

Our Regimen

Nehemiah 7:53c-8:12; Luke 4:14-21

There are two words most Presbyterian Christians don't usually put together in the same sentence: "worship" and "joy." We say worship was "meaningful, or inspiring, or instructive." But unless we went to an African American funeral or perhaps a jazz mass we don't usually say "worship was joyful; it was a whole lot of fun."

You and I also hear a lot *out* of the Bible during worship. But as Jill Duffield, the editor and publisher of *The Presbyterian Outlook* wrote recently, seldom do we hear *how people actually worshipped* in the Bible. In today's two readings we hear what people actually did when they went to what we call church.

We know from history that Israel was sent into exile by the Babylonians in 587 BC. The leaders were taken to Babylon, present-day Iraq, and the rest were allowed to be subsistence farmers on the land. After a few decades a cup bearer for the king (literally a wine taster to make sure the king wasn't being poisoned) named Nehemiah convinced the king to send him back to Israel. Nehemiah wanted to rebuild both the walls of Jerusalem and then the Temple of Jerusalem.

We jumped into the story at a place called the Water Gate. At the Water Gate adults and teenagers of both genders (anyone who had been Bar or Bat Mitzvaed) heard the Law, what we call the First Five Books of the Bible. The Bible says it took Ezra and his priest assistants four hours to do it, and they were standing the whole time.

The people wept. It had been so long since the Law had been read that there was a wave of regret and shock.

Ezra responds. He says, in effect, "Knock it off! Don't cry." The Bible says "Go your way, eat the fat and drink the sweet wine and send portions of the fat and the wine to those from whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to the Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

When I was a kid we sang a song called "The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength." It was a particularly happy song. (I'll not sing it now but I could.) There were hand motions and actions to it. Before joy, I want us to look at Ezra's three admonitions of what leads up to the joy.

The first command is to "go your way."

When I was an undergraduate I learned that every symphony has four movements. I cannot remember them now but they're distinct. In lay person's language the theme is laid down in the first movement. It's played within the second. It's rested in the 3rd movement. And in the fourth it's summarized, and brought to close.

It's much the same with worship. Like a symphony, there are four movements. They're in your bulletin each week: Gathering, Word, Thanksgiving, and Sending. Ezra only plays the last movement of

worship—the Sending. We’re not to sit on what we just heard, even if it involves four hours of standing. We’re to get up and do something with it—apply it to our lives, share it, speak of it.

We had a custom in my home growing up: Sunday dinner. After morning Sunday School and worship, my mom would prepare a formal dinner and we would gather around the dining room table. Sometimes the discussion would turn to the sermon. On more than one occasion my mom would say ever so sweetly “let’s not have roast preacher.” Do you ever have a roast preacher at your house? 😊 Ezra didn’t want them to have roast preacher, he wanted them to go.

Specifically, he wanted them to (in a direct translation of the Hebrew) “eat the fat and drink the sweet wine.”

(I may have told this story before but it’s about eating the good stuff.) When I was in Africa for my seminary internship I learned that it was customary for a wedding or funeral to kill a lamb or a cow for the reception. It’s also customary to serve anyone who comes, even if they didn’t know the couple or deceased.

I lived in subsistence farming country. I was told that neighbors send their shepherd boys to these feasts to see whether they were serving lamb, or beef. If it was beef the neighbors would come; if it was chicken or lamb, no. In Ezra’s words, the neighbors were only interested if they ate the fat—the beef--of the land.

Part of joy is food—abundant, well prepared--and sweet wine, that is, drink of the highest quality.

This past Thursday night I had what ten of us call the Manly Book Club. I was tired as Thursday night is the end of my work week. I had seen that night’s host of the book club at Trader Joe’s earlier in the day. I thought we were going to have simple fare. When I got there we had a grand spread: abundant trays of food from Naan Café, the Indian place in the Alberston’s shopping center. The wine, and even champagne, was superb. The desserts from Martha Green’s were to die for. The book, by the way was terrible. But the food and fellowship was great. As I went to bed I thought “That’s the best time I’ve had in a long while.”

Food and drink is an essential part of how we do joy. That’s why one wise elder said about building out the basement of this Sanctuary—you need a place to cook and serve food and to talk and laugh if you ever wanted to make the space below a place for meeting.

At the end of time, according to Revelation, we are invited to a rich meal, the “marriage supper of the Lamb.” Jesus chose a meal to wash his disciples’ feet and tell them by washing their feet that he loved them to the end. Ezra sent us out to eat, too. He told the worshippers not to grieve about how bad they’ve been, but, in effect, “to go party.”

His third command was *to share*—give a portion to anyone who doesn’t have enough. An essential part of the joy is sharing. Sharing is what economists call a multiplier.

In this church we institutionalize sharing with our deacons, by giving them money so they can share with those who have less. Ezra wants us to share ourselves. That will make our joy complete. We can share the Word or we share our abundance. Sharing feeds joy.

We go. We eat and drink. We share.

Five centuries later Jesus picked up a Scroll, opened it to Isaiah and read the first verse and phrase of Isaiah 61, verses 1 and 2. Jesus pointedly left out how that proclamation continues to proclaim “the day of the Lord’s vengeance.” Jesus agrees with Ezra: it’s about joy, not recompense; mercy not judgment.

Our pictures of Jesus are either him with a halo or with a solemn, subdued face. But the one my colleagues in my first church had on his office wall was Jesus with a smile. Remember, Jesus was accused by the legal beagles of his day of going to too many parties and hanging out with “the wrong crowd.”

Jesus was about joy, and the worship he commended was about joy. The preacher to the Hebrews thinks so: “who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. This is the same author who begins by saying Jesus is the “exact representation of God’s nature.” Jesus is about joy. God is, too.

I have to be honest: joy does not come naturally to me. My father noticed this in me as a young adult and said, “Son, you need to lighten up.” That’s why the beautiful calligraphy poster on the wall of the Holy Spirit Retreat Center in Encino made such a deep impression on me many years ago: “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” I have a copy my then girlfriend, now wife, made for me as I go out my office door. Not duty, not reward. Not moral correctness, not saying all the right things. Joy is its own reward. It is found infallibly in the presence of God. A psalmist writes [16:1], “you show me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy. At your right hand are pleasures forever more.”

We keep trying to make it more complicated than being in the Presence. And it’s true: the way of resurrection (true joy!) goes through the cross. But Ezra and Jesus’ word to us is rather than pout or lament how much we fall short after we hear the Word, we are simply to “go our way, eat of the fat and drink of the sweet wine, and share what we have with those who have not received a portion.”

That’s joy.

A few weeks back I went to see a spiritual director, a retired Episcopal priest. Not surprisingly, I wanted to talk about something. After about 40 minutes he stopped me and asked “how’s your prayer life?” I replied with one word: “rigid.” He responded “what’s so bad about being rigid? It’s regular, you keep doing it. It sounds like you do some good things.” I’m not sure I agree—daily prayer is a hard practice to keep fresh. But at least he pointed out that rigidity, what one might call a regimen, is not necessarily a bad thing.

It’s the joy of the Lord which is our strength. Hearing the Word, even for four hours, *and then*, and only then, going, eating and drinking well, and sharing-- always sharing, that leads to life.