

Weekly Reading – Monday, January 18, 2010

Here are my comments on the lessons for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, which is January 24, 2010. A great series of texts!

Nehemiah 8: 1 - 3, 5 - 6, 8 - 10

In the midst of the long and often discouraging process of rebuilding after the Exile, there is an assembly of all the people, the whole community, for a reading of the Torah. The reaction of the people in hearing the reading and interpretation of the law was to weep. Why? Grief, I imagine. Grief for what they had lost. Grief for their own failures. Grief upon hearing the old, old story that they had all but forgotten, but which named and claimed them. Like them, we remain a people of the book, of the story. Like them, we often forget or neglect our story. Sometimes when people who haven't been to church for a long time return, they spend a lot of time weeping. They usually don't know exactly why. Possibly remembering their childhoods in the church? Possibly weeping for lost years? Not easy to fathom. But it seems that there is likely some similarity between the two experiences. And often such weeping is, in the end, healing.

I Corinthians 12: 12 - 31a

Paul continues wrestling with, "managing," the polarity of unity and diversity in the church with his metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ. This image validates both unity (one body) and diversity (many parts). When unity overpowers diversity it becomes uniformity. When diversity overpowers unity the result in fragmentation and disarray. We need both: unity and diversity and have to manage that polarity rather than resolving the polarity in favor of one or the other. In more liberal churches the tendency is toward letting diversity overwhelm unity. There is frequently no clear sense of the center, of the core mission or purpose. Paul holds the tension. The body has many different parts. But we need one another. We are one body. Interesting how contemporary something that is so ancient can be.

Luke 4: 14 - 21

Jesus' inaugural sermon at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. If you look inside the word "inaugural" you find the word "augur," which means discerning or pointing to the future as in "augury." So this event does point to and foreshadow the future. Initially Jesus is well-received. "All spoke well of him." But (and this gets into next week's lesson) he is rejected and the townspeople are so incensed they attempt to kill him. Note that he reads from their own (his own) Scriptures, which is to suggest that the Bible is both the greatest friend and the greatest enemy of the community of faith. Everything that would challenge us most deeply is right here, right there, in this odd, disordered and difficult book, a book that reads us as much as we read it. Jesus reads from Isaiah to remind Israel of its core mission or its vocation, to be a blessing to all the people's of the earth, to bring good news to the poor and healing to the broken. Jesus then makes an interpretive move which closes the gap between stated ideals and present realities. In him the two become one. "Today these words are fulfilled in your hearing." We're often okay with our ideals so long as no one insists they actually become

real. Both this lesson and the one from Nehemiah remind us of the power and strangeness of the Bible, the Scriptures, and of their function in the church and community of faith. One thing you can say for the people depicted in these stories they weren't indifferent. They wept. They grew angry. They weren't ho-hum. Maybe we aren't either when the Book is taken seriously. Maybe it's as dangerous now as then?