

A Call to Transformation

I. A Renewal of the Covenant

- A. On this 3rd Sunday of Epiphany in Year C of our three year cycle of scripture readings we hear for the one and only time from the Book of Nehemiah. So, it may help to highlight it today briefly.
1. The book narrates the time of Israel following their return to their homeland after years of captivity in Babylon.
 2. In Babylon, Nehemiah, a prominent Israelite, was the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes and known for his good disposition.
 - b. But when he hears of the city of Jerusalem lying in ruins he becomes depressed.
 - (1. So much so that the king releases him to go help restore his homeland.
 3. By the time of the text we've read in ch. 8, the work of rebuilding the city and its walls is complete.
 - a. But it is a time of severe conflict, \ dispute \ and fragmentation.
 - b. The future of the people is in serious doubt.
 - (1. Enemies attack from the outside, but even more disruptive, --
 - (2. are the internal disagreements that undermine the community's future.
 - (3. Factions argue over who is in and who is out, \ who should govern, \ how should the temple be rebuilt, \ how can Jerusalem be established in safety and in peace?
 - (4. Whether or not the Jews can revive their life together and reclaim their identity as a worshiping people is an urgent matter of life and death.
- B. This unique passage recounts a distinctive ceremony of worship on the Jewish New Year's Day, the 1st day of the 7th month, -- late fall at the end of the harvest.
1. It comes at the end of the Feast of Booths with a celebration called *Simchat Torah* (means "rejoicing in the Torah").

2. The assembly of all the people is at the city gates and Ezra who is portrayed here as a new Moses - reads from the Torah.
 - a. Ezra and his companions read the book of the law for 6 hrs, from early morning to midday, and all the people: men, women and children give him their rapt attention.
 - b. The ceremony of renewal brings a highly emotional response and comes to a climax when “*all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen.’*” agreeing to a renewal of the covenant.
 - (1. This covenant calls them to their unity resting in the law of Moses, the Torah.
 - (2. The people are invited to renew their life in their God, to live together in justice and joy.

II. Jesus Announces his Mission.

- A. We have a living picture of another service of worship some 500 years later at the Synagogue of Nazareth in Galilee.
 1. The story comes near the beginning of the Gospel of Luke at the outset of the public ministry of Jesus.
 - a. Luke sets the context of this event soon after Jesus has emerged from his days in the wilderness, following his baptism, and filled with the Spirit.
 - b. Nazareth is the place where Jesus grew up, where he played, where he worshiped, attending the Synagogue on the Sabbath day “*as was his custom.*”
 2. He has been well received in synagogues of the area, and now Jesus returns to his home town.
 - a. Here, Jesus knows the people, he knows their faces, he knows many by name, and probably some are even relatives. ---
 - b. In synagogue worship, any male could be asked to give the sermon and on this occasion Jesus is invited to read.
 - (1. He selects a passage from the scroll of the prophets.
 - c. From the reputation that preceded him there is great interest and anticipation.
 3. Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah:
 - a. “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to*

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

- B. It's helpful to know some historical context.
1. This particular passage was known and circulated at the time.
 - a. It was used by the Qumran community as an important reference to the Teacher of Righteousness.
 - b. The words had been attached to the description of the Messiah who was to come.
 - (1. There was a wide expectation and waiting for this.
 - c. So, the synagogue worshipers would hear this as a description of what Messiah would do. --
 2. Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.
 - a. Everyone was looking at him. -- What would he say?
 - b. Luke tells us, *"Then he began to say to them, ..."*
 - (1. *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*
 3. At first his hearers are amazed at his gracious words, but after he has continued to speak a little further of the universal reign of God, the dissonance of this scene is not just left for us to imagine.
 - a. Luke tells us, the listeners are filled with wrath and they throw their own homegrown son out of the synagogue (vss. 29-30).

III. Followers of Jesus on the Way

- A. It's a popular aphorism for Christians today to say the Old Testament is about the Law and the New Testament is about the Gospel.
1. The God of the OT is one of judgment and the God of the NT is about forgiveness.
 2. But I would ask us all to consider how we are to take Jesus' proclamation of fulfillment of Isaiah's vision for the entire re-ordering and up-ending of the world as we know it.
 3. If we were honest with ourselves, we might well be in that same group of listeners at the synagogue at Nazareth, the ones who threw Jesus out of the Temple. ---
 - a. It's not that we would disagree with the beauty of this vision theoretically. ---
 - b. We might agree with Luke making the point at the outset of his gospel that this vision of Isaiah is the keystone for the

entire ministry of Jesus. ...

