

Sunday, January 27, 2019

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

I Corinthians 12:12-31

Luke 4:14-21

Equal Before God

We continue in this season of Epiphany to focus upon the person of Jesus as we learn more about his purpose and who he was, is and can be to all people. We remember the story of the Wise Men's visit and gifts given to Jesus. We also recall Jesus' baptism and how Jesus was recognized as God's Son and how in our story last week he enabled the wedding banquet to continue as he turned water into wine. Our story about Jesus today has him doing something that he had done most of his life and that is entering the synagogue as was his custom. And there he stood up to read one of sacred scrolls from Isaiah.

This story is reflective of the tradition of reading aloud the scriptures as set out generations before. Nehemiah records the sacred day when after having been in exile, they Israelites returned to their land. They rebuilt the temple and to celebrate all the people assembled before the Water Gate. There the Book of the Law of Moses was brought out by the priest Ezra and it was read before the assembly. For the entire morning Ezra read aloud and the people listened attentively and they stood and listened. Ezra then praise God and everyone responded, "Amen. Amen." They bowed down and worshiped God with their faces to the ground. Governor Nehemiah, Ezra the priest and scribe and the Levites addressed the people and told them of the significance of the day. It was deemed a sacred day-not a day to mourn or weep but to celebrate.

After they finished listening to the word of God spoken aloud, they ate and drank with everyone present. They were reminded that their strength was in the joy of the Lord. They were to celebrate the joy that they found in the Lord as they were able to freely worship at the synagogue. And they did.

In the tradition of what was done at the time of Nehemiah, Jewish customs continued to be shared. Many years later, Jesus went into the synagogue of his home town and there he looked at the leaders whom he knew since childhood. He wanted to read and so was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolled it and found the place Isaiah 61:1-2 which laid out his life's purpose. He finished reading it, rolled it up again, gave it to the attendant and sat down. Everyone focused upon him and wondered what this man, Jesus would say next as his reputation had preceded him. So Jesus began by saying, "Today, this scripture is filled in your hearing."

What did he mean exactly? What was Jesus saying and why did the crowd get angry? But it was not just this, but that he was not accepted the Son of God even in his hometown. How do we express this today? The crowd grew furious and they wanted to drive him out of town and kill him. But Jesus just walked right through the crowd and went on his way. Had Jesus gone too far, too soon? That is a question many faithful people first ask. Jesus was accepted as one of the community of faith gathered to hear the scriptures. He offered to read. He chose the passage he wanted; read it, and sat down. As was custom, those who read and those listened offered commentary on the passage. Jesus was very clear with his words, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Nothing else needed to be said because the waiting for the messiah was over. Jesus was with them and they did not accept him because they did not know what to do. He shared his life's purpose with those present as written in the prophets. One can only imagine the looks on the faces of the people wonder, shock, anger, uncertainty, confusion. Jesus then got up and walked straight through the crowd. Just how sacred was that reading of holy scriptures?

This holy moment was filled with hope that the one they saw grow up was the anointed one of God to preach, proclaim, heal, and forgive. But they could not believe it. There was no sacred celebration after this gathering with refreshments being served. There was anger and questions with even the possibility of killing Jesus. But what prevented this from occurring was simply Jesus walking through the crowd and going his way. Those in the synagogue had to figure this out for themselves. Isaiah's prophecies emphasized what the Spirit would lead the messiah to do and Jesus came to fulfill that role.

But what does this mean for us? When Jesus read the scroll and declared his purpose it seemed to separate the people in his synagogue—they were not expecting the messiah to be Joseph's son nor did they credit him with any signs of support. The opposite was true. Yet when we think of a community of faith like our church today, we pray that God's Spirit unites us and calls us to become one because of Jesus and what he did for us as individuals and what he taught us to do in love for others. The body of Christ is a living organism and when we regard our church family as living we might reflect upon it as being creative, fun, smarter and more able to do God's work on Earth than first thought. This is possible because we are all equal before God. God created us male and female in his image and we are equal in importance in tasks and yet as a collective—we are able to do so many things- which benefit those outside of our church family and we can also do this for ourselves.

But how do we show that we are equal before God? Paul writes to the people of Corinth the expressed need to work as a unit- and uses the body made up of many parts as an example. Foot, hand,

ear, eye, they are all important and all necessary for the physical person. But as the body of Christ, his church we each have special roles, tasks and abilities and these change as we grow older and acquire more knowledge or change in ability. Yet all are equal before God.

As we consider how we help others, our church does this faithfully- through donations of food, hygiene products for self care and clothing for warmth we help to enable agencies like the Welcome Centre for Women, Hiatus House, Downtown Mission, Youth Centre to in turn help others. But there are also other agencies which assist people—those centres which teach ESL programs, women in the work force, pregnancy centre, and those extended government agencies which help finding places to live, work, and for retraining. All of these are supported by the body of Christ in its various forms across the city and county in order all people will be equal before God as they establish or re-establish themselves.

Jesus read aloud his life's purpose as he read from the scroll that day in the synagogue.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. “ As we hear these words again, we can rejoice because Jesus has called us to do the same as His feet and hands, ears and eyes today. We are Christ's body, individuals who believe, yet as a community we are stronger faster and able to aim high our hopes in fulfilling Christ's purpose today. The simple question is do you believe all people are equal and need to know of Christ's unconditional love; are you willing to share your love as you tell Christ's story and his purpose in living an earthly life? Are you willing to show others that hearing God's word is sacred and worthy of all praise? Let us be faithful and come together as the body of Christ for we have blessed and in turn can and do reach out to others in Jesus' name. Let us offer to God our thanksgiving as we answer the call to serve Christ Jesus, his church and to do so with faith, hope and love.

PRAYER

God of grace and love we praise you that all people were made equal in your image and that we are called to serve one another through our faithful service of Jesus. Bless us O God as we feel the Spirit move our minds and touch our hearts as we journey together in grace and with hope. We ask this in Christ's name for he asks the question, “Will you come and follow me?” enable us to answer with love and with joy knowing that you will enable us and give us the strength we need to do it. Amen.