

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Westminster Students**  
**Nehemiah 8: 1-10; Luke 4: 14-21**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany**  
**January 24, 2016**

**Elizabeth Welliver:**

[Read Luke 4]

In the world of being a millennial, my most common preoccupation in life is Marina Keegan was a 22-year-old Yale student and journalist who became well-known for her writing published posthumously, following a tragic car accident. Her book of essays has become a best seller, and in the title essay, she writes, "We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that's what I want in life." We all want the opposite of loneliness – the feeling of belonging, of signing of our lives onto a common trajectory. We want to live in a way that binds us to others.

The question becomes, then, how do we form such community?

Our scripture reading from today comes from two contexts of community gathering around the Word. In the book of Nehemiah, the community of Israelites have recently returned from Babylonian exile. Their return to Zion was fraught with challenges, however. The city walls had been destroyed. Tensions prevailed between returners and the local inhabitants.

When Ezra stood before the body of women and men, he read from the Torah, the law of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Torah includes the first five books of the Old Testament. These books include the sacred stories that bound together the generations of the faithful and made for wise living. The law, from Ezra's reading, was more than a legal code – it became a way of living in community with God and neighbor. The law represents the opposite of loneliness.

This passage describes a pivotal event that led to the recreation of Judaism. Scholars refer to Ezra as the second founder of Judaism after Moses. Ezra *re-formed* the community, he joined them together according to obedience to YHWH. This same God, YHWH, revealed the commandments to the Israelites as part of their deliverance from Exodus. The law was salvific because it gave them an identity. The law served as a pathway for the people to form a just society before God, a **common life together**.

Ezra read and interpreted the law, he 'made sense' of it, by focusing on the *joy* of abiding by its statutes. When the people first heard the law, they wept, for they had failed to live up to its commandments. In response, Ezra said to them, "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." The joy of the Lord is your strength –not your self-reliance, nor your accomplishments – but the joy of relationship to YHWH.

Through Ezra's obedience to God, the law became synonymous with renewed strength and gratitude. The people came to recognize, or re-cognize, the law as a gift rather than a burden. In the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 119, "the statutes of the Lord are perfect, reviving the soul," the law is our counselor, and our wisdom. The joy of the law is fully revealed to us when Jesus reads from the words of Isaiah. Following his period of temptation in the wilderness, Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming scripture in his hometown of Nazareth. Like the Israelites, he has returned from a time of exile. He returns weakened by his fasting, and undoubtedly wrestling with questions about the future of his ministry. He came to re-form Judaism, as Ezra had done centuries before. When he read the vision of the law proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah, he returned to the roots of his identity. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he spoke. Christ's Spirit made the law real to us, alive for us – our delight and our counselor still today.

Yet the law presents us with a high demand. It asks for our full obedience to God, to love our neighbors as ourselves. To love in this way presents a high cost – what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls costly grace. For Jesus, the cost is his life, which is scary – certainly more fear-provoking than loneliness. My selfishness makes me read the law the way I want it to be read, rather than for its truth.

The temptation to misread the law is two-fold. First, we can turn following the law into legalism, or what Father Richard Rohr describes as navel-gazing Christianity. Legalism turns faith into checking boxes. We are good Christians if we abstain from curse words or alcohol – if we send in our checks to Habitat for Humanity and send our tithes to church. These are good things – we need to do them. But it is not sufficient. Legalism narrows our obedience to rote, prescribed action. We forget how to take risks. And so we forget that we rely on God's grace.

**The second temptation** is to soften the demands of the law. Much of contemporary Christianity is about feeling good, rather than being convicted by the purifying Spirit. We too soften the law to be a fossil of our Jewish ancestry. Yet Jesus says to us in the Gospel of Matthew, “I came not to abolish the law but to fulfill the law.” He came to transform the law from a set of empty customs and rituals that it had become. He came for the law to be completed, to be made full. He called to make the law perfect by extending love to every one of God’s children, so that we might live and strive for the Kingdom.

The law, then, calls us out of our self-made ways. It leads us into a **collective path of obedience**. The law draws us together, toward a life of service to God, which is perfection. **As Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, “The freedom of the Torah is a freedom in obedience.”** We come to pray to God, in the words of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, “O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom.”

