

Sermon at St. Thomas January 21, 2007

by Lynn E. Cunningham

Epiphany 3

Nehemiah 8:2-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-17; Luke 4:14-21.

1. St. Thomas as a church community holds a sacred trust. I do not really know what that sacred trust is, because only the Holy Spirit know it fully. But I understand that sacred trust to be:
 - a. First, keeping the sacred tradition of Christianity alive in our time by our naming and witnessing to the Holy One.
 - b. Second, being stewards of this sacred land, our true home.
 - c. Third, to care for one another, including the stranger, as if caring for family.
 - d. St. Thomas' sacred trust is something like this.
 - e. I have stated this in a heavy way, but at bottom, the trust is a very light hearted celebratory thing.
2. The Nehemiah passage we just heard about Ezra reading the Torah to the people of Israel is old. Older than this church of 100 years, older than the petroglyphs found up in Torrey Creek Canyon. Older than the Greek and Roman empires. Really, really old.
 - a. The events in this passage occurred in about 400 BCE. The Israelite nation had just been returned from 70 years in exile in a foreign land, in Babylon, returned to their sacred land. And they were remembering and re-learn how to be religious people and how to care for their sacred land, the Promised Land. They had to re-learn what was their sacred trust.
 - b. They had lost connection with much in their religion during the exile. Ezra the prophet, Nehemiah the ruler, and the other leaders of the nation had determined to restore the ancient sacred Temple where Israel had worshiped, the center of their religion. In digging around in the ruins of the old Temple, so the story goes, someone had discovered the text of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. In this passage today, Ezra reads most of this newly rediscovered text to the whole nation of the Israelites gathered before him to teach them anew who they were as a people. Who their God was. What the laws were for maintaining their community. After spending seventy years in Exile in Babylon, the people are moved to tears by connecting openly and deeply again with Yahweh, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
 - i. The reading takes place with all the elders gathered around as if to lend their personal authority to the Torah.
 - ii. The people named in the passage are affirming that they are members one of another, and deeply connected as one body to God.
 - c. And what is one conclusion to all this reading and Bible study, and weeping, and mourning? Ezra tells them, stop weeping; go out and have great, big party, to eat the fat, and to drink sweet wine, and to make sure everyone gets in on the meal! That is what it literally says! The sacred trust is grounds for a celebration!

3. It reminds me of our Wednesday noon-day bible study. I first suggested when we started that someone bring in a little soup and bread so we could have something to eat during the study. But interestingly, every week the lunch meals have grown more and more elaborate. Two weeks ago, there was an delicious soup by Kay Jacoby, three kinds of cheeses, two kinds of fruit, a variety of crackers and breads, plus tea and coffee, and cookies. Have you noticed how last week Dick during our Sunday service announcements, invited everyone to the lunch on Wednesday, and, then said, oh by the way, there might be some bible study mixed in there somewhere?
4. This parish – and Dubois in general – celebrates with food and feasting frequently! Clearly this church gets that part of its sacred trust, the part about celebrating often, just as Ezra instructed the people to do after the reading of the Torah!
5. The passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is oddly similar to the Nehemiah passage.
6. Corinth in Paul’s day was a rip-roaring, wide open town where anything went. Maybe like Dubois in the “good old days”. Plenty of wine, free-spirited women, and boisterous music. A big seaport. Everyone ready to have a wild good time. One of the ancient Greek words for fornication was “Korinthiazein”, which roughly translates as, to “Corinthicate”.
7. We moderns might read this chapter 12 passage as a kind of sweet and gentle reminder of how people in the church are to get somewhat sentimentally, but not literally attached to each other in polite ways. However, this passage, in not really nice at all. Paul confronts these Corinthians about their scandalous and outrageous behavior.
8. I can easily imagine the Corinthians writing back to Paul in response to his letter, Dear Paul. We can assure you that we have long enjoyed becoming members one of another. We promise we will do so often, today, and in the future. We love becoming members one of another! They knew how to celebrate, but in scandalous ways.
9. Imagine Paul reading their letter in response to his, and asking his scribe with some puzzlement, what are they talking about? Members one of another? And the scribe says gently, I do not think that the Corinthians meant, dear Paul, what you meant.
10. Paul begins chapter 12 with these words: “Now brethren, concerning spiritual gifts, I do not want you to be uninformed...”. Like Ezra to the Israelites, Paul reminds the Corinthians of who they are really are as human beings, as children of God. That they have a sacred trust to fulfill.
11. Sexual and other exploitation of each other is not what being Christians is all about. And so, the passage and the setting is oddly similar to the Nehemiah passage. The intended hearers of the passage are being affirmed that they are members one of another in a spiritual sense, and deeply connected as one body to God. They should surely celebrate in their lives together, Paul would say, but presumably Pauls means celebrating in a more moderate way, a way that avoids “Corinthicating”, a way that upholds their sacred trust.
12. The passage from Luke’s Gospel tells of Jesus coming into the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and, yes, once again, reading to the members there from an ancient sacred book, this time from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Whatever else Jesus may have been trying to do, he was giving a reading that is designed, like Ezra, like Paul, to

