**Preaching Notes**

**Season after Epiphany 3.C.2016**

*This is week two in a three-week mini-series for whichever track you have chosen.*

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

**Old Testament Track: Our Saving God**

Like last week, this week’s Old Testament reading comes the time period after the Jewish people had returned from exile in Babylon. Both Ezra and Nehemiah are believed to have been written by a Palestinian man who lived in post-exilic Jerusalem around 300 BCE. The writer focused both of his books on recreating a strong and distinctive Jewish identity among a people who have lost their way.

As noted last week, post-exilic Jerusalem was inhabited by a mixture of elite Jewish people who had survived exile in Babylon and returned home, and the poorer Jewish people who had been left behind when Jerusalem fell to the Persians in 539. Among both the people who stayed behind and the people who had returned from exile, some had married outside of the Jewish faith. The practice of Judaism in Jerusalem had become watered-down or totally abandoned, rebuilding of the Temple had been delayed, and life in the city was generally tense.

Around 458 BCE the priest Ezra announced the establishment of the law of Moses as the law of the land in Judah. Ezra also sought to restore a worship schedule in the Temple. It is in this context, then, that in September of that same year the priest Ezra read from the Torah to the people gathered in the square before the Water Gate in Jerusalem. He read a text from the book of the law about the Festival of Booths (Leviticus 23:33-44). He and the other priests standing on the platform above the people offered interpretation to help the people understand. In essence, Ezra and his colleagues gave sermons and teachings on the text. As they spoke the people began to weep because they knew they had not kept the law of the Lord for many years. Ezra told them not to cry, but instead to celebrate with food and drink and to share their food with those who didn’t have anything to eat.

We can understand this situation very well, for we live in a time not unlike the time when Ezra and his fellow priests stood before the people and tried to remind them who they were. Many of us serve in churches without many worshipers. Those who continue to be faithful in their attendance and practice of the faith are overwhelmingly older adults in a lot of places. These faithful people show up week after week. They don’t necessarily need to be reminded of their core identity in Christ.

In many of our churches younger families are scarce on Sunday mornings. Why? Because they are busy with other things. Some, perhaps those considered affluent, are busy taking their children to soccer or football or baseball. They are going to brunch or playing golf. They are getting a mani-pedi or enjoying a weekend ski trip with the family. These are among the ones who need to be reminded of who they once were, or invited to participate in something more than what their current lifestyles have to offer.

Others are absent for different reasons. They don’t know anything about Christianity other than what they hear on the news, and from what they’ve learned there they don’t feel like they have a place in the Christian family. Maybe they have been deeply wounded by someone who ascribed to the Christian faith. Maybe they are married to people who do not share the same faith or their relationship is judged to be not compatible with Christian teaching. Or maybe they are working at a second job because their full-time job doesn’t pay enough to sustain their family. Maybe they don’t feel welcome because when the offering plate is passed they don’t have much to give. Maybe Saturday and Sunday are the only days they have to clean the house, do the shopping and laundry for the week, and be with their children. These people also need to be welcomed into our communities and nurtured in the faith.

And so, with all these millions of people not participating in any religious education or ritual, we have raised a generation of people that look a whole lot like the people of Jerusalem during the time of Ezra. Maybe they haven’t lost complete touch with matters of faith or lost a yearning for a relationship with the divine so much as they have lost the regular practice of a faith.

What did Ezra do in this situation? He read the scriptures concerning a high holy day in a public space in an effort to reacquaint the people of his day with one of their festivals. When they lamented over their perceived unrighteousness he offered forgiveness and urged them not to cry, but to celebrate and to share their food with others. One gets the feeling here that what Ezra may have wanted was for the wealthier people to share their food and drink with their poor neighbors. It’s a great idea, isn’t it? Not too far from what the Missional church movement is trying to do in our time and place.

So what are you going to do in order to restore faith in our saving God in your community? How can you relieve the guilt of people who have not been keeping any faith? How can you bring a word of hope to the street corner? How can you encourage those who are better off to share what they have with those who have less? Instead of judging, can you find a way to offer respite and assistance to working families who need a little help on the weekend? Can you find a way to offer Christ without judgment to families born of interfaith marriages or marriages that are not considered holy by the church? How can you help people find a core identity in Christ?

