people have left... as we have rejected ancient tribalism and have embraced a broader theology... a broader practice... some have left... there are simply those for whom change is difficult... or maybe there were things they simply didn't want to give up... and so they left seeking them... I don't think that's wrong... or bad... but there are consequences to the choices we make... both individually and collectively...

So as we conduct our Annual Meeting today... as we start our own Rosh Hashanah... as we continue our story... it's my prayer that we can rededicate ourselves to the Gospel spoken and heard... and that we prayerfully consider... what's crucial to our journey... what's neutral but may seem otherwise... like whether we have wax or oil candles... and what other changes might still need to be made...

And do we mourn and weep these changes... or celebrate and share what we have with others... I pray it's the latter... and that we continue to ask how the Spirit can fill and empower us for this prophetic work... for the ministries we embrace... and for the light of Christ we bring to those we meet... who may not yet know about God's radical grace and forgiveness in Christ Jesus... Holy God... strengthen us for this work... and make it so... Amen.

Mike+