

Back to (Jesus) Basics  
November 1, 2009

Ezra 1:1-5  
Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,9-11  
Mark 12:28-34

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of how the Jews in Captivity in Babylon and those in exile in Egypt were able to return and rebuild Jerusalem. Having won the confidence of King Cyrus and his son Darius of Persia, they were allowed to return to David's city to rebuild, and it was recorded that this was God working through the pagan king.

It is important to note that the Jewish people recognized that God could work through people who did NOT profess to believe in Him; they affirmed that great good might come through pagan rulers. This is an insight many Christian rulers have ignored to their own detriment. And of course, we must remember that these accounts are theology, not history; or at least, they are history with a theological slant. So there are some problems with the time lines, but that's not the main point.

Ezra is the prophet who oversees the rebuilding of the Temple and of Jewish society, and he was focused on "getting it right", of purifying the people from any hint of idolatry. One of the things that appalls him is that the moment they return the people are beginning to follow the pagan ways of their neighbors again, and so one of the ways he goes about doing this is by forbidding any Jewish man from marrying a foreign wife. In fact, he tells them that they must divorce any foreign wives because of their pagan influences.

From our vantage point this is harsh. But Ezra was trying to make things as simple, as fundamental as possible in the face of the huge task ahead of them.

You must remember that one of the basic understandings of the Jewish people at this time was that God was the One who tamed and controlled the chaos of the universe and who kept the cosmos in order. And the way you honored that was by keeping the world neat, recognizing each thing for what it was and keeping it in its place, with its own kind. The whole idea of "kosher" is that you don't mix together things that are different – wool comes from an animal, linen comes from a plant. You might wear either, but you don't mix the fibers together. You don't eat shellfish because it lives under the water like a fish, but it doesn't look like a fish, it has no gills, no scales...you don't eat animals that are scavengers like pigs or dogs because you don't know what *they've* eaten, and because you know they eat dead things, and touching something that's touched something dead makes you unclean.

Anyway, Ezra is starting with the fundamentals because he's starting over. These days Christians can identify with that. We find ourselves in a time of great confusion, and there's a great deal of attraction to religion that focuses on fundamentals. Some folks will tell you exactly what you should believe and do, and others will tell you just as

firmly and assuredly that you should believe and do something different. Others aren't so sure...

We find ourselves in a place where we know we need to rebuild – but we're not sure how, and we have the support of “empire” as long as we stick to ourselves and don't interfere with what the powers that be have planned for the world.

I have a modest suggestion of my own.

What if we got down to basics, too?

Jesus distills the “Torah”, the Law/Teaching down into two premises: Love God with everything you have and are and love your neighbor as yourself. “There is no command that takes precedence over those two,” he says. Simple, right?

Sort of. How do we live those? What does it mean to love God with everything you have and everything we are? Remember that “love” doesn't mean warm feelings. It means to make God your primary orientation, the focus of your loyalty, the source of your identity. Lots of people today hesitate to identify themselves as Christian because so many people who call themselves Christian spread a basic message of hate and fear.

Hatred and fear are NOT the good news of the Gospel. Intolerance and exclusion are NOT a Christian lifestyle. But we must reclaim the name Christian and show people what it means. We must reclaim the identity of “Evangelicals” as the people who bring good news! We must make sure that “Christian” means something that invites people to experience the love and grace of Christ.

In the life of the larger Church today is All Saints Day. And for Baptists all people can be saints, the people through whom God's love shines. Real saints are not “holier than thou” – real saints invite you to experience holiness, they live their lives and value people by a different set of standards, standards of welcome, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of integrity and wholeness.

Life that is lived wholly for God is hard in this world – but each of us is here this morning because some saint stepped out of the way, moved their own self from the center of their life and let God live there instead. They loved us the way they loved themselves and wanted us to know the joy they knew.

To love our neighbor as ourselves does not mean we have to be best friends with them. It means we want for them what we want for ourselves: a decent living. A roof over our heads. Food for our children. A safe community. Respect for who they are and a willingness to help them be who they can become. To love our neighbors as our selves means we think about how we use earth's resources and don't take more than our share, especially when it means someone else will have less than they need. It doesn't mean we are entitled to what we can afford, but that we have an opportunity and an obligation to share.

As a congregation it means that we have an obligation to learn who our neighbors are, what they need, and how we might share God's love with them. It means we respect what they may have to teach us about the world and community we all share.

The love of God and the love for neighbor are indistinguishable for Jesus' people. We cannot separate them any more than you can separate two sides of the same coin. I John asks "How can you say you love God whom you have not seen and hate your brother, whom you *have* seen?"

How can we love the Church and not want to share it? How can we love Jesus and only think about him and his way of living for two hours on a Sunday? (Think about it. What kind of a marriage would you have if you only thought about your spouse for two hours a week, most weeks...some weeks...).

And I say "we" because I struggle with this, too. And because while Nehemiah had the vision of a rebuilt City of God, it was only with the work and co-operation of all the people, those who returned, those who stayed in Babylon and Egypt, but supported it with their money and their prayers, that it was accomplished. We must work together on the rebuilding of the church. One person, two people alone can not do it. It will take all of us.

So here's a challenge. What if for one month (and today's the first, that makes it convenient!), What if for one month you ask yourself each day, "What ONE thing can I do today to show my love for God and my neighbor? What ONE change can I make in my life to let God shine through?" If we each take that challenge seriously for one month, what changes might God make in our lives and in our life together? How might we move ourselves from the center and the distractions of our own lives to proclaim Christ's Way, and become the saints of God?