- c. For so long, the Church has found ways to say we believe this is the work of the God-man Jesus, \ the unique Spirit filled Messiah.
 - (1. But when it comes down to ourselves being followers in his way, we have a hard time envisioning this for ourselves.
 - (2. Jesus says, *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*
 - (3. I think the question we need to ask is: *“Is there any way to say with him that it has been fulfilled in me?”* -----

B. A chief obstacle in our being able to hear what Jesus is saying is that it is easy for us to apply Jesus’ vision as a new law.

- 1. For lack of deep transformation in ourselves to the love of God, we take this as a new moral or social agenda.
 - a. We may struggle to enact this ourselves through various means or even more in our conception of being church.
- 2. The Catholic theologian Ilia Delio writes about how she left the academic world of scientific research to enter a Carmelite monastery in order she says, *“to put on the mind of Christ.”*
 - a. What she discovered, \ was that indeed Catholic religious women have built the social arm of the Church.
 - (1. They became educated and accomplished administrators of hospitals, \ nursing homes, \ schools, \ and orphanages, \ among other institutions, \ indeed an impressive history.
 - (2. She says, *“work became genetically encoded into religious life and it gave rise to successful Catholic institutions.”*
 - (3. But, she says, *“this was often at the expense of oneness of self in God and cosmos.”*
 - (4. *“I think many religious women have been exhausted for years and are just waking up to a new call for inner liberation and unity.”* (Making All Things New, p. 157)

C. Another challenge for us is the endemic individualism of modern western society that has accelerated to a pinnacle in modern America.

1. It has affected our understanding of being the church.
 - a. The struggle to be a successful and competitive church \ that can capture a good chunk of the popular market \ often takes us into unrecognizable forms of commercialized spirituality.
 - (1. A recent (2002) big seller in religious books is, *The Purpose Driven Life* by mega-church pastor Rick Warren.
 - (2. There is no reference to Jesus' succinct purpose statement of his entire ministry that we hear in Luke today.
 - b. We have almost wholly lost touch with the kind of unity that was characteristic of ancient Israel as the covenant people of God,
 - (1. called to represent the unity of all people in God's creation.

2. Our moral and social programs and efforts may be judged very good by society.
 - a. They may be held as high examples for all to follow.
 - b. But they are of a whole different order than the transformations to God's love that are at the core of Jesus' vision.
 - (1. Moralism, as well intentioned as it may be, maintains the division between "us" and "them."

3. The native American priest and writer, Anthony de Mello writes, (*Awareness*, 1990).
 - a. "We so frequently equate love with good feelings toward others, \ benevolence, \ non-violence, \ or service. But these in themselves are not love. -- Love springs from awareness. It is only as you see someone as he/she really is here/now and not as they are in your memory, \ desire, \ imagination \ or projection – that you can truly love them. Otherwise, it is not the person you love, \ but the idea that you formed of this person, \ or this person as the object of your desire, \ not as he/she is in themselves."

- C. The question about how this vision may be fulfilled in us is all about a relationship of love, \ or our awareness our unity with the other, as de Mello writes. ---
 1. One of the most vivid metaphors and image of this kind of society is St. Paul's description of the Body of Christ.

- a. Christ, crucified and risen, has become universally present.
 - b. Joined with him through the universally present love of God,\ each of us are made individually,\ members of one another.
2. It is a transformation in our self understanding that we are one in the risen Christ and one with one another.
- a. Paul's message is that being the Body of Christ in the world is a holy calling, not just a kind of membership in an institution, as it is often made.
 - b. Our own offering of the unique gifts that are given to each of us is analogous to the operation of the distinctive members in our human bodies.
3. There is much to be said of this but I'll close with this beautiful quotation from Thomas Merton from a talk he gave in Calcutta, just before he died (Spiritual Master – The Essential Writings, p. 229).
- a. He was speaking of the inter-relationship of the deep spiritual traditions of the world so it begins to touch the universal dimension of all people.
 - b. I think it is another marvelous image of the kind of life together to which we are called by the love of Christ.
 - c. "If [all] are faithful to their own calling...communication on the deepest level is possible. And the deepest level of communication is not communication but communion. It is wordless,\ it is beyond words,\ and it is beyond speech,\ and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers and sisters, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are."
- D. In the season of Epiphany we highlight our gifts and callings as Members of Christ in his church.
- 1. The Church is our training ground for being God's love for the world.
 - a. May it be for us this season.