**Perfect freedom in Christ opens us to relationship. It does not free us from others.** Christ’s freedom does not barricade us, tell us to build bigger walls or larger armies. Christ’s freedom allows us to enter in solidarity and thus loose the chains of bondage to classism, racism, individualism. Christ’s freedom leads us to the opposite of loneliness. Yet we resist this freedom. We do not want to be vulnerable to depend on God, let alone others, and yet that is what the law calls us to do. At some point, the law asks us to accept that autonomy is an illusion, that in the words of Professor Matt Samson, none of us is a self-made individual. Then we can look toward a new life in obedience. A life of interdependence. Of mutuality. Of common identity. The lawful life makes us focus on the Honor Code of Christianity: we will love God, and we will live to uphold the dignity of the other. The law forms a sphere of relation that binds us together. We can’t follow the law perfectly, but we can rely on the Spirit to give us the strength to love the best we can.

The Good News tells us that we cannot follow the law alone – we need God’s grace and we need each other. We need the ears of other generations to hear the law and teach us what it means today. We need others to pray, to discern, to wrestle with questions of faith.

Following Jesus challenges us to abide by the laws that run more than counter to our culture. Following Jesus asks us to enter in solidarity with the least of these - **to accept refugees into church walls, as our Presbyterian sisters and brothers have done.** This summer, I worked in Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona that did just this. Rosa Robles Loreto lived in Southside Presbyterian church for 14 months while she was threatened with a deportation order. As a ministry intern, I came to know Rosa by working on her campaign and praying with her in vigils. Every night we gathered, she taught me to pray – “God, help me to rely more on you. Though I may be scared, help me to rely on you.”

In Rosa’s prayer, I heard the opposite of loneliness. I heard a life built on more than self-reliance – I heard radical obedience. Rosa taught me that obedience means giving up your life in exchange for true faith.

Following Jesus is risky business. Following Jesus means giving up our rightness in exchange for righteousness. In the words of Father Gregory Boyle, “The strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place—with the outcast and those relegated to the margins.” Obedience leads us to stand in new places, to look at society through new eyes. Chaplain Rob Spach sometimes calls these the Kingdom goggles that we can use to compare our vision of the world with how God sees it. Are we loving the outcast, welcoming sinners, proclaiming freedom for the captives? Are we being obedient to Christ’s way of life?

To be obedient, we have to learn to walk side-by-side. We have to learn to hear the voices of people like Rosa that our loud culture seeks to silence?? silenced. We need to lend our ears to the prophets of old and new, to hear the law being proclaimed in a way that is fresh, invigorating, indeed joyful. We can fail to uphold the law, but we cannot keep God from singing over us – Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. Do not be grieved, for I bring you the opposite of loneliness – I bring you joyful obedience. As spoken in the words of Kahlil Gibran, author of *The Prophet*, “People of Orphalese, you can muffle the drum, and you can loosen the strings of the lyre, but who shall command the skylark not to sing?” Let us be joined to sing together for God’s glory, in God’s joy for all eternity.

**J.P. Flynn:**

Let us pray,

Almighty God, in you are contained all the right paths to peace. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word, and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

...We expect a lot of things from the law, in order for us to follow it with full hearts. But the law also expects a lot from us. Surely, Christian law is no exception. It is wonderful indeed to have assurances that God does not quit his contract with us; that if we follow him in the right way, we will not be led falsely. But when we discuss other forms of law, the most common talks tend towards how to change it.

What does it mean for people trying to make sense of it all? Start with the community of faith. If there is no you and me, then there is no law that puts us together. Certainly one should follow laws of one's country, but beyond that there is nothing but one's own law. {D. Boenhoeffer: And if we insist on "demands set up by their own law, and judge one another... accordingly," we do not truly follow the right path.}

The goal, as Jesus tells us, is not to change the law to fit one's own needs, but to fulfill it and push it into something better. We know Ezra and Nehemiah contributed to the re-founding, as it were, of Judaism, but we also see that they were comfortable with what they had in terms of statutes, even after a period of hundreds of years. Instead, Nehemiah, for the rest of his story, ensures that the laws that are already in place are followed, undertaking reforms and changing practices inconsistent with Biblical law.

