

“The Mission”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
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Nehemiah 8:1-10

Luke 4:14-21

*When the seventh month came and the people of Israel were settled in their towns,
all the people gathered together in the area in front of the Water Gate.*

*They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Instruction scroll from Moses,
according to which the Lord had instructed Israel.*

Nehemiah 8:1

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for your Word which has taken the form of the prayers, songs, and stories of our faith
to be our bread for the journey of life.

Thank you for words to live by, as we seek to improve and perfect ourselves as human beings, and
thank you for opportunities to joyfully share the gifts we have received of forgiveness & love.

Amen

Our lesson today from Nehemiah describes an event during the re-establishment of
Israel as a nation by those who returned as Jews from Babylonian exile.

The people gathered at the south eastern gate of the City of Jerusalem
where a platform had been constructed for Ezra the priest to read publicly
from the ‘Book of Instruction’ – the Torah which includes
the first five books of the Hebrew Bible:

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

There were 13 men up there with him – presumably to help with the reading
and 13 scholars among the people to answer their questions.

They read from early morning to midday.

This is what is called an ‘epic reading’...

Every summer at the Mystic Seaport in Mystic, CT,

there is ‘epic reading’ of a specific classic novel that takes place.

The Mystic Seaport is a re-creation of an 18th Century seafaring village
with houses and shops of the period, vintage sailing ships,

as well as a boat building facility for the construction of such vessels.

When I was serving a church in Mystic, the slave ship Amistad
was re-constructed there, which now sails around the world
to teach about slavery and the fight for freedom.

One of my favorite events at the Seaport was the epic reading of Moby Dick
by Herman Melville, which would begin at noon on a Saturday,
and participants would read continuously for 24 hours.

People would sign up to read a chapter and when it was night,
everyone would go aboard the Charles W. Morgan whaling ship
and continue reading until noon on Sunday.

Barnes & Noble here in The Villages did something similar this year,
with a public epic reading of To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee.

Willard, p.2

Each year during their Festival Gathering of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, there is an epic reading from one of the books of the Bible

One year it was the Gospel of Luke, another was the first half of the Book of Acts, and this year it will be the Song of Solomon.

In the past, I have organized such an epic reading of the Gospel of Mark.

It takes about 60 readers and an hour and a half to tell the whole story.

First, everyone would meet for spaghetti dinner then go into the sanctuary for the presentation which included readers aged 8 to 80.

An event like this celebrates stories that are the lore of a community, and stories teach us who we are, remind us where we came from, and guide us for the way ahead.

Though I prefer the connecting context of narratives,

single memory verses can be very useful to bring focus to one's belief as words of wisdom & purpose to live by.

An example of this came about the other day when I was talking

with one of our church members – you can probably guess who, as he spoke about the significance to him of “big ideas” and “words to live by”.

As we talked, he described his faith in 2 sentences summarizing two verses from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians...

From Galatians 2:20[RSV]

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me;

and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

From Galatians 5:22-23[RSV]

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.

What he said was so beautiful

in how he simply put it all together.

He didn't just recite it exactly word for word,

but taking the principal phrases and the essence of the text,

he expressed it in his own words – and made this statement his own.

These verses from Galatians are there for us all to claim

as they define what has been done for us and what gifts have been given to us.

As Christians in fellowship with one another, we must remind ourselves of these good words to live by and this Good News to be shared.

Today's Gospel lesson provides us with words that Jesus lived by in what appears to be his mission statement.

He got up to read Isaiah 61:1-2, but his words recorded in Luke, differ from traditional versions of this text in Isaiah.

Willard, p.3

In Isaiah 61:1-2 as found in the RSV, the Prophet Isaiah said:

*¹The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good tidings to the afflicted;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;*

As recorded in Luke 4:18-19 [RSV], Jesus quoted Isaiah saying:

*¹⁸ "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,
¹⁹ to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

Note that Jesus left off the part about 'the day of vengeance',
but he also made some changes to the text, leaving out the reference
to 'binding up the brokenhearted'

while adding the recovery of 'sight to the blind'.

I believe what that means – is that by his example, we have been given permission
to translate, paraphrase and reinterpret scripture for our time.

This can be dangerous business because back in the Middle Ages, William Tyndale
was burned at the stake for translating the Bible to something other than Latin.

On the other hand, new translations should not simply be to accommodate trends,
but to dig deeper and explore what these words can mean for our time.

There are many examples these days for how new scholarship is
re-examining and re-interpreting scripture, leading to the affirmation
and inclusion of people who would otherwise be left out – like women.

I believe such new approaches can be done responsibly and must be done
to keep up with the challenges before us as Christians –

and by the way, I believe this is something Muslims must do as well
with their scripture and tradition.

