

Reflections On The Lectionary – Christina Smerick

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

I like to tell my students that the Bible is full of itself.

What I mean by this, of course, is that different books of the Bible quote other books all the blessed time—as we see here, with Jesus reading from Isaiah, and Ezra reading from Torah. We have a tale of two sermons here—two different times, separated by 400 years, where two men interpreted Scripture for those before them. In both cases, the men claim that they bring Good News—and in both cases, it’s not exactly received that way. This is daunting for a preacher—basically today’s lessons show us sermons gone wrong, received poorly. I’m grateful there are no nearby cliffs! It is an odd feeling, participating in the interpretation of interpretations of...interpretations.

ANYWAY I’m not up here to navel gaze. I’m here to do the only things preachers should do at the end of the day: proclaim the Good News. And that IS a common theme in our Scriptures this morning: the Word of God is Good News! The word of God, read and interpreted by Ezra to all the people, men, women, children, anyone who could understand, is a word that should be followed by celebration, an eating of the fat and drinking of the good stuff.

And yet the first response of those tired, worn-out Judeans to the word of God was...weeping. Hold onto that.

Then in the Luke passage, we see Jesus reading from Isaiah, and it is good news indeed! Release of the captives! Recovery of sight! The oppressed freed! Jubilee declared! Yet, after their initial amazement, when Jesus continued (which is not in our reading today) to explain just how far this good news went, to just how many people...their response was less than joyful. Specifically, they tried to chase him off a cliff.

Why? Why weeping and attempted murder? How could proclaiming the Good News possibly lead to these responses?! What’s wrong with these people? Surely we would never react to Jesus preaching before us with bloodlust and fear.

Or do we, even now, react to the Good News with something less than enthusiasm and joy? Yeah. And that’s because sometimes the Good News of God can also be hard news to hear. Because this kind of good news, proclaimed by Ezra, echoed in the Psalm, boldly stated by Jesus, and elaborated upon in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, is not the kind of news you walk away from unchanged. Not if you know what’s good, what’s truly good, for you. The Good News can be hard news because this word of God will not feel good if you remain unchanged.

Let’s walk through this a bit. Ezra reads the word of God and interprets it. The people weep. It has to be said to them: “Don’t grieve or mourn! Celebrate!” Why did they weep? Some commentators have suggested that they wept for joy, but that is a poor

interpretation (I think) because why, then, would they be told not to grieve? No, these were not tears of joy initially. Tears of guilt, perhaps. A recognition that the covenant has not been kept, even as they toiled and labored under harsh conditions to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem itself. While they worked hard at the trappings of their nation and religion, at repairing the prideful center of their former identity, the heart, the lifeblood, has been forgotten. They mourn their own failings, perhaps. But what is so lovely about this story is that they are not encouraged in their self-flagellation, but are told to make this a day of holy joy—and a day to share with others, not to keep to themselves. *Send portions ... to those for whom nothing is prepared.* The word of God is again before them—and it is a gift to all, not just to the few! It's easy for us latter-day Christians to tell ourselves that the Law of Moses is harsh, that living under the law is living in fear. But that is not the case: read the psalm if you have any doubt about that. No, the word of God, even the Law of the Old Testament, is not a law given in order to produce fear and guilt. Rather, it is a good gift that *revives the soul* and *rejoices the heart*. Not only that, but in the psalm we find a precursor to the bold claims of Jesus in Luke. The word of God is not just proclaimed and celebrated by human beings, but rather all of creation 'sounds' its joy about God's goodness, to the ends of the world. The tears of the people...well, we should all cry such tears sometimes. Perhaps when we realize that we have corrupted the teachings we've inherited, that what we've been working to build is not the Gospel, but something else. I would love for American Christians to hear the Gospel afresh and weep and mourn for (to quote Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove) "the power structure that had used Christianity to justify slavery ... to bless Jim Crow, and to bolster White Citizens' Councils." Yes, hear the Word of God afresh, and mourn. And then receive freedom from the bondage of that inheritance and find the Good News again! Would that it be so.

Jesus seemed to hope for this in his own time. His reading of the words of Isaiah echoes the good news that the word of God is for all, especially those who suffer. Here is the heart of Jesus' mission and ministry, his anointed task. Jesus' proclamation of his mission is a societal version of the psalm: just as creation itself echoes the good news of the word of God, so too does his mission extend to all people, especially the lowly, the forgotten, the poor. His mission and ministry are not just to those who already consider themselves of the tribe, but to all, to Gentiles, to pagans...perhaps sometimes at the expense of those who are a little too comfortable with their 'guaranteed' place. Jesus' announcement was good news indeed for the poor and oppressed and downtrodden and imprisoned. We should pause, however, to admit that most of us in this congregation have far more in common with the outraged citizens of Nazareth than we do with people who are truly oppressed; and that we indeed have more in common with the power of Rome than we do with the downtrodden citizens of Nazareth. So here comes the challenging part: the upside-down kingdom of God should leave us praying for mercy rather than resting comfortably in our sense of power and belonging.