**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**

**Epistle Track: Reconciliation in Christ**

Last week I wrote about how, in chapter twelve of First Corinthians, Paul had been admonishing those in the church who thought they had received higher gifts from the Holy Spirit than everybody else. Specifically, those who could speak in tongues let the other members know that God considered them to be the holiest of all because they had, after all, received the very same manifestation of power that the original disciples had received in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

Well, the other members of the church were not about to stand for their own holiness being put down, and so they began to band into opposing groups: the ones who thought they were prophets and wiser than everybody else, the ones who gave the most to the budget and therefore figured they had made the greatest amount of self-sacrifice, those who had a way with words and felt they were the most important because everybody listened when they spoke, those who had shown the least doubt about Jesus being the Messiah, and so on. Paul's entire letter to the church at Corinth was written to challenge and destroy the bases of these divisions and to bring the members back into unity by having them not focus on the things that they thought were most important gifts in the church, but on Jesus Christ.

Paul's arguments culminate in today’s passage in this famous figure of speech where he likens each of the members, with each of his or her particular gifts, to the various organs of the human body, and points out how ridiculous it would be for any organ to either claim to not be part of the body or to get claim that they were the body complete in and of themselves.

Paul says, "If all were a single member, where would the body be?” That’s not how it works. Not at all. On the contrary, all the members of the church, with all their various gifts and talents, are needed to carry out the various functions that the entire ministry of Jesus Christ requires. Nobody in and of him or herself can take the place of Jesus. No-one has all of Jesus's gifts, or powers, or understanding.

Who is the most important?

Jesus is the most important.

Who is the head of the church?

Jesus is the head of the church.

As baptized believers the rest of us are the body of Christ. Our baptism has afforded us a new, shared identity even as we retain our own individuality. It is by God’s design and purpose that we are to use our individual gifts for the good of the community as followers of Jesus Christ.

The problem for us, as it was for the church in Corinth, is that we (especially us preachers!) have a hard time not thinking of ourselves as the head of the church, or thinking of some of our more generous or especially talented members as being more important than some others. As much as we may like the theory of valuing everyone in the community equally, in reality most of us don’t really practice it.

In every church I’ve ever served there has been a member who has, to put it as delicately as possible, not been the easiest person to get along with. Usually if I couldn’t get along with this person then other people in the congregation also had difficulty. You know what I’m talking about. Every church has people who stir up trouble or hurt people’s feelings or cause dissension in the ranks. Indeed, so common is this problem that there is an entire book written about these folks, *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identity and Deal with Destructive Conflict* (author is Kenneth C. Haugk, founder of Stephen Ministries).

What are we as pastors to do about these folks? Are we to gently encourage them to move along to another church? Are we to do continuous battle with them in order to keep them from doing injury to other members? Are we to allow them to terrorize and injure us or members of our families?

Whenever I read this passage I am reminded of a conversation I had with my dad many years ago, when I was a young pastor trying to deal with an antagonistic church member. I know that this notion is not original because I have since heard it from other seasoned pastors, but for those of you who are newer, maybe you will benefit from their collective insight into this passage from Paul.

My dad said to me, “You know how Paul says there are all these parts of the body, and they are all necessary for the function of the body? Well, I’ve always thought that one of those necessary parts that Paul does not put on his list is the (I will use the technical term here rather than my father’s more colorful term) anus. Every body must have an anus. It is necessary to the function of the whole. What would the body do if it did not have a way of ridding itself of all the poop that has built up inside of it? The anus is a critical part of the body. It is as critical as the arm or the leg or the eyes or ears.”

I hope and pray I have not offended anyone at this point.

I don’t mean to say that we should not deal appropriately with antagonists, or that we should allow them to beat up on other people. I only want to suggest that as members of the body, their particular gifts are as needed and necessary as those of the other parts of the body. After all, “If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God has arranged the members in the body, each one of them as he chose” (1 Corinthians 12:15-18, NRSV).

The only way forward as a community of faith is to honor each member. Sometimes that means speaking the truth in love, as another book by the same author mentioned above has put it. But the key to that action is not speaking the truth, but loving. Jesus may be the head of our body, but love is at our heart. It is the greater gift for which Paul says we are to strive.

