



Dr. James C. Howell
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Luke 4:14-21
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A few months ago, a number of us were together in Jerusalem and saw the massive stone remains of this Watergate whereas, ascribed at the behest of Nehemiah, the governor read God's words to the people. The people received it at first with some fear and trembling and with tears, but then Nehemiah the governor said, "Do not weep, but instead, eat, drink and be joyful and share what you have with those who are poor." Jesus centuries later stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and unfurled the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah and he read about good news for the poor and release for the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind and then he said, *Today these words are fulfilled in your hearing.* Those who heard it were angered at that thought, but they should have rejoiced. They should have welcomed it. How good of God to speak to us. How good of God not just to remain remote but for God to say words to us, to tell us about God's self, to tell us about ourselves. Our part is to listen. Our part is to learn to be silent and to hear God.

Gregory the Great, a pope back in the Sixth Century, wrote these words: *It is better to be silent and be real than to talk and not be real.* Even the things which God has done in silence are worthy of the Father. Things that we do in silence, the things that God will do in silence. We listen to God's word. We listen to God's world. We listen to God's people.

Our clergy went away for a little overnight retreat and we read some material about the history of the Civil Rights Movement. One of the great heroes of that movement was a man named Robert Moses, who admired people that he called deep sea divers, those who immerse themselves in their communities. He said, "I heard my way through the world. I listened, I watched." God would have us to be deep sea divers, to immerse ourselves in God's word and in God's world and among God's people, to listen and to watch.

When Ezra read the scriptures to the people, it said that there were those there who interpreted it, who gave sense to it, who explained it. God's word is not always clear. Interpretation can be required. We need great teachers. We need each other. We need books to help us to understand God's word. Most importantly, we need the silent explanations of God's word that come in the actions of God's people, who try to put it into action.

You know, we're having this Faith Academy right now that we hope you will sign up for. The Presbyterians, our dearly beloved Presbyterians neighbors across the alley (Myers Park Presbyterian), are having an academy. I'm actually speaking in their academy. It's sort of, you know, mission work to the heathen that I'm involved in, and I'm talking to them about St. Francis of Assisi and I'm saying that St. Francis is somebody who read the Bible and he didn't talk about it so much as he just did it. He read something in the Bible and that made his check list for the day. Whatever he read in there, whatever Jesus did, whatever Holy people in the Bible did, "This is what I shall do." He explained the Bible by how he lived and how he acted.

Another person that the clergy thought about while we were away, another great hero of the Civil Rights Movement, was a woman named Ella Baker. She was not famous like Martin Luther

King, but she was no less important. Ella Baker was a great community organizer and her biographer said this about her: "Her life was a coherent body of lived scripture spanning 60 years." Her life was a coherent body of lived scripture spanning 60 years. If you ever wondered how she came to be such a person, she said it probably came from her mother because when she was a little girl she tagged along with her mother when her mother went to church and to community meetings and to help the poor and to care for children that had nobody else to care for them.

We had a program recently about how parents raised their children to be Christians. Maybe the thing you do is you go to church and you care for those who are poor and you just have your children tag along with you because our goal is to be a coherent body of lived scripture.

This wasn't in my notes but I found I have been unable to avoid talking about it today. We had a funeral yesterday. It was in Jubilee Hall – I believe it's our first funeral in Jubilee Hall – for a man named Michael Norton. That's where he worshipped and we thought that was the place to have his service. If you knew Michael, you know how extraordinary he was. If you didn't, you missed it. Michael was an amazing guy, kind of the least likely Myers Park church member in a way. He had been in and out of jail. He had been a homeless person. But the last few years he got his life organized and exhibited a remarkable, earthy holiness. He was here for everything we did. He always spent the night when the homeless spent the night here. He took his own money and started a halfway house to help homeless people get back on their feet. He just did so many things. When he got up in the morning, he wanted to do whatever Jesus wanted him to do. You know, we're naming some stuff for him. There's talk of naming a Sunday School class here for him. The Urban Ministry Center is building the Moore House for the homeless and the welcome center there is going to be named for Michael Norton. I told him a couple of weeks ago, I said, "You know, Michael, if you live we're going to have to take all this back." I wish we could take it back. His first Sunday that he came to church here – I just have to report on this and why he is important – the first Sunday he came here I got an e-mail that afternoon arguing with my sermon. It was lovely, I'm grateful for that, and then he came by to meet me that week and he said, "Is there a place for me in this church?" He said, "I don't have a coat and tie." He said "I raise my hands during worship. I talk too much and say things people probably don't want to hear and I'm not impressed by Myers Park." I said, "I hope there's a place for you here." And there was. Somebody at the funeral yesterday came up to me and said, "Myers Park is such a cool church because a guy like Michael found a home here." And for about 2 nanoseconds I was tempted to be proud of that, but then my overwhelming feeling was one of fear and worry. You see, Michael has died. Who's going to be the person now who gets up in the morning and wants to do what Jesus was about all day long? Who always cares for those who are shut out by everybody else, who knows how to be attentive to God's word and to God's people in a compelling way.

We come to Holy Communion now. God knew that we would not just understand God's word in and of itself, so Jesus had the brilliant idea that we would come to the Lord's Table and we would share bread and the fruit of the vine together. It would be a symbol of our unity even when we feel fractured from one another. We are still called by God to love. We discover our hunger and then we can't help but feed those out there who are hungry. God has spoken, and it is ours to listen and to feed on God's word and to be those who feed God's people. So that at the end of our days when someone speaks of us, they might say that his life, her life was a coherent body of lived scripture, lived scripture. This is our goal. This is our privilege. This is our hope.

Amen.