

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

<sup>1</sup>all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. <sup>2</sup>Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup>He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. <sup>5</sup>And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. <sup>6</sup>Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. <sup>8</sup>So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

<sup>9</sup>And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

## **Luke 4:14-21**

<sup>14</sup>Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. <sup>15</sup>He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. <sup>16</sup>When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, <sup>17</sup>and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: <sup>18</sup>"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." <sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

## **ECUMENISM**

Today is Ecumenical Sunday, and the title of the sermon is Ecumenism. What in the world is ecumenism? It is a movement to bring the churches into a greater degree of unity. What's ironic is that there isn't consensus on the origins of Ecumenical Sunday and the Week of Prayer for Christian unity; each denomination has their poster child. Methodists like to reference John Raleigh Mott, a Methodist layperson and a Nobel Prize Winner who was big in the World Council of Churches and a big advocate of ecumenism early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Episcopalians venerate Father Paul James Wattson and Sister Lurana White, co-founders of the Franciscan Friars and Sisters of the Atonement in Garrison, NY who began something called a Prayer Octave in 1908 focused on restoring "full communion" with the Catholic Church. Regardless of its origin, the Ecumenical Movement is still quite strong today, especially as membership in the

mainline churches have been in decline; it doesn't do the Church any good to argue over differences when so many people are already disenchanted with or disinterested in the Church.

But Ecumenism faces a serious challenge because while we all like the idea of unity, that unity does break down at some point as differences crawl to the surface. The Methodists can say let's all unite on what we call the *essentials* of the Christian faith, but as you study the Christian faith more you may not agree with others on what the essentials really are. And the truth is that (believe it or not) a lot of our behavior is driven by our beliefs; doctrine is the *why* for *what* we do. Whether we tip a waitress or give someone a handout or a handup, it all comes down to our most core beliefs, and those beliefs fall right into the rubric of religion. And we take our religion very seriously.

Which brings me to our Scripture passages: Both of today's passages relate to religious zeal which can unite us as well as separate us. In our Old Testament lesson, Nehemiah, the mayor of Jerusalem, is standing with Ezra, the prophet of God, and all the people of Jerusalem have assembled to celebrate the rebuilding of the city (which in those days were protected by walls) and to hear the Word of God, and considering that the Word of God consisted of a good chunk of the Old Testament, you would definitely call it the Words of God. And a lot of words there were. And the people listened attentively and shouted "Hallelujah" and raised their hands and bowed to the ground, and when they were weeping the prophet said, "Stop it: Celebrate! Eat. Drink. Enjoy. And today's Thanksgiving, so everyone gets fed! AND THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH." What a great motto: "The joy of the Lord is my strength." I like that, because the word 'joy' is linked to 'strength' and linked to 'the Lord.' But it's not "the Lord" who gives me strength; it's "the **joy** of the Lord."

Jews take this passage very seriously; their joy truly is in the Lord, the Lord who gave them the Law, the Torah, which they hold sacred. I've attached here a Youtube link that you should watch showing the joy of the Jewish people in "the Word of God."

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XRk5pFOePM>) This is a video of a celebration known as the *Simchat Torah*, a festival that celebrates the Torah, the written word of God, and this celebration harkens back to our Old Testament passage, as all the people listen to the Torah and are told to go celebrate. The celebration of the *Simchat Torah* goes back to the time of Jesus.

By contrast, our Gospel Lesson has Jesus, at a pivotal moment at the beginning of his public ministry, declaring that the "spirit of the Lord" is upon him, that he has good news for the poor, that he will be releasing the captives, and that it is "the year of the Lord's favor." This is a rather serious claim that, quite honestly, most Jews rejected, and we should be able to understand that. For one thing, there was no obvious change that occurred in Judea as a result of Jesus' life, death, or resurrection; Rome was still running the show, people were still poor and oppressed, and the same people ran the Temple in the same way they had been running it. The only difference that most Jews would recognize was that there was a new "denomination" in Judaism, the "Nazarene" cult, a pretty small group of Jews who proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. Most people paid them no mind until they became dangerous to the survival of the religion, at which point they were officially "excommunicated" by the religious authorities.

My point is that we can't vilify the Jews for being zealous about the word of God which was handed down to them through Moses, yet we hold onto our belief that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and messiah, and the proclamation he makes in today's Gospel lesson is our mission statement, "to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And instead of obsessing over our differences in doctrine, we can unite in mission. The passage Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth came from Jewish scripture, and Christians and Jews can and unite in efforts to "to bring good news to the poor. and proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." I heard this week of the death of a great Jewish publisher and philanthropist, Lord George Weidenfeld, who has successfully rescued over 150 Syrian Christians and found them safe haven in Poland. While he's been criticized for not rescuing Muslims and people of other religious groups, he did some good for some people, and not just people of his own faith.

For that matter we can unite with Muslims; it is written in the Koran, "what the Ascent is! It is to free a slave, And to feed in the day of hunger, An orphan near of kin, Or some poor wretch in misery. And to be of those who believe and exhort one another to perseverance and exhort one another to pity." (Surah 90). I could find the same kind of passage in Buddhist or Hindu scripture, even atheist, humanist literature. And on those principles of compassion and liberation we can all agree.

Christians can unite with anyone else on matters of mercy and justice and liberation and compassion without in any way betraying our beliefs. In fact, when we *do* unite with people of other denominations and other religions we are also effectively evangelizing. I say "effectively" evangelizing because there are such things as ineffective evangelism and destructive evangelism, which are both misguided and based on a flawed doctrine. You see, Jesus begins his declaration in today's Gospel lesson by declaring, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." If you want to know what made Jesus' ministry so effective, the answer is *the Spirit*. If you want to know what makes a church's ministry effective, the answer is *that same Spirit*. The Spirit of the Lord is none other than the Spirit of the One God, and it is, to boil it down to its essence, LOVE. When we engage in ministry with Jews or Muslims or Buddhists or Atheists or Baptists or Catholics or Lutherans or Mormons, and we do so in the Spirit of the Lord, we are not so much conscious of evangelizing as we are conscious of *loving*, and such love know no fear – no fear of being persuaded to convert to a different religion, no fear that some religion other than your own may receive more recognition or honor among people, because love is not self-seeking. Living in the Spirit of the Lord, living in God's perfect love, means living free of competition; you strive to please God because you love him; you strive to make this world a better place because you love others. You strive to heal a very wounded world because it breaks your heart, and it breaks *your* heart because it breaks *God's* heart. When you dwell in the Spirit you are freed from petty concerns like, "Is this person going to accept our doctrine and join *our* church?" When you dwell in the Spirit you trust the Spirit to do what it will, and you don't worry about the way people respond to it.

My prayer for you today is that the Spirit of the Lord would rest in you, breaking down barriers between you and others, whether they be people of the same belief or different belief. And may

that Spirit unite us with others in bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, in letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.