Jesus inherits that tradition of making sure, not that everything undergoes radical change, but that our understanding and interpretation are moving forward. Indeed, Luke 16:17 suggests that "not one stroke of a letter in the law" will be dropped. However, when Jesus stands upon the Mount, he gives fresh meaning to all sorts of do's and don'ts. "Blessed are the poor, Love your enemies, Bear good fruit" – all are fabulously worded phrases to take what is right within the law and push it forward, to those who need to hear it. Here is an activity that benefits all those who hear and understand, **just as the law** is meant to do. We know then "that the law is good." [1st Timothy 1:8]

Later in that episode in Luke 17, in the middle of a long run of parables, Jesus says something interesting about the law. He compares our efforts to keep the law to a slave's effort to fulfill his master's duties. Jesus says that the slave, having put in his day's work in the field, comes in to the house, but does not earn special privileges. By fulfilling the law, "we have done only what we ought to have done." [Luke 17:10]

This analogy might be tough to hear. It's not easy to acknowledge that our fulfillment of our end of the bargain is only the beginning of God's expectations. As John Calvin states, the law is also used as guidance for a good life among others. If step 1 is the love of God, and thus doing what he asks, then part 2 is the love of our neighbors, like in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus combines both steps in this one Bible verse in Luke 4, as he proclaims God's justice by recommending strong empathy with the poor.

In the story presented in Luke, Jesus declares the law has been fulfilled. But to illuminate his position, He chooses a passage from Isaiah. He declares that he seeks not just to interpret the law, and therefore clarify certain theological positions. Jesus additionally puts forward an agenda of social justice second only to the justice of God.

Jesus declares that he comes "to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind..." We know about the ministry of Jesus, about his desire to open the eyes of all types of those who were unable to see. As for the ministry to captives, nothing could be more fulfilling than eliciting remorse from a convicted criminal, high on the cross, begging Jesus to forgive him.

Interesting it is, that Jesus would pick that particular passage to reveal as his first sermon at the synagogue. He does not reveal blessings or prophecies, parables or stories. Instead we receive the path of Jesus' ministry as it relates to those laws that came before him, laws emphasizing the justice and mercy Jesus will provide. Truly, the people of Nazareth had a right to be amazed at these honest, beautiful words.

{From beginning to end, the fulfillment of the law brings joy to those who hear it.} That's why it's called the good news. If the blind shall see, and the oppressed go free, and those who listen understand, then that is all we, as a community, can desire in fulfillment and administration to the law. [Therefore live as free peoples; love and serve the Lord.] Jesus tells us like he told the potential neighbor: Go and do likewise...

### **Sara Jane Bush:**

Holiness stresses me out.

Maybe it stresses you out, too.

Maybe holiness looks like all the things you don't do,  
or don't do well.

Holiness is the people you've heard about  
who have strict fasts,  
and live in voluntary poverty  
because they've given away everything they own.

Maybe holiness is the you know  
who somehow manages to "tithe" his time by  
spending two and a half hours a day  
reading his Bible and praying.

Maybe holiness is those people who have Bibles  
that have been highlighted and underlined and annotated  
until they are beautiful, colorful testaments to their devotion. Holiness is those things that you resolve to be  
but always fail in,  
or don't do well enough at,  
or don't even find necessary or helpful,  
but still feel guilty for not doing.

I don't know about you, but holiness gives me anxiety.

Maybe you feel the same way.

But in today's readings,  
holiness is given as a reason to rejoice.  
But the people don't get that message at first.  
The people in today's Old Testament reading  
respond to the hearing of the Law more or less as you  
would expect.

They begin to mourn.

They haven't lived up to it.

They just barely have gotten their lives back  
after a long, painful exile,  
and they've already messed up again.

To us, this might seem like an appropriate response,  
maybe even praiseworthy.

It's a good thing

to feel the grief of sin so strongly,

right?

Nehemiah stops them.

There is a time for mourning,  
but it's not right now.

Today is a day that's holy to God.

So,

he tells them,

go feast,

and drink wine,

and send portions to people who don't much  
so that the whole community can participate.

This reasoning might strike us as a little odd.

