

SOMEONE WHO HAS NOTHING

Nehemiah 8:2-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4:14-21

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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The Old Testament passage from Nehemiah records an historical event that took place soon after the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon to back home to Jerusalem.

Question: How did God's "chosen" people end up as exiles in Babylon? Briefly, here's how: after David's son Solomon died there was a civil war which resulted in God's people dividing themselves into two separate kingdoms. The result? They made themselves easy prey for their enemies ("a divided house cannot stand"). The Northern Kingdom Israel fell first then the Southern Kingdom Judea, first by the Babylonians and then by the Persians, who, thankfully had the enlightened policy of letting conquered peoples return to their homelands and govern themselves.

This morning's passage from Nehemiah tells how their sudden homecoming was quickly followed by a special gathering. All the people gathered together to hear Ezra read the Torah. All morning long the people listened attentively to their sacred stories, beginning with God promise to Abraham that his descendents would be a light and blessing to all the nations of the earth. As Ezra continue reading these stories in the Hebrew scriptures the people also heard about their ancestors' enslavement in Egypt, their liberation from bondage and their return to the Promised Land. Hearing these stories, in light of their own recent experience of being conquered, exiled and then returned home, they wept because they realized God still loved them and was going to give them another chance even though they didn't deserve it.

After reading from the Torah all morning long, noticing the people's tears, Ezra cried out, "This day is holy to the Lord, do not mourn or weep." Then he said something very practical, "Go and get something to eat and drink and be sure to share with your neighbor who has nothing...remember this day is holy to the Lord, do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

What a marvelous benediction giving both pardon and absolution and a charge. "The past is past. Let's now be wise enough to learn from past mistakes. God forgives us and with God's help we can begin all over again, starting right now by eating and sharing our lunch with those who have nothing to eat."

The Bible is the story of the Gospel of the Second Chance. Each time you come to your senses and crawl back to God, if you're truly sorry for what you've done, God always gives the opportunity to start all over again by sharing what you have with someone who has nothing. Let me repeat that. After God forgives you, you start all over again by sharing what you have with someone who has nothing.

That's probably why I became a minister. Accepting Christ's grace and forgiveness I was compelled to share what I have with those who have nothing. Maybe that's why you answered the call to discipleship. Overwhelmed by God's unconditional love you were compelled to deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow Jesus. Makes sense doesn't it? Jesus sought you out, gave you a new lease on life, a purpose for living and a new sensitivity for people in need.

You might be wondering, "What does God want me to give away?" Basically, yourself. You give yourself first to him then to your neighbor because Jesus already gave himself to you.

Luke gives us the story of Jesus' first sermon that started his ministry. His text was chosen from the Book of Isaiah.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
Because he has anointed me to bring
Good news to the poor.
He sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free..."*

(Luke 6:18-19)

Then by saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus declared the purpose of his life: to give himself to the poor, the prisoner, the blind and oppressed so those who are oppressed, as well as those who oppress, may have eternal life.

But what is eternal life? Contrary to popular opinion it doesn't begin after you die and go to heaven. When you read the gospels you realize the Kingdom of God isn't just a place, it's a way of being. That's why Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is near, or the Kingdom of God is within you. So, if God's Kingdom is imminent and within you, God wants you to pass it on to someone who's still waiting for the Kingdom to come. How do you do that? Give yourself, your friendship, your time, talent, treasure to someone who has nothing.

You've read the bumper stickers urging random acts of kindness. If you're a follower of Jesus, you move beyond doing random acts to committing systematic acts of kindness. In other words, you have a plan, you don't just react to a need, to anticipate a need and are ready for it. Find something you do well that can be incorporated in your own ministry that enables you, in the name of Jesus, to give something to someone who has no love, no hope, no joy. Your neighborhood is full of people like that.

Early last week a six page handwritten letter from an out of state federal prison was delivered to the office. It was from a young man who lived in the Loch Raven Community some years ago and for five or six months worshipped with us on Sunday mornings. He wrote he doubted he would be remembered because he kept to himself and avoided having conversations with anyone. He did remember me, but didn't remember my name and was sure I moved on. He's now serving a twenty-five year sentence for armed robbery and

wrote Babcock Church wondering if anybody would consider corresponding with him. Apparently he's still a loner, keeping pretty much to himself, so, he says, he's very lonely and would appreciate receiving letters to have something to look forward to as well as someone from "home" to talk to.

He didn't hold back recounting his downward slide into alcoholism, and when his liver gave out drug addiction. Along the way he lost his wife and son and has become reconciled to never seeing either of them ever again. He also wrote that although he works in the prison's chapel, he's become a Buddhist and that he'd understand if because of his addictions, crimes and being a non Christian no one would want to write him.

The timing of this letter is curious. I've stopped believing in random coincidences a long time ago. Instead I believe God orchestrates coincidences to make good things happen. I was debating whether or not to respond to this man's letter until I read the scriptures selected for this particular Sunday in Epiphany, first the story of with Ezra reading the Torah to the Jews after their return from exile, but especially his benediction, "Go get something to eat and drink and share with your neighbor who has nothing." Then from Luke's Gospel, Jesus' reading from the prophet Isaiah,

The Spirit of the Lord...

has anointed me to bring

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and especially his comment, "*Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

Even though this young man doesn't remember my name, I do remember him and strangely enough, though he moved away years ago, I was thinking about him lately, wondering what became of him. I got my answer when I read his letter.

So, I stopped debating with myself whether or not to write him back. Who knows, maybe the Spirit of the Lord is also calling on you today, to give yourself to the neighbor you've been thinking about lately, wondering how his or her life is going and whether or not God wants you to get reconnected.

This morning God is prompting me to encourage you to share with your neighbor who has nothing. Start by taking inventory of your gifts and talents, what you do well and brings you satisfaction, then use your gifts and talents to become the difference in your neighborhood, workplace or classroom that is the mission field God has given you.

An essential question each of us should always be asking, "Lord, what do you want to accomplish through me at this time?" A second but equally important question, "Lord, what's your vision for this congregation in this neighborhood?"

May God bless you all. And remember, “This day is holy to the Lord, do not mourn or weep. Now go get something to eat and be sure to share with your neighbor who has nothing, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”