

The First Reading is from the Book of Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10:

¹ All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ Ezra read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

The people of God had returned to the holy city of Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile to find their beloved city in ruins. The Book of Nehemiah recounts the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah, a government worker in the employ of a foreign king, becomes the building contractor for this work. He worked with stones and mortar, partnering with Ezra, a scholar and teacher of the law of God, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The text we just heard occurs after the rebuilding of the wall is complete and hence, worship is in order.

Worship is in order in our gospel text as well. According to Luke, Jesus had returned to Galilee from the wilderness filled with the Spirit. Jesus then began teaching in Galilean synagogues and everyone praised him. On the Sabbath we find Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth.

The Second Reading is from the Gospel of Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then Jesus began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The Living Word of God. Thanks be to God.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Just who is this Jesus who unrolled the scroll of Isaiah to this very passage in his hometown synagogue? Who is this man who said at the conclusion of his reading, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing?” Just who is this Jesus, whom we believe was not only human, but fully divine?

In these questions I hear Jesus ask his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Some in the synagogue that day knew Jesus to be the son of Joseph. We understand Jesus to be the babe born in Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph. In this reading from Luke, Jesus reveals the template for his entire ministry. These words bear witness to the perspective from which Jesus walked among us, words quoted from the prophet Isaiah and declared in the Gospel of Luke.

This passage is not only central to who Jesus is, it is also central to who we are if we claim to be followers of Christ. If we claim Christ, then this passage is to inform our actions as individuals and as the gathered community of faith. It is a template that describes what God hopes for all of humanity, where God’s people love what God loves.

Through this textual quote from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus is declaring the emphasis of his ministry among us. Jesus does not discard the poor, he brings the poor good news, or as Mary said in her song of praise, “God lifts us the lowly, fills the hungry.” Christ’s compassion overflows to those who are disenfranchised by human principalities and powers, those who are left out or left behind, those who are not considered worthy of notice, those whom others cast out or cast off. Jesus was found wherever there was need.

What about us? Are we on the ground wherever there is need? If we were to unroll the scroll from Isaiah and read this text, would it describe your ministry or my ministry or our ministry together?

Our denomination operating manual, The Book of Order, describes who and what we are called to be as followers of Christ: “The Church is called to be Christ’s faithful evangelist participating in God’s activity in the world through its life **for others** – healing, reconciling, binding up, feeding, caring, engaging, giving, sharing, serving.”

Did you hear what I heard? “The Church is called to be... **for others.**” As a church our emphasis is to be “**for others,**” for those struggling to survive on our streets in the cold of winter, for those struggling to put food on the table, for those without employment, for those struggling with addictions, for those struggling to create healthy life-giving relationships with each other, for those fleeing for their lives from violence, for those who have yet to hear of the good news of Jesus Christ in our neighborhoods.

This church, just like any church, came into being because it was called to participate in “God’s activity in the world through its life **for others** - healing, reconciling, binding up, feeding, caring, engaging, giving, sharing, and serving.” So, I ask again: What is the emphasis of our

ministry?

Nehemiah's ministry emphasis was clear. He felt called to lead the people of God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But was this their only purpose, to rebuild the wall for their protection? I don't believe so because the people of God wept when they heard the law read. "Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding." He read from the law from morning until midday, a nice short reading by the way! On hand that day were a number of other teachers who helped the people get a sense of the word, possibly translating the Hebrew text into common Aramaic. And with their understanding of God's word came tears, "For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law."

Now we don't know the exact reason for their tears, for their reasons could many. Perhaps they were overcome with regret for the loss of the Torah during their exile. Perhaps they were tears of joy for a sense of God's abiding presence and providential care that brought them back to Jerusalem. Or perhaps they were reminded that their actions fell short of God's expectations of them.

Yes, it's quite possible that the word so plainly interpreted made their transgressions obvious. It's quite possible that they realized that their ways during the exile had not been God's way. Yet notice, what Ezra does. In the context of worship, he speaks of transformation saying, "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." The peoples' tears may have been motivated by confession, but Ezra proclaims that they shouldn't stay mired in their failures. Their weeping is turned into a joyous feast where provision is shared with those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy proclaims Ezra and Nehemiah, for the joy of the Lord will be our strength!

