

**“Rediscovering God’s Word” based on Nehemiah 7:73b-8:10 and Luke 4:14-21a**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 23, 2022 at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

As a child, I grew up in a home where I read and studied the bible with my mother. Her bible was always easy to find. It was on a little table alongside our dinner table. It was well worn, filled with notes, clippings, and scribbles on the pages. Each night she read to us from an illustrated children's bible, and as I grew older, she introduced me to early church writings, and other tools to help me understand scripture.

But it was not until I met Claire, that I found myself in an actual bible study to learn. Beyond my mother’s instruction, I had read on my own and learned from sermons, but I had never sat down with peers, living, breathing human beings to discuss a text and consider things that were on their minds. I knew the writings of theologians spanning nearly 2,000 years, but had never sat down with anyone but my mother to discuss, debate and engage scripture in community. For me, this was an incredible new experience. I’d been lectured plenty about scripture, but this put me in the text.

There is something distinctly special and powerful about a good bible study class. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the largely Roman Catholic region of Latin America had seen a continuous decline in church attendance and participation. Even as North Americans and Europeans had come back to church after the World Wars, nominal affiliation remained the norm in Latin American countries. Many of these countries faced poverty and people viewed the church, as part and parcel of their struggles in life.

But then something happened – Bible studies were started, first initiated by the church, and then they grew and these ‘base ecclesial communities’ or ‘small groups,’ prompted a rise in biblical literacy and it revitalized faith. It spurred action and growth in Protestant denominations and among Catholics, as people realized that readings like today’s from Luke’s gospel about Jesus coming to proclaim good news to the poor, sight to the blind and freedom from captivity, was for the people reading it. What has come is a revival, even a rebirth, in Latin American Christianity that all began with reading scripture in community.

We think the church is dying because we live in North America and look often at Europe, but the church is growing in Latin America, Africa and Asia. In Africa, it was after the missionaries had mostly given up, leaving only bibles behind in many areas, that a resurgence in the Christian faith began. In Asia, it is often the clandestine churches in people’s homes, centered around a shared copy of the bible translated into their home languages, that fuel the growth. In these areas, it is bible study that fuels the growth of the church.

In the early church, it was the reading of scripture in community that spread the good news. It was the Hebrew Scriptures and the teachings of the apostles in the New Testament that created the foundation of church communities that raised up martyrs and great theologians to witness to and articulate their faith in Christ. When Roman forces tried to persecute the early Christians, the first thing they went after was their writings, which is why Christians feverishly made new copies hand copying every single word of every page, so that when

Roman officials burned one, many more were still available. We have 5,000 partial or complete bibles from that era, more than any other ancient text of that era or before. That's how much they cared about bible study.

When the Roman Empire transitioned from Greek to Latin as the language of the people, there was a new Latin Translation was called the 'Vulgate,' because it was written in vulgar, or common, language, the language of the people who couldn't read Greek. This kept scripture accessible and solidified changes in the empire. And when Latin was no longer the language of the people, reformers again went to the playbook of the early church and put Scripture back in the hands of the people, translating it into many common languages, and making copies on a printing press.

Our text from Nehemiah represents one of these high points of reading scripture together. The scene today comes after many of the people of Judah had returned to their land. Prior to the exile, the people of Judah and Israel spoke Hebrew. But upon returning from exile, the language of the people had changed. A related, but different language of Aramaic had replaced Hebrew. This was the language of the people in nations around Israel.

To help you imagine the difference, imagine the Hebrew people spoke Italian, and then they go into exile and return to find everyone living in their land speaking Spanish. But lucky for them, the language they could understand in exile had been Spanish too. They could understand, but it's not the same language.

The book of the Law that Ezra and Nehemiah found, would have been written in Hebrew. This means that the people hearing Ezra read it out loud, would have needed help. They may have been able to understand some of it, but they needed translators and interpreters. That's where those names I had to struggle through, matter to this text. These are the translators and interpreters sent out to the people to lead them in discussion of the text and what it means. They showed them how this text was their shared history, connecting them to each other and to Moses, whom God used to deliver them from Egypt, just as they had been delivered now from Babylon back home.

