

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

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

^{8:1} 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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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."

Commentary

The Ezra-Nehemiah story focuses on recreating a distinct Jewish identity. When the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylonia in 539 B.C., he decreed that Judahite exiles could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Many exiles returned, among them Third Isaiah, who envisioned a magnificent restoration. About sixty years later, the priest Ezra was commissioned to establish the law of Moses as a state law in Judah and to regulate temple worship. All Judahites who were married to Gentiles were required to divorce their wives or leave Jerusalem. A decade later, in 445 B.C., Nehemiah, a cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, was appointed the governor of Judah and charged with rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. The wall would enhance Jerusalem's status and security. After the wall was completed, Nehemiah enlarged the city's population by resettling Judahite villagers inside the wall. It separated Judahites from Gentiles. Nehemiah, like Ezra, also instituted religious reforms, purging the Jerusalem community of all foreign things—more exclusionary tactics aimed at rebuilding a distinctive identity and guarding ethnic purity.

Reflection

Ezra sought to protect the people's identity by forbidding intermarriage. What "walls" do you see being formed on country's borders and in people's hearts? What factors do you think best ensure a group's identity? How is Christian identity formed and preserved?

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

^{12:12} For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts.

Commentary

Paul applied this familiar body metaphor theologically to the Corinthian's own situation. With this image of a supportive, interdependent community, Paul departs from an ancient Greek and Roman ideal of dispassionate self-sufficiency. As believers they were baptized into the one "body of Christ" and drank of the one Spirit. Baptism provided them with a new shared identity in Christ, even as they retained their individuality. Later New Testament writings declared that Christ was "the head of the body, the church (see Colossians)." But for Paul, believers were not "under Christ" in the sense that the head has "power over" others. Rather, believers are "in Christ"—implying God's loving, saving power. For Paul, that saving love was revealed in many things, but most ultimately in the cross.

Reflection

How does the body metaphor go beyond being a “nice thought” and instead become truly helpful in understanding the nature of the church? What other metaphors might we use to describe our modern Christian communities?

Luke 4:14-21

4:14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ "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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ 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. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Commentary

Luke seems to have intentionally modified Isaiah (by combining 58:6 with 61:1-2). In doing so, he provides a succinct summary of Jesus' ministry of deliverance. He moved among the poor and the outcast, pronouncing God's blessing on them and criticizing the rich and the powerful. He healed the lame, cast out demons, and forgave sins—all forms of release from bondage. Significantly, Jesus did not quote Isaiah 61:2 about the day of God's vengeance. (That was the day when God would vindicate the righteous who had suffered because of their loyalty to God.) Through this brief story, Luke proclaims that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish scripture; He was the hoped-for Messiah who would deliver them. But, as we will see in next week's lection, what Jesus understood about deliverance and what His Jewish listeners understood were quite different.

Reflection

Jesus returned to his hometown synagogue and proclaimed that he was fulfilling God's promises of deliverance. What might you think if someone you had grown up with made a similar claim? Does familiarity often breed contempt?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 19

^{19:1} The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

² **Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.**

³ There is no speech, nor are there words;

- their voice is not heard;
⁴ **yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.**
- In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
- ⁶ **Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.**
- ⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
**the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;**
- ⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
**the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;**
- ⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
**the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.**
- ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
**sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.**
- ¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
- ¹² **But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.**
- ¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
**Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.**
- ¹⁴ **Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.