

3rd Sunday Epiphany C 10

February 7, 2010

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Ezra brought the book of the Law, the book which the Lord had given Moses, before the assembly, in front of both men and women who could hear with understanding. There he read from the book throughout the day and all the ears of the people were attentive to the word. They read from the book of the Law with interpretation so that the people understood the reading. Then Ezra, the priests and scribes and the Levites said “This day is Holy to the Lord your God.”

Nehemiah along with Ezra the scribe brought the people of Israel back into community and the people found unity in their understanding of the word of the Law. For generations the people of Israel had existed in exile, worshipping their God in a foreign land. Finally they had been given permission to return, they had gathered together and rebuilt a small temple, houses and now the walls of the City of Jerusalem. Yet prior to this it is clear the people are lost, wondering around without leadership within the church, without discipline in their worship and without the regular hearing or teaching of the word of God.

Onto this scene come Nehemiah and Ezra to lead them, priests and Levites to instruct them and bring order to the worship of the Lord their God. The people were hungry for the word and looking for a way to understand what was required of them as they searched for a mission and purpose in their life together. They were able to use the many different gifts and talents each had to rebuild the city, but they had not found a mission or purpose to form them into the community they were to become. Nor were they aware of the covenant God had made with their ancestors and with them.

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It may not have been chaotic; there may not have been division or struggles, while at the same time there was not yet any community. So they gathered for the reading of the scriptures, they listened to the interpretations of the word, Ezra blessed the Lord, and all the people answered, 'Amen Amen.'

In the chapters which follow our reading it is clear the people understood the good news they had heard. Ezra, Nehemiah and the other leaders sought to help them come together and remember this blessing they had received. For they all knew, they had heard and told the stories which caused their ancestors to be taken into exile. They were constantly reminded for generations that the people of God had failed to heed God's warning, failed to follow the Lord's Law as given to Moses, they had not cared for the land, the orphan, the widow, the needy the alien and the oppressed among them.

So here in the following chapter the whole community comes together for mourning, and repentance seeking forgiveness from God. Here they do their penance and renew their covenant with God. Here they once again come together unified as a community under one law and one God and one Lord. They do so with the words echoing in their ears, 'Go your way, eat and drink, and send portions to those in need, for this day is Holy to the Lord your God.' Go take care and enjoy yourselves, but do not forget the poor, the needy, the blind and the oppressed.

You can almost see the crowd of people rushing out not just to celebrate and enjoy themselves but hurrying to take the food and wine to the poor, the sick and the needy. Others gather left over materials to assist the homeless and collecting items for those without clothes or shoes or household goods. You can almost envision many rallying around the least among them, lifting them up, sharing their talents, their gifts, their resources for the betterment of the community.

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Maybe not much different that we have seen this week and I am sure in the weeks to come. Many have rushed to share their bounty with the people of Haiti; others with gifts of construction or large machinery have come to the aid of the people. While others with talents and abilities use them to heal the wounded, to bind up the broken hearted and to care for the grieving. It is times like this which help us to look beyond our differences and to offer assistance to our neighbor. It is times like this which help us get beyond our own ego and desire for praise to allow the good to get done regardless of who is receiving the aid.

It is at times like this, I give thanks because the barriers are stripped away, languages are overcome as each part and each individual becomes a part of the greater whole. Here it is more important to share the gifts given to us and allow the center of attention to be focused on the recipient and not the giver.

Paul in writing his response addresses similar questions and pushes the members of the Corinthian church to look beyond the ways of the world, get past the need for recognition, to overlook the titles the world puts upon us to become the body of Christ for the unity and benefit of all. It is the world who cares if our title is president, business owner, conductor, teacher, janitor, street cleaner or doctor. It is the culture which tells us certain people are more valuable or more worthy of praise or recognition than others. While the world might work that way, here in the body of Christ we need everyone equally. If one is missing then the whole cannot function. Like each of our individual bodies, the body of Christ, are greater than the sum of its parts.

Sometimes analogies are hard to understand, difficult to apply to our individual situation. I think Paul got it right when he compares the church to our body. While we see our body as a whole, each part is both independent and interdependent upon the other for us to function. Are their parts of the body

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we can live without? Can a body function without a hand or a foot or a kidney? Yes, other parts compensate but it does not work as well. Are their parts of our bodies we celebrate or give greater honor to? Sure. A singer celebrates his voice, a surgeon her hands, a mathematician his mind, a cook her sense of smell or taste, a messenger their feet and on and on.

Such it is within the church, within the body of Christ. We gather together unified by the Spirit, following one Lord with One God and Father in Heaven. We gather to worship and celebrate with reading of scriptures, hearing interpretations for our understanding, we sing praises with music and song, we gather to share a meal of bread and wine. Then we are sent out in diverse ways as the hands of Christ to bring comfort to the distressed, the feet of Christ carrying portions to those in need, the voice of the Church proclaiming the Good News to a world hungry for the Word, and on and on and on for this day is Holy unto the Lord.

Just as you need each part of your body to function properly we as the body of Christ need each of our members to function properly. Some might say I do not have a lot of money so I cannot give like someone else. So give as the Spirit prompts you to give, use your other resources of grain offering or of your time or talents. Some say I do not get up in front of people, so use your gifts to support those who do by setting up worship, encouraging others, writing articles or baking bread. I often tell members, especially our shut-ins who seek ways to remain a part of the body, ways to stay connected yet feel they now have nothing to offer. I ask them; pray for us, pray for me, pray for the people on our prayer list and give thanks for those who are able.

For now you are the body of Christ and individually a member of it. So which gift to you possess? It does not matter for each of you posses many gifts which

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are brought into unity as you strive for the greater gifts. If you want to know what the greater gifts are, you have to come next week.

But in the mean time leave this place where we have gathered to hear the Word of God read and interpreted. We leave with Jesus' voice ringing in our ears. For the words Christ read from Isaiah were not just for him but for each of us; "The Spirit of the Lord is upon you, because he has anointed you to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed." So go your way, unified as the body of Christ, sent to share the Good News through the gifts you have received, for today is Holy to the Lord our God. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

AMEN

T.G.B.T.G.

Pastor Michael