

Third Sunday after Epiphany/Annual Meeting Sunday/January 27, 2013

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 14-21;

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"The Audacity of Jesus' Gospel"

This past Monday, January 21, many of us watched the **Inauguration** of the President. As Kate and I watched, I was surprised to find myself getting a bit **emotional**, caught up in the spirit of it all. And it wasn't so much that I voted for President Obama, or that I support some of his positions on things, it was more about feeling **connected** to the people. Seeing the crowds there, waving their little flags, dressed in hats and mittens and coats and scarves and braving the chilly conditions, knowing too that many of those folks were out there from the very earliest times of the morning to get a good spot. In fact, we were looking for **Lynn and Don Hoenig**, who were supposed to be there someplace!

For me on that day when we were watching the induction of a **leader** for our nation, I felt at **one** with all of those folks out there, as if I were standing there right alongside them. Listening to the **commentators** give us historical and anecdotal information about all that was going on seemed to **deepen** my involvement with the event. And each song that was sung, each taking of the oath, each spoken word, seemed to bring me ever closer. I felt within me on that day, the trueness of the knowledge, that I am an **American**.

For the people in **Nehemiah's** day, somewhere in the 5th century B.C., coming together as one people was both necessary and a challenge. Nehemiah and Ezra were part of those who were first to return to Judah after the **exile** in Babylon. For more than 50 years, many of the people of Judah had been held captive and forced to serve in the Assyrian capital of **Babylon**. Now, they were **free** to return. But what they found was **devastation**. The Temple had been destroyed, there was no real governing authority and foreigners had moved in, displacing the religious and social ways that they were accustomed to.

Our passage today tells us of a **gathering of the people**. It is led by the **governor**, Nehemiah, and the **priest, Ezra**, who reads to the people the **Law of Moses**. There are **interpreters** who tell the people what the meaning of the words are, as the Law was written in Hebrew but they would have had to have it translated into the **Aramaic** which they spoke. And it was for **all of the people**, ". . . *both men and women and all who could hear with understanding*. . ." There is **ritual** involved, as we hear that the people stood for the reading which went on for quite some time, from early morning to midday. They stood, they raised their hands in the air, they shouted "Amen. Amen!", they knelt on the ground and prayed with their faces to the ground. And they wept.

I can't help but see this event and our nation's Inauguration, as very **like things**. There is ritual, there is singing, there are prayers, there are the special words, read and repeated, there are interpreters of what is being done. But mostly, there is a **uniting of the people**. They gather together, and they experience together a **spirit of oneness**, a sense that whatever the situation, no matter how **dire** the reality of what they see around them, whether it be a devastated country or a nation still reeling from the shock of an economic recession, that they will face it and they will face it **together** and in that way, they will know in their hearts, **who their God is and who they are**.

In our passage from **Luke**, Jesus has just begun his ministry. He already has a **reputation** as a powerful teacher and healer as he returns to his home town of **Nazareth**. And there in the synagogue, very likely seen as a favorite son of the community, he is given the scroll to read. And from **Isaiah**, he reads,

*"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 recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

And that seems to be okay until he decides to turn those words from **prophecy to reality**, having the **audacity** to say, *"Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* Powerful words! But what they really do, is **identify** who Jesus sees himself to be. Much more than the good little boy they all knew who grew up in their town. No, he sees himself as **God's anointed**. And his message is not quite what they expected. It is interesting to note that when you read the first two verses of Isaiah 61, you see that Jesus leaves out the line that states, *"the day of vengeance of our God."* There in the synagogue, Jesus is **forming and publicly stating his identity**, as **one sent by God** to preach good news, to proclaim freedom and liberty, to bring healing, and to proclaim the way of God's will for this world, but not to bring vengeance or violence upon their enemies. His would be a **different** message.

Today, we are gathered together on this **Annual Meeting Sunday**. This is a day when we are to look at ourselves, look at one another, and **declare** who we are. Today, we have our Sunday **ritual**, we stand and sit, we are singing our songs, bowing our heads in prayer, reading our scriptures and hearing them interpreted, bringing our gifts. Indeed, we are like the image from **I Corinthians**, where Paul speaks of the **body**, each of us members of it, though **unique** in our own fashion, and yet all a part, all **essential** to its proper working. We are the **body of Christ**, here together, and it is important that we recognize that and **celebrate** it.

So, as one who is set before you as a **pastor**, let me say to you, as those who may have experienced last year as a **difficult** one or who feel **uncertain** of this coming year, **oh people of The First Church in Belfast, United Church of Christ**, lift up your heads! Be of good courage! Let not your hearts be troubled by the worry of another year with **challenging finances**! Don't be **overwhelmed** by the thought of all the necessary work of caring for this structure within which we worship and do ministry. Be not **dismayed** by the thought of the hours of toil and sweat which may accompany the work you will do here to strengthen the weak, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, warm the cold, liberate the captives, and bring justice to the oppressed!

No! Rather, **reach out** your hands to one another, **open your hearts** to each other and to the stranger in your midst, be **filled** with the **Spirit of God** who **flies** all around and in and through this place and us, and let us celebrate **who we are** this day, The First Church in Belfast, United Church of Christ, just one part of the wider **body of Christ** in our world, the bearers of the **gospel**, the **beloved children** of God. Be filled with hope and faith and love, and let us have the **audacity** to go forward with **joy**! Amen.

Benediction

And as we prepare to go and meet and share our meal together, let me send you out with the words of Nehemiah to the people of Israel who would rebuild Judah, *"Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to those who have none, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!"* This day is holy! Let us go out with joy! Amen.