So next week, as we wrap up this three week mini-series on finding Reconciliation in Christ, we will give attention to what Paul calls “the more excellent way.”

**Luke 4:14-21**

**Gospel Track: Jesus the Miraculous Healer**

Over the years I have wrestled with these words that Jesus spoke as he began his ministry. Why did he quote these particular words from Isaiah? What made him choose this passage? Was it the prescribed reading for the day? Had he thought it all through in advance? Or did he just pick up the scroll, unroll it, and land on this passage by chance?

I don’t know the answers to all of those questions, but, I can tell you that the promise Jesus was making that day was not a new thing. It was a very, very old promise, one that dates back at least to the time of Isaiah, and probably even before. In all likelihood, Isaiah took his words from some other source and applied them to the people of Israel when they were being held captive by the Babylonians. It was only because Isaiah applied the old promise in a new way that it was new, or that it was written down and kept forevermore by the Jewish people as sacred scripture. It was kept because people knew that the Spirt of the Lord, the Holy Spirit of God, was indeed upon Isaiah and speaking through him, the spirit of mercy, the spirit of grace, the spirit of God’s redeeming love, because Isaiah gave the old promise of liberty to the captives and the setting free of the oppressed a new meaning by saying that it was God’s promise.

And, as a matter of fact, Isaiah was not the only prophet of his generation to pull out this old promise. Ezekiel, his contemporary, also mentioned this promise, but Ezekiel just repeated the promise in much the same old way, declaring that, at last, it was really going to come true, but that it was going to apply only to the people who had been forced by the present economic crisis to sell off their land in and around Jerusalem. Ezekiel’s promise was this: “If the prince makes a gift to any of his sons out of his inheritance, it shall belong to his sons, it is their holding by inheritance. But if he makes a gift out of his inheritance to one of his servants, it shall be his to the year of liberty; then it shall revert back to the prince; only his sons may keep a gift from his inheritance” (Ezekiel 46:16-17, NRSV).

The original promise, the one to which both Ezekiel and Isaiah are referring, goes all the way back to the time of Moses, and a commandment said to have been given by God. This commandment, recorded in the 25th chapter of Leviticus, and referred to as the Year of Jubilee, the Year of the Lord’s Favor, goes like this:

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the Day of Atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family (Leviticus 25: 8-10, NRSV).

But the fact is, even though this promise was made as a commandment from God, it was never actually carried out. I mean, how could it be? That on every fiftieth year, on the Day of Atonement, a person would be sent out to blow a trumpet and on that day, throughout the entire land, all inhabitants would be given liberty, all the slaves set free, all the debts written off, all the prisoners released, all the blind healed, and every person restored to their original property and family? Nobody’s going to do that! And so, throughout all the history of Israel, even though Ezekiel repeated that old promise very solemnly, it was never carried out.

The reason it was never carried out is perfectly obvious. People who had bought lands and slaves didn’t want to give them up without any compensation, and no governing official who wanted to keep his or her job was going to try to force this on people. Now I would submit to you that when Isaiah made this same promise, it was a little different from the way Ezekiel meant it. Isaiah proclaimed not the letter of the law, but rather, he caught the Spirit of the Law, and applied that promise not to Israel and the freeing of local slaves and the restoring of local land to its original owners, but instead, Isaiah applied the promise to Babylonia. He said that God was going to set free the people of Israel, the ones who were being held captive by the Babylonians.

So where does Jesus fit into all of this? Why did he bring up this promise?

Well, in order to answer those questions, first of all, I think it’s important to note who Jesus quoted. For whatever reason, Jesus quoted not from Ezekiel, that is, not from the letter of the law as applied by people. Jesus quoted Isaiah, and the Spirit of the Law applied by God. And furthermore, Jesus didn’t simply repeat the old promise the way Ezekiel had done. Jesus updated the promise, the way Isaiah had done. He said that it wasn’t just a promise about a particular group of people being set free from the circumstances of their lives. It was a promise from God for all people. And then Jesus said that the promise was not just something to be remembered as God’s promise. It was a course of action that God was taking, right then and there. What he said, exactly, was, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” In that way, I think, Jesus deepened the meaning of that old promise by suggesting that his very life was going to be the everlasting Day of Atonement.