My sisters and brothers, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah reveal for us a big old mess. These are strange stories. The people, much like the people in the wilderness between Egypt and Israel, are struggling to adapt to their new home, a place they had never seen before. And unlike the first conquest of Canaan, the people living there are not a people that need conquering, but more like separated brethren. Babylon had taken all the religious and civic leaders, and a large portion of the population, but not everyone. There were people left behind and now there is a need for reform and restoration.

For most of these two books, the main characters – Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah – and all are obsessed with doing what it takes to gain God's favor again. Zerubbabel thinks that what is needed is to rebuild and re-staff the temple. This is done, but unlike when the tent of meeting and temple were built, there is no display of God's presence, and this worries the elders.

Flash forward 60 years, and Ezra ends up on the scene. His perspective is that the problem is the natives, the people who remained in there during exile. He wants them to divorce their wives and abandon their children. Some do, but most do not, and Ezra's contemporary, a prophet named Malachi, was proclaiming at the same time that purity was needed, but that God hates this forced divorce. It is not the way it is supposed to be.

Likewise, then Nehemiah comes in and figures it has to be the walls. The problems of Israel must be that it needs better walls around it, but this too does nothing to change the favor of Israel and Zechariah, another contemporary prophet, is preaching that the new Jerusalem will have no walls.

I bring all this up, because the thing Ezra and Nehemiah finally get right, above all else, is the scene we read today, when they go not to their own narrow view, but turn instead to the foundation of their community, the Word of God, and instead of weeping, they tell the people to find their strength. This is a strength that is rooted in the joy of the Lord, turning to the Lord, a repentance that is not an attempt to earn God's favor, but rooted in a desire to walk in the will of God. Friends, this is the value of studying scripture, and it's not something we should be doing only alone, according to our will, but in community, together, openly and honestly.

As we look to the future of this church, it must be grounded in this kind of reform. The pandemic has created for us an exile and we are returning, but not yet in full. Modern technology has also created for us an exile, where digital media, has become the place where many young people seek their answers. It's where many of us spend so much time each day and each week, that sometimes even I can feel like I'm living there and not in the real world.

The future of this church and every church is not some predetermined reform idea, but an encounter with the one who fulfills all scripture, as we read in Luke's gospel by reading the scriptures, not in isolation, but in community with each other, and in conversation with the early church theologians and modern ones. We have a cloud of witnesses to be like those names in Nehemiah that can ground our perspective not to tell us what to do, but to help us stay rooted in our history, just like the people who listened to Ezra speak, and in response, restored Sukkot festival, or festival of booths, where the people live in tents to remember their ancestors, who wandered 40 years in the wilderness.

I love the position we are in as a church community. We are ready and excited for the future. As we pick up the pieces to rebuild by our own effort what has worked in the past, we must be mindful that our God is the creator and the agent of new creation as well. When Jesus came, he came as the embodiment of God in our human flesh, living as we live, even turning to scripture as we are called to do, and he fulfilled this scripture proclaiming good news to the poor, the broken hearted, and the oppressed before going to the cross to die for us, so we might have new life, freedom in him.

Sisters and brothers, the good news is that God is with us, not just in the scriptures, but came to us in Jesus and remains with us in the Holy Spirit who is in and among us pouring out God's

love. We must see this world as God sees it – a good creation worthy of reconciliation – and take our role as proclaimers of God’s word, sharing in Jesus’s work, to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set the oppressed free. And we do this by growing together in God’s word, learning from the cloud of witnesses before us, and studying scripture in community.

There is so much potential in this church to grow together and impact our community, and I cannot wait to see what God will do in, through and with all of us together. But this must be done in, through and with Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, as we listen for what God’s will for us is, and as we listen to each other, to discern God’s will, and listen to those around us to find our path to what is needed. We have the confessions of our Presbyterian Church to help, and we have those great theologians whom God sent, and we have each other too, to learn from.

I want to urge you to consider joining a Sunday School class or another book or bible study, including if you feel led, starting a study, either on Sunday morning or another day. However we do it, studying scripture (and books that engage us in scripture) together, listening to the needs in our community and immersing ourselves in prayer, will be for us – just as it has been for God’s people all along – our best guide for taking this amazing opportunity we have and living into God’s will and God’s plan for us all, so that we might know God’s love for us in full and share that love with others. Amen.