To repeat: the word of God is good news. Its arrival is cause for celebration. Its very existence blesses all creation. It is already arrived, present since the dawn of time, and at the same time fulfilled in Jesus; and yet to come. And we are to be a testament ourselves, a proclamation of this good news, not by grand speeches or really good blogs, but in our very existence, in the being of the church. And I mean that ontologically, folks, just to

geek it up for a bit: the church's being, its existential condition, is to be this good news in the flesh.

And how do we do that? Well, Paul seems to think we should think of ourselves more concretely. If we are a body, let's really be a body. If that is our metaphor, we should take it as a serious ontological condition. This body, like creation itself, is diverse. Uniformity kills it. We are really, actually, mutually dependent, we really cannot function well without each other. I read Paul's letter as a rejection of rejection. Even if you don't see yourself as a part of this body doesn't make that true. Even if you feel rejected by the church, the good news (and hard news) is that **the church doesn't get to reject you**, not without mutilating itself. You cannot make yourself not of this body simply by saying so—and neither can a part of this body make you cut off simply by saying so. While we can hurt each other, wound each other, and proclaim rejection of each other—and in doing so fail to live out the good news, fail to be the body of Christ—we cannot ontologically, existentially, make it so. (Yes, I know we now hear echoes in response; what is cut off on earth will be cut off in heaven. But you know what? Maybe that's not a recommendation for action so much as a warning not to do that). *The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable*: is this not The Beatitudes? Is this not the upside-down coming kingdom of God?

What does it mean, then, that all are one in Christ Jesus? What does it mean that the Roman centurion is of the same body as Stephen, tortured and crucified? **What does it mean that the oppressed is of the same body as the oppressor?** That the white Christian who massacred black citizens in Mississippi is part of the same body as those he killed? In this upside-down kingdom, our salvation is dependent upon being of the same body as the oppressed, tortured, victimized, lynched, enslaved, and crucified. The bodies we would reject, avoid, or claim ourselves Other than, are essential for our salvation. Rather than thinking, oh isn't it nice that the poor finally have some good news coming to them, or even thinking that we have a moral obligation to the poor, we must hear Paul's words with Jesus' proclamation as a **dire condition** for us: our hope must be that somehow, it's true that rejection is rejected. Because most of us, historically and literally, are not the oppressed Jesus came to save. No, historically and literally, most of us are on the side of the powers and principalities, and our only hope is that this body of Christ, this body made up of illegal bodies, imprisoned bodies, tortured bodies, starving bodies, let's us be a part of it too. Jesus comes to give good news to the poor—and only by the grace of God does that good news extend also to the rich.

Bringing Jesus' mission together with Paul's metaphor, we are reminded, powerfully, of who the body is, and who it is for. Jesus' mission, the word of God, is not contained only here or there, in this or that 'right practice' or 'right belief', but extends everywhere, to the ends of the world. This can be hard news for those who on the side of power. But such good news for them too, for us, for just as, impossibly but necessarily, the oppressed and oppressor share of the same body, so too are the oppressors freed when their oppressed are freed. None of us are dispensable. None of us are rejected. The good news, the word of God, extends and covers all. Once we get over ourselves and maybe shed some tears and feel some guilt, how can we not break out the good 'wine' and eat the fat?

And how can we not share that 'wine' and fat with those for whom nothing has been prepared? Let us confess: we have forgotten the Good News. We tried to make it for some and not others; we tried to deny the mutilations we've committed to the body of Christ. We have inherited a racist Christianity that must be purged. The real Good News must be read again in the center of town. Having confessed, we atone—we share our portion with those who have none; we own up to our failings and complicity with the Slaveholder Religion. And then, yes, then, as an act of future hope, we celebrate: celebrate the diversity of our body, celebrate the existential and ontological salvation of Christ Jesus that lets us, oppressor and oppressed, be freed by the same love, the same blood, the same life and death, the same Word from the Lord. And let us, with those people gathered before Ezra, never forget this word, never take for granted the blessing of being part of this scarred and suffering body. Thanks be to God!