What a wonderful image for us to behold. That our worship would be transformative. You see, even though we hear these words from Nehemiah and Luke as a challenge to examine ourselves, we are not to be paralyzed by our shortcomings. Sure, there are times when we only have energy and concern for ourselves. Sure there are times when our focus is only inward. Sure, there are times when we struggle to see beyond the safety of the walls we have built in our lives. Even so, God calls us to trust in the strength of God's joy for our lives. God knows we will stumble and fall yet God chooses even us – you and me - to be faithful evangelists for others.

You see Luke left something out of the Isaiah passage that Jesus would have read that day. Luke quotes Isaiah 61:2a, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," but he leaves out 61:2b, "and the day of vengeance of our Lord." Luke's omission suggests that he understood Jesus' central ministry was not about condemnation or judgment of what we do wrong or how we fall short. Jesus' central ministry was to bring good news to the poor, to all in need of the joy of the Lord. Jesus' central ministry was to be **for others**.

So, I ask again - What is the emphasis of our ministry together? Why has God chosen us to be God's church at this particular time and place in history? Are we a church that is **for others** – focused on healing, reconciling, binding up, feeding, caring, engaging, giving, sharing, and serving others? [Pause]

The Rev. Joan Gray, a former moderator of the General Assembly commented, "When you think about the first century church, the Holy Spirit is the only thing it had going for it. It had no buildings, no budget, no paid staff, and very few members." Gray continued saying, "The opposite situation faces us today."

“We have buildings,” which in our case need repair, especially our boiler. “We have budgets,” which we have set to accomplish our goals. “We have paid staff,” like myself who represent a large part of our budget. “We have members,” about 190 of them. But, do we, as Rev. Gray asks, have the Holy Spirit? Is the Spirit at work within us and through us as a church? We obviously have buildings, budgets, paid staff, and members, but do we welcome the Spirit at work within us whose template for our lives whispers and roars, “Be for others”?

I shared last week that our cold weather shelter, organized by churches working together has been shut down by the city. I heard that there was a meeting this past week and the city has affirmed that it will not allow the cold weather shelter to reopen at the Set Free Church. Yet, community pastors are not giving up. There is a gathering this Tuesday at 1:00 P.M. and the thought is we don’t need the city to solve this problem. What if the church, just decided to be the church? To be for others, those struggling with homelessness, in whatever way is possible? One suggestion is, what if every church housed just a couple of folks? I have no idea where our conversations will take us, but I do know that we cannot ignore the reality of the world around us. Pastor Ron and I participated in the Point-in-Time Count this past Thursday, which is designed to identify those who are struggling with homelessness.

Our gird on Thursday morning was from Colton to Citrus, and from Church to Judson, which incorporates Sylvan Park and the space on either side of the 10 freeway. We encountered 9 people on Thursday morning, with three willing to talk with us to complete the survey. A young man who slept overnight in a park gazebo. A woman and her two dogs who slept in a van with her husband but was dropped at the park while her husband went to work. And another woman who slept in her car. The women said they had income, but not enough to secure a place to live. The young man had no income. Regardless of how these individuals ended up being counted on Thursday morning, I believe that we are called as a church to be for others - focused on healing, reconciling, binding up, feeding, caring, engaging, giving, sharing, and serving others.

The Spirit is most visibly present among us when we remain true to this calling, when we participate in God’s activity in the world **for others**. Biblical commentator Carol Hess reminds us that, “Whatever we take to be the heart of the gospel will be the central shaping force in our life of faith.”

What is the heart of the gospel that shapes your life? What is the heart of the gospel that shapes our life together as a church? Is the heart of the gospel that shapes us the one that Jesus declared for himself? Christ was **anointed for service, service for others**. I believe we are anointed for service, **service for others**, too.

The questions for us today is, “Will we follow in Christ’s footsteps?” I pray so. Amen.