

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10
1 Cor. 12: 12-31a
Luke 4: 14-21
3 Epiphany, Yr. C

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“Make Sense So That We Understand”

One of the most important lessons I learned early in my teaching career was the fact that the curriculum I planned to teach, the curriculum I taught, the curriculum that was heard, and the curriculum that was remembered for more than a nano-second were all different and, generally, each was less than the one before. I almost never actually taught everything I planned to teach, some of what I taught was not heard by those I taught, and, sometimes, precious little of what was heard was remembered. That’s why we have life-long education. That’s why change can take so long – we don’t get all the lessons the first time, we don’t hear them, and we certainly seem not to remember them.

It all begins with the need to have someone make sense of the world around us. We need to begin with a clear, understandable explanations of what is going on – what are the true issues, what are the risks, what are the current and future challenges. Then we need to listen carefully, ask questions, and raise concerns in an atmosphere that respects differing viewpoints but seeks to find common ground. Then we need to remember what we were taught and to follow through with our desires and promises even if that causes new challenges and difficulties. And, it turns out, most of us get that change is hard and that the new is not always cool and wonderful but if we understand clearly the whys and hows of the world, we can learn to be different; even old dogs can learn new tricks.

Our readings for this third Sunday after Epiphany take us to this notion of make sense so we understand. Consider our reading from Nehemiah, not a prophet we hear from very often in church. The people of God have asked to hear again the Law of Moses. Perhaps they are confused or perhaps they worry they are falling away from the law, or perhaps they fear the aliens in their midst, but it is clear that the people desire instruction. It is no short reading, either. A half-day is spent in careful listening to the law being read to them. But notice that it was teaching the law not just reading the law. All those who read did so with interpretation. The leaders gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. The people of Israel had to internalize and remember all over again. Part of that integration process was to weep over the law. Did they weep for this reminder that the law was hard and demanding, or did they weep over their remembered transgressions of the law? It is not clear, but they were told not to mourn or weep but to rejoice in the presence of the Lord as embodied in the given law.

Sometimes, we think church or religion or Christianity is all about the “can’ts.” One can’t do this, one can’t do that, one is to be dour and pinched and disapproving of life and light and joy. And there is that strand of Christianity and that is not our way – that is someone else’s curriculum and they are welcome to it. We were taught and are taught to eat the fat and drink sweet wine and share it all with others because we are holy, this day is holy, and we are called to rejoice in the covenant we have with our God. In the wonderful words of the Psalm, “Let the

words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

This teaching with sense for understanding is central to Paul’s long and somewhat obsessive metaphor of all believers being part of the Body of Christ. The one gift – the coming of the Holy Spirit in baptism – is expressed in many ways within the body of Christ. Thus each means of understanding the power of the Holy Spirit will create many expressions of the gift and no expression is intrinsically greater than any other. The Body of Christ has need of all gifts and what seems inferior to some might be vastly more important to the overall success of the Body. We rejoice together, we suffer together; we are intertwined into one organism even as we express our understanding of the Holy Spirit in different ways.

In our own parish, we see the variety of gifts we possess collectively and we can marvel at the way in which those individual gifts connect and inspire and support each other to building up the totality of our faith community. If each one of us truly understands what we have learned about the Good News of God in Christ, remembers it, and then openly shares that understanding as it calls us to reflection and action, we will marry all these understandings into one great banquet for all of us and for our guests, and for the whole world. And by the power of the Holy Spirit we will have all the gifts we need to flourish as a community of faith.

Our Gospel story is a stunning image of “making sense for understanding.” Jesus has returned home to Nazareth, come to worship, is afforded his right to both read Scripture and to teach in synagogue. In what must have been an extraordinary moment, this home-town boy, marginalized by the questions that lingered about his birth, calmly reads the incendiary words of Isaiah, the words that contain the signs of the Messiah, and then claims that these longed-for words, the words of the Messiah, have been fulfilled in your hearing. Now that is “teaching for understanding!” I wonder if Jesus was not just a wee bit nervous about making that astonishing claim – but He gave his clear sense of these prophetic words and proclaimed what He understood was His call to mission, His call to destiny. But his hometown did not hear or remember – they only heard a personal boast, a moment of bragging, and they shortly thereafter, rejected Jesus for his presumption in asserting that He is the Messiah. But others, less connected to the law, did believe and followed Him.

And so it is with many of us. We hear the Word of God but we cannot quite figure out how to implement it in our lives, we cannot figure out how to make it real for ourselves, how to integrate it deeply and fully into our own lives. The Word of God remains outside of us – told to us over and over but never quite fully absorbed into the marrow of our bones. Our connection to the Body of Christ is tentative, our acceptance of God’s love made problematic by our own uncertainties, by our own anxieties, by our own egos. This makes us unclear about our part in the Body of Christ; we end up warring with other parts of the body or waste time wishing we were other parts of the Body of Christ. In so doing, we weaken the Body of Christ and make it vulnerable to disease and corruption. We need only look at the on-going squabbles within Christianity, or across the great religions or the world, or in our own domestic politics. We struggle to find good teachers, we don’t hear much sense so that we might truly understand.

We may find our deepest understanding of God's call to us through service in worship, or teaching, or singing, or fellowship, or service to the community, or service to the world. It is all part of making sense of our baptismal covenant. But that can lead us to new challenges, new problems. Making sense of the world around us and figuring out our part in it is never easy and it is never done. That is why we gather again and again to review the same material. The lessons are largely the same. What changes is us. Each time we hear the Word of God it is new because we are different and the world is different. Each time we hear the Word of God some part stands out that we did not hear before.

It is well past time to make sense so that we all understand. In every part of our lives, we need a Nehemiah moment – when we gather to listen and be attentive, to be taught with interpretation from those who would teach us truthfully and honestly so that we might all understand and strive for the greatest of all gifts – the gift of inclusive love. Amen.