Let’s try and unpack that a little bit.

In Jesus’ day, just today, people were deeply troubled by their own personal sins, as well as the sin of their ongoing participation in a system of injustice. Just like I am troubled by the way that I live when I know that most of the world lives in much more oppressive conditions, and I see my own sinfulness in my failure to change either the way that I live or the system itself. And so, the way people in Jesus’ day dealt with their sins was once a year, on a day called the Day of Atonement, when the people gathered at the Temple to fast and pray and have their sins taken away.

This was an important ritual that was done in three parts. First, the high priest laid his hands on the head of a young bull and confessed his own sins, acknowledging that the entire priesthood was sinful. Then he slaughtered the bull and took the blood and a container of incense and entered the holy of holies. With live coals on a censer in his right hand and a container of incense in his left hand, he approached the Ark of the Covenant. He set the censer on the poles of the Ark, let it, and retired from the Holy of Holies to pray, but only for a very brief time, lest the people become terrified. Then, he re-entered the holy of holies and took the blood of sacrifice and sprinkled it seven times on the ark to cover the sins of the priests, and he came out (See Leviticus 16).

The next part was, standing before a pair of identical rams, the priest thrust his hands into a special urn and brought out, in each hand, a slip of paper. One slip was marked, “For God”, and the other marked, “For Satan.” Actually, to be more accurate, the second would read “For Azazel”, which means, “A scapegoat.” The priests took out these slips and brought his hands down on the heads of the rams as he stood before them and uttered a dedication: “To the Lord!” A scarlet thread was tied on Satan’s ram. Then the priest slaughtered the other ram and with its blood he entered the holy of holies for a third time to sprinkle the Ark of the Covenant seven times with the sacrifice of the people. Then he returned to the front, exchanged the vessel with the ram’s blood for the one with the blood of the bull, stood before the curtain of the holy of holies, and sprinkled the curtain seven times with the priest’s sacrifice. Then, once more, taking up the ram’s blood, he sprinkled the curtain seven times with the people’s sacrifice.

Finally, the priest laid his hands on Satan’s ram while he confessed the sins of the people. He turned the ram over to a man appointed to lead the ram away. According to the tradition, the route led over the valley of Kidron into the wilderness of Judea. At the end of the route, at the edge of a cliff, the attendant tied one end of the scarlet thread around the ram’s neck to a rock, and then pushed the animal over the cliff to its death. The announcement of the completion of this rite was relayed to the Temple by the crowds of people stationed all along the route. According to the legend, a scarlet thread tied to the threshold of the holy of holies turned white at the very moment that the ram was pushed over the cliff, as a sign that the people were cleansed of their sins.

As you can see, in Jesus’ time, people took their sins very seriously. On the Day of Atonement, they went to great lengths to go before God and be cleansed from them. Indeed, Jewish people in our day continue to take this day and this ritual seriously, in the most high-holy day of their calendar year: Yom Kippur.

The really remarkable thing about Jesus is that he understood himself to be God’s gift to replace the entire ceremony of the Day of Atonement. Jesus understood his own life to be a sign to the people that God was not only taking away the sins of the people of Israel, but that someday, somehow, God was going to set everything on earth right, giving relief to the poor, ending oppression, setting free those who were held captive by systems of injustice, and saving all people from the consequences of their sins.

How this can be, we surely cannot understand. But is it for everyone? Absolutely.

Maybe we can’t change the world, but we can throw ourselves on the mercy of Christ, confessing that he was not like all the rest of us, that is, not just another person with occasional flashes of spiritual insight, but that the Spirit of the Lord was truly upon him, moving him continuously to do the right thing, always and everywhere, even unto death, and even beyond death.

The amazing good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone, from those are fortunate to live privileged lives to those caught on the other end of this system of oppression and injustice that humankind has created and we all participate in. Those who live with privilege need to hear it as much as those who live with less, so that they especially will be compelled to take their sins seriously, and fall on their knees confessing before God and one other both their need and their faith, looking to Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the present world and cleanses all people, something we all desperately need, for our sins are very widespread and very grave.

Nevertheless, the time again has come when God will save us. So let us indeed be God’s people, repenting of our sins, and accepting the year of our Lord’s favor.