- awaken the congregation to the fact that they are deeply connected to one another through their connection with God. Just how are they deeply connected? Jesus says that because the Spirit of the Lord was upon Isaiah and now is upon him, There is to be no more oppression and slavery, no more poverty, no more holding people captives, no more blind ones, among them. In that society, which lived under the yoke of Roman Imperial rule, oppression and slavery, prisoners and poverty were widespread.
13. For good reason the people of his home synagogue thought he was crazy. And drove him away. Jesus was subversive in a way that threatened the secular, political and religious order for them.
 14. Yet, like Ezra and Paul's listeners, Jesus' listeners to that passage from Isaiah are being affirmed that they are members one of another, and deeply connected as one body to God, caretakers of a sacred trust, even if they thought he was totally crazy.
 15. Moreover, I read this passage to mean that Jesus was asking those Nazarenes to lighten up. Jesus was showed them that life centers on freedom and liberation, celebration, and abundance. Life should not be centered on glumly living in the terror, imposed by the Roman imperial yoke. Not for Ezra, not for Paul, and not for Jesus. And now, not for St. Thomas. Our sacred trust calls for us to study, to reflect, to pray, and then to live into the freedom and abundance that God wills for us, with celebration, with eating the fat, with drinking sweet wine.
 16. For some of us, of course, that sweet wine drinking is going to be figurative.
 17. Holding on to the sacred trust today is a challenge as it was for our ancestors. How many have come into church feeling today inwardly like coming in from the bitter cold?
 - a. How many come in today for a moment for shelter from a culture, a society that sometimes regards any sort of religious expression as outmoded and slightly wacky?
 18. Are we not listening to our respected elders read to us from sacred texts that in our case are many centuries old, as the people around Ezra did?
 19. Does it not feel sometimes like we living out there in a culture, like the the Israelites of Ezra's time, and like the members of the Nazareth synagogue did,
 - a. where our prisons are overflowing with prisoners,
 - b. Where people in too many places have been driven into exile,
 - c. where families are sometimes so poor that they are living in their old cars?
 - d. Our own modern culture is not so different in many ways from the culture surrounding Ezra, Paul, and Jesus in Nazareth.
 20. Are we not here today, like Ezra, Paul, and Jesus, for the purpose of taking a moment to rest in the holy and to find peace and restoration, in a way that nothing else in our culture can give? Are we not here to celebrate and enjoy God's abundant grace in our lives?
 21. I will say it again. St. Thomas as a church community holds a sacred trust, as do many other churches and worshipping communities.
 - a. First, to keep the sacred tradition alive in our time by naming and witnessing to the Holy One who is continually in our midst, as Ezra, Paul and Jesus did in their times
 - b. Second, to be stewards of this sacred land where we live, our true home, as

Nehemiah affirmed the sacred land of Israel, Paul sought to convert Corinth to a sacred place, and Jesus sought to restore his home synagogue to its sacred trust.

- c. Third, to care for one another, like family, like for your own body, as Ezra and Paul and Jesus did in their times.
22. A sacred trust that surprisingly challenges the people just to lighten up, to enjoy the humor of life, to feast together, and drink the sweet wine and just let the abundance of the Lord surround us.
23. Next Sunday, our parish gathers for its annual meeting and retreat to face our challenges like our ancestors did. I hope you will come to the retreat with prayers, and questions, and thoughts about how this community can carry out its sacred trust in the coming 2007 year and later years. Bring your toughest questions, and your fondest hopes.
24. But if you just bring these things, you will not really carry out the sacred trust. To do that, also bring your funniest jokes, your best stories, and share your best dish to pass for all of us to feast on together.
25. You have and hold a sacred trust from when you have been marked as Christ's own forever.
26. Now celebrate with me that sacred trust.
27. In Jesus name, Amen.