Nevertheless as we seek to interpret our Bible and create new traditions
of prayer and song, the only way to do this legitimately is from a perspective,
or "bias", of rational loving-kindness – a bias for love.

Deuteronomy 6:4 is the Shema of Jewish tradition...

⁴ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD;

What follows is the Great Commandment...

*⁵ and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might...*

Willard, p.4

Love is the true north, the plumb line, the litmus test
by which we can know God's will.

Love – as the will of God, is eternal and has been present all along
to emerge as the basis for a universal social ethic.

Love is the law that has been written into us like our DNA and
it is available to everyone from British atheists to Brazilian animists
and even Southern Baptists.

Love is our mission.

In a recent "Stillspeaking" devotional, Talitha Arnold wrote about
a benediction she has used for many years at her church.

It is very similar to one I have used from time to time and draws inspiration from
the words of the Apostle Paul in the Book of Romans and 1st Thessalonians.

Like our fellow church member's faith statement,
this is not a direct quote from those scriptures, but combines their essence
as a benediction that is also a sending forth on a mission ...

"Go out into the world in peace.

Have courage. Hold onto what is good. Return no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the faint-hearted. Support the weak. Help the suffering.

Honor all persons. Honor all creation.

Love and serve the Lord,

rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And may the love of God, the Light of Christ,

and the power and communion of that Spirit be with us all.

Go in peace. Amen."

The notion of having a mission statement is important.

It gives focus and meaning to what churches do.

We have a mission statement which we say together
every time we receive new members...

Our Mission Statement goes like this...

We believe God is still speaking and calls us to:

- *Worship as a Christian Community*
- *Be open and affirming*
- *Share God's love, wisdom and compassion as revealed in God's Holy Word*
- *Celebrate the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion*
- *Provide spiritual education*
- *Support missions in the community, nation and world*

Willard, p.5

You can find our Mission Statement on our church's webpage.

Our office manager, Penny Timson, has also placed our covenant which is the pledge made by those original members who signed our church's charter.

Our Covenant goes like this...

As a member of the United Church of Christ at The Villages, I will:

- *Protect the unity of our church*
- *Act in love toward other members*
- *Support the leaders of the church*
- *Accept and embrace diversity*
- *Participate each week in worship, study and prayer*
- *Perform acts of caring and kindness to others*
- *Refuse to gossip about the affairs of other members or church leaders*
- *Contribute time, talent, and financial support as much as possible to the furtherance of the mission of our church*
- *Invite as many new members into our church as possible*

Not bad for words to live by – taking the words of Christian tradition and making them our own.

Our former regional minister, The Rev. Dr. Jean Simpson, advises churches to have brief mission statements like one sentence that can be easily remembered.

That's work for another time. In the meantime, what are the words you live by?

Amen

Our lesson from Nehemiah 8:1-10 describes how the Israelite people returned from exile to re-establish themselves as a Jewish community of faith.

They did this by re-building walls, re-consecrating the Temple, and re-remembering who they were by re-reading their sacred scriptures aloud in a public gathering...

- [1] When the seventh month came and the people of Israel were settled in their towns, all the people gathered together in the area in front of the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Instruction scroll from Moses, according to which the Lord had instructed Israel.
- [2] So on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest brought the Instruction before the assembly. This assembly was made up of both men and women and anyone who could understand what they heard.
- [3] Facing the area in front of the Water Gate, he read it aloud, from early morning until the middle of the day. He read it in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand, and everyone listened attentively to the Instruction scroll.
- [4] Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that had been made for this purpose. And standing beside him were [six men] on his right hand side; while [seven men] stood on his left hand side.
- [5] Standing above all of the people, Ezra the scribe opened the scroll in the sight of all of the people. And as he opened it, all of the people stood up.
- [6] Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all of the people answered, "Amen! Amen!" while raising their hands. Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.
- [7] The Levites—[thirteen of them]—helped the people to understand the Instruction while the people remained in their places.
- [8] They read aloud from the scroll, the Instruction from God, explaining and interpreting it so the people could understand what they heard.
- [9] Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all of the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Don't mourn or weep." They said this because all the people wept when they heard the words of the Instruction.
- [10] "Go, eat rich food, and drink something sweet," he said to them, "and send portions of this to any who have nothing ready! This day is holy to our Lord. Don't be sad, because the joy from the Lord is your strength!"

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 4:14-21

- [14] And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee,
and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country.
- [15] And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.
- [16] And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up;
and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day.
And he stood up to read;
- [17] and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah.
He opened the book and found the place where it was written,
- [18] “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,
[19] to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”
- [20] And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down;
and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.
- [21] And he began to say to them,
“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”