

The Driving Force

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Season of Reconciliation

January 27, 2013

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Texts: Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6,8-10;
Psalm 19;
1 Corinthians 12.12-31a
Luke 4.14-21

I don't think it is just me because I've seen others of you needing this as well. But it seems that for the last couple of weeks you had better keep some Kleenex nearby when coming into worship. And I'm not referring only to the two funerals of this last month. It's been happening throughout this season of reconciliation that some Word from God, whether in Scripture or testimony or song or sermon, moves me to tears.

So when I came to this text from Nehemiah for today I felt some kinship with the people gathered together in the square hearing the Word of God and weeping as the impact of what they were hearing began to dawn on them. Two weeks ago it was the pairing of the passage from Isaiah "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" with the witness to reconciliation that John Koch shared. I was struck by how God "redeemed" (if you will) a very dark time in his life through the people around him: his wife, a friendship, the Men's Breakfast.

Last Sunday it was in hearing the gospel of John and noting that Mary's last recorded words in the gospel were "Do whatever Jesus tells you." And listening as Gordon linked Mary's last words to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last recorded words and to know that the night before he was killed he spoke about his clarity of vision and purpose - his commitment to do what Jesus told him - to speak the Word of God and to keep holding this nation accountable for its racism and injustice - and to do so without fear. Directly from that Word we heard Jean Cook describe how she has come to be reconciled to this life even when death comes to steal those we love.

That is to speak only of what we have been hearing in worship. When I went to the Shower of Stoles open house and read the stories of the people for whom these stoles have been given when I saw the video about why this exhibit was started in the first place, I felt God's Spirit bring me to my knees. And I fully expect to be confronted and convicted by God's Word as I sit and watch the film *The Line* later today and in the training tomorrow night on community development. I've been hearing a similar word of challenge from those studying together the book *Radical Reconciliation*.

The questions that the Word of God raises in this season are relentless! How can we work for reconciliation in the face of racism and poverty? How can we build coalitions for reconciliation in our neighborhoods and communities? How can we do a better job of walking alongside each other when we are grieving or suffering from depression? Then we come to the gospel for today when Jesus names his mission (a mission he has entrusted now to us) as nothing less than proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...this is a daunting mission!

It feels right that we bow our heads in worship and let the tears flow to grieve for the suffering of the world and the suffering of our own souls and to grieve for our failures in carrying out this mission Jesus has entrusted to us. I feel a kinship with the people from Nehemiah standing at the gate hearing the word of God and weeping as the impact of what they were hearing begins to dawn on them.

Which makes it all the more striking to hear how this passage ends. After observing the weeping of God's people at the gate, we hear this exhortation: "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep....Go on your way..." It's a surprising conclusion to what was clearly a stirring and convicting service of worship. People were moved and then they are told: "Don't just sit there and wring your hands or pound your chest and make lofty proclamations...just get up and get on with your life....go on your way."

I was thinking where does your way take you? I suspect it is somewhere different from where my way takes me or where it takes the person next to

you. Think about the varied lives we all live. Think about the people we touch, the places we go, the influence we have. Then think about the people who gather around God's Word all over the world. Think of the combined impact, energy, and influence that is unleashed as we go on our way eating the fat and drinking the sweet wine of all we have experienced together. Someone sent a note last week using exactly that metaphor of a well-balanced wine to describe their experience of worship

Although I think the passage from Nehemiah means this quite literally. People are to go on their way feasting – eating rich food and drinking good wine – to go on their way in a spirit of celebration. And here is how the impact of God's Word begins to widen beyond the circle of those gathered: send portions of this feast to those for whom nothing is prepared. The spirit of celebration naturally moves us into a spirit of generosity as the good gifts of God are multiplied through us.

I recognize that there are multiple driving forces present in scripture. Justice, for instance, is often fueled by anger. Anger is a powerful motivating force and righteous anger has its place. We see it in the prophets. We see it at moments in Jesus himself. It doesn't strike me, though, as the predominant driving force for Jesus as I read the gospel. More often than not we see Jesus being driven by a Spirit of love and delight; of celebration and rejoicing.

We said goodbye to a dear saint of God this week. The funeral for Barbara Borr Veurink was held here yesterday afternoon. The witness of her life was a testimony to the powerful impact that can be made in the world when your driving force is joy; the joy of the Lord to be precise. The book of Nehemiah is right. We *are* strengthened by the joy we find here in God's Word, at God's Table.

Yes, there are times when God's Word moves us to tears, when that happens, we need to let those tears flow for the suffering of the world, for the failures of our lives. For me, anyway, I recognize that my tears have at times been for the sheer magnitude of God's grace that can meet our suffering and failure and give to us a strength and resolve we could never imagine.

“This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep...Go your way – eat the fat and drink the wine – share with those for whom nothing is prepared – this day is holy to the Lord – do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Keep in mind that as you go your way, I will go mine, and so will the person sitting next to you. We are all just *one* part of the body of Christ at work in the world. This is good news! None of us has to be the center of everything; single handedly leading the force for reconciliation on each and every front.

You really can just go on your way as long as you take with the rich food and the sweet wine that you find here from God’s Word and at God’s Table. Take it with you, share it freely and God will do great things.

Go on your way. The joy of the Lord will be your strength.

But first, come, eat and drink...for all things are now ready!