We are used to thinking of holiness

as something solemn and quiet,

much more likely to fast than to feast –

much less to “drink sweet wine,”  
as the scripture says.  
But apparently even our sorrow for our sin,  
our dissatisfaction with ourselves,  
should not constrain our unbounded joy in the Lord.  
The proper behavior on a holy day  
is rejoicing and feasting,  
and helping others to do the same.

The words of Jesus call us into a similar place.

He has come, he says,  
to bring good news to the poor  
and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.  
And this is what that means:  
he, Jesus, has come to proclaim release to the captives,  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
and to set at liberty those who are oppressed.  
The reasons we have for rejoicing  
begin to be a little clearer.

It does raise a few questions though,  
like:

are we to take this “literally”  
or “figuratively?”  
Does he mean the literal blind,  
the literal captives,  
or is it more all-encompassing and nebulous,  
meaning spiritual blindness,  
or spiritual captivity?  
Who are his words addressed to?  
And what exactly are we meant to do about it?  
The answer to the first question isn’t immediately obvious.  
Jesus obviously cared intensely about bodies.  
He healed them,  
raised them,  
fed them,  
clothed them,  
welcomed them.  
He had no hatred of bodies,  
as if they were somehow impure  
or unspiritual.

Still, if this were all,  
it hardly seems worth the Incarnation.  
Has Christ nothing to say to those of us  
who are hale and hearty,  
except the threadbare morality  
that has always been with us?  
Surely he is more than a simple,  
if miraculous,  
doctor.

And yet, if we go to the other side  
and say that he is the physician of our souls,

that he straightens us where we are bent  
and curved in upon ourselves,  
well, surely that's true!  
But if that is all we say,  
it seems to ignore,  
or at best dismiss as unimportant,  
all of the time he spent healing our diseases.  
It forgets his unfailing love and tenderness  
for those most trodden underfoot in his society.  
And so our question is not answered.

Maybe in order to find our answer  
we should change up the popular  
but not always particularly helpful question  
"what would Jesus do"  
to "what did Jesus actually do?"  
After all, if this serves,  
as it seems to,  
as a kind of definition of Jesus's mission,  
the things he actually did will serve as commentary.  
And when we do that,  
I think we find that it's a false dichotomy.  
In healing souls,  
Christ very often also healed bodies,  
and in healing bodies  
he often healed souls.  
Sometimes,  
as in the case of the demon oppressed,  
it was more or less the same thing.  
Furthermore, he displayed this unity in his own body  
in his death and resurrection.  
He physically suffered pain and death  
and was physically raised,  
and thus freed us from death  
and the seed of death which is sin.  
Firstborn from the dead,  
so that we who are baptized into his death  
may share also in his life.  
If anything is cause for rejoicing,  
surely this is!  
He has healed both the blind  
and those who could not see past  
their own self-interest,  
freed those oppressed by demons  
and those of us oppressed by our sin  
and a misguided sense of the holiness we fall short of.  
He has indeed come with good news for the poor,  
for all the poor,  
for all the blind,  
for all the captives.  
He has come with good news for all of us.

Last year I studied abroad in Scotland.  
One of the churches I worshipped in  
had a preacher whose name was Charlie.  
Charlie was a very kind,  
slightly gruff, elderly man.  
When it came time for the sermon,  
he stumped gravely up the steps of his high pulpit,  
paused to look at us all,  
and then:  
"Alleluia!  
I have a message from God!  
Believe on him, and ye shall be saved!  
Alleluia!"  
Now,  
the Church of Scotland is no more used  
to preachers shouting Alleluias in the pulpit  
than the Presbyterian Church is.  
But maybe we should try it more often.  
This is, after, all, what Jesus and Nehemiah were encouraging in today's scripture readings.  
The passages we read this morning invite us to *rejoice*,  
because a holy time is upon us,  
because Christ saves us from ourselves  
and from Death, our oppressor.  
Christ's words,  
which are for us,  
bring us into a holy time,  
a year of the Lord's favor.  
Therefore, let's take Nehemiah's instructions to heart.  
Let's rejoice.  
Let's eat and drink,  
and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, honoring them as Christ's friends,  
and their bodies as vessels awaiting resurrection,  
because this is the good news of the gospel:  
that Christ has come to give sight to the blind,  
freedom to the captives,  
and to lift up the oppressed.  
he has come to all of us, for all of us.  
Alleluia.