



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Epiphany 3 (C) January 27, 2019

[RCL] Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

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

The wall surrounding Jerusalem is finally completed, despite local detractors, and as the people have returned from exile, they are re-establishing traditions. When we think of walls today, perhaps the fall of the Berlin Wall comes to mind, but the wall around this city was protection against hostile neighbors, rather than a barrier to prevent people from freedom. Physical safety was the first priority for the people of Jerusalem, before they could even think about anything else. This is a people who had been repeatedly conquered, and the elite had been exiled during Babylonian rule. As they were returning to Jerusalem, those left behind in the city would not necessarily have welcomed the exiles with open arms. After all, those who remained had suffered in an occupied territory and had to adapt to that oppressive society.

Resentments on both sides, they still managed to come together to rebuild the temple, and under Nehemiah's leadership, to rebuild the wall around the city. With this nascent sense of physical safety, they begin to re-establish their singular identity as God's people. During exile, they likely did not have access to scripture, and with no temple, the traditions of sacrifice and worship were not possible. Ezra is a scribe who has spent his life studying the law; because of this, he is called upon to read the scriptures to the people. He not only read the law—the Torah—but he also interpreted it for them, so they could understand it. For six hours, he read and interpreted the law, and the people wept.

- Why do you think the response to hearing the law was sorrow?
- What priorities get in the way of your spiritual life?
- Who are the exiles that you might resent if they “came home”?

Psalm 19

The Psalmist describes the many ways that God's laws and words are beneficial to humans: they bring justice and light, they impart wisdom, they have resurrection power for the soul, they are more valuable than wealth and they are eternal. That is an impressive list. I have heard it said that knowledge is a bank of facts, but wisdom is understanding a story. Creation tells the story without using language but still testifies to God's glory. The justice and righteousness of the law might have been so overwhelming to the people hearing Ezra speak that they were moved to tears. When we understand the story of God and how our lives fit into God's story, it can be emotionally overwhelming. Recognizing the significance and value of God's law can hold up a light to all the places where we are missing God's standard.

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- Are you aware of any “secret faults” or “presumptuous sins” in your life?
- Is there anything that you would like to let go of, in order to be “whole and sound”?
- What would it look like to have thoughts and words for the next hour that were acceptable in God’s sight?

I Corinthians 12:12-31a

One of my favorite images of the body of Christ is a bag filled with rocks. As the bag is shaken up, the sharp edges of one stone are knocked off by another. Sometimes it is my edges that are being smoothed by another, and sometimes I am the agent of someone else’s smoothing process. Just as we do not choose our families of origin, we do not fully choose our parish family. If we did, it would be a club for insiders rather than a community focused on the needs of the neighborhood and community. A congregation without diversity of opinion and background looks like an amputated hand; without the rest of the body, a hand cannot effectively lift others up. Since we all have bodies, Paul’s image is easy to understand but difficult to live out. Caring for those whose opinions, goals, and ways of being in the world differ markedly from our own must be intentional. This is our calling: to be the church where everyone matters.

- What gifts do you particularly respect in your community?
- What would it look like for you to notice the gifts that you do not find valuable?
- Who is currently knocking off one of your edges? Would you consider asking God to show you the gift in this, and pray blessings on that person?

Luke 4:14-21

Jesus is in Nazareth, his hometown, in this passage that immediately follows his forty days of temptation in the desert. He shows up at the synagogue, reads the passage from Isaiah, and then sits down. Jesus says that the scripture is fulfilled right then, right there. This had to have left those in the synagogue dumbstruck; it must have sounded incredibly presumptuous and arrogant if they understood that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophet’s words. For many in ministry, Isaiah 61—at least part of it—is a template for their calling: bringing good news to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming freedom for the captives and releasing from darkness the prisoners. Jesus says that he has come to set the oppressed free. Certainly, that can refer to those being trafficked or marginalized in any way, but how might we be oppressed by our consumer culture? Under Roman rule, debt could easily translate into slavery and/or imprisonment, and since most of Jesus’ contemporaries had a subsistence existence, one crop failure could condemn them to slavery. All the expressions of liberation in this passage can be understood metaphorically today.

- Who are the brokenhearted in your life, and in what ways can you be present to them?
- How are you oppressed? How are you an oppressor? What would freedom from that look like?

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