

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 Psalm 19 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a Luke 4:14-21

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD.*

If we were to paint with a broad brush, and not be especially sensitive to details, we might find that today's readings are very relevant to our gathering today for this particular annual parish meeting. Our first text, as you heard Shelly read, was from the Old Testament Book of Nehemiah, and is about a historic gathering of the people of God. You may remember that some 600 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of Jerusalem came under attack from the Babylonian Empire. The city was first under siege, then overrun, and then destroyed. And many of its Judean inhabitants, all those influential enough to cause the Babylonians a problem anyway, were marched off into exile in that foreign land. The city, including the ruins of Solomon's famous temple, was left to scavengers and squatters. The Judeans weren't plagued by a pandemic, but they were indeed displaced from their normal lives and normal habits of worship. They made the best they could of their situation, but longed to return to their homeland and their church.

And, as empires rise and fall, Babylon was providentially conquered by Persians under Cyrus the king, who decided it would be a good thing to send those Judeans back to Jerusalem and let them rebuild it into a profitable Persian possession. So, some fifty years after their exile, they came back to Jerusalem and Bethlehem and Jericho and all those familiar Judean places. And they began rebuilding. Rebuilding their buildings and also their society and their religion. They came out of cautionary hiding and gathered once more, intent on being a restored people with God's help. So, the governor Nehemiah invited everyone to listen to the scribe Ezra read aloud from the Torah scrolls. Everyone was invited, not just the estimated three percent of the population which could read and write. And not just the men, but the women, too! In a show of solidarity, they all came to the grounds of the restored temple (the western wall of which still stands today) and listened for several hours that morning to a reading of God's teachings through their history. Some scholars say that the old stories were especially edited for this occasion, as far back as the stories of creation and the patriarchs. But much of the shared text was about the laws and rituals believed to have been given by God to Moses. And when they heard all this, the people wept.

The text of our reading doesn't say exactly why the people wept. It might have been from sorrow, or it might have been from joy. Or it might have been both at the same time, in that paradoxical way human emotions express themselves, but they certainly were touched by the experience, the experience of being back together again, back in some control of their own destinies, and back together again in the presence of the Lord. When we are back together like this, in our worship space, I too am a bit overcome, I too am unsure whether it is in sorrow for the people and the time we have lost, or for joy at seeing your faces in 3D again. But I do recognize my emotional and spiritual experience as a gift from God's Holy Spirit, filling me with awe and wonder. And I wonder if you have noticed it, too. In those days, Ezra the priest and scribe told the people not to weep mournfully, but to celebrate God's holiness, not to be grieved, but to eat, drink, care for those less fortunate, to find their strength in God, and (in so many words) to dance for joy.

Now, this worship space of ours isn't quite like the venerable Jerusalem temple, but I hope you can see the process of restoration here, and that it brings you joy, too. Thanks to many volunteers, and some paid contractors, even during this time when the pandemic sought to defeat us, we have

repainted, repaired, and replaced many things: from the chimney to the mailbox, from the roof to the outdoor bench, from the gardens to the outdoor railings, from the lighting of the church to the lighting of the tower, and so on, and so on. And when we gather here to worship, to pray, or just to share a few minutes in fellowship, we are the benefactors of those who cared enough to do this work. And we are the joyful benefactors of the God who inspired them to make the effort. Honestly, it overwhelms me. And I hope that when our Lectors stand before you and read from the scriptures, like Ezra did all those centuries ago, that you may find renewed strength and joy in their message.

And the message we heard Susan read this morning from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is also so appropriate for our annual meeting. Like the Christians to whom Paul had preached in the Greek city of Corinth, across the bay from Athens, we gather to hear the Gospel message. We gather as members of the Body of Christ, with diverse gifts, abilities, and callings. Yet we are all one in the Lord, one member as beloved by God as any other, each with its own ministry to continue the work of Jesus. Each visited by the Holy Spirit and given life and power that it might join others in being the passionate presence of Christ. And in our gathering together, Paul reminds us that we are 'the body of Christ and individually members of it'; the foot cannot truthfully say, 'because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', nor can the ear say, 'because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body.' The members of the body do their work in harmony; their wholeness and efficacy depend on it. The members ought care for one another, for if one suffers, they all suffer with it, just as 'when one is honored, all rejoice with it.'

When we gather as Christ's own Body to do ministries which will glorify God's eternal dream, we need all the talents and unique abilities we can get! Everyone who takes the time to participate in this effort is a valuable member of that Body. In the Sacraments we share, like our weekly Eucharist, and weddings like that of LeeAnne and Steve last September, we bring our intentions to where the rubber really meets the road. And the more the merrier, the more the stronger, the more the wiser. From the quilt guild to the vestry, from those who take on coffee hour to those who read the scriptures, from ushers to camera operators, from Evangelist editors to counters and all the other ministries of this parish, the unique gifts and talents we discover through the Holy Spirit pave the way for the fulfillment of God's dream. And I hope that today you will celebrate them, and join me in giving thanks to God for all our members. And as we begin to re-gather and restore, like those historic Judeans, I plan to dance all the way through this coming year. Shall we dance together?

And this dance is not ours alone, BTW. We will gather this afternoon at 2 O'clock with friends, neighbors, and others in a service of Christian unity, held this year at the Presbyterian Church just down the street. We will pray together, sing together, and hear God's word, and we will earnestly seek the revelation of our calling as Christians in this community. For our faith and our cause are common to us all, despite historical and doctrinal difference. No one member of this Christian community ought to presume that it is not a vital organ in the Body, nor that it has no need of the others. When one member suffers, we share in the distress; when one member is competent in ministry, we all share in the value. Faithfulness is the vocation of all; encouragement is the task of Christian fellowship. Paul writes, 'Strive for the greater gifts', by which he means those achievements which are amplified by our common cooperation, those missions which benefit from our work together in Christ's name. Pray for Christian unity, for the wisdom and strength revealed through harmony, and please join us this afternoon if you are able. The Bill's game doesn't start until 6:15. Amen.