

A Little Understanding

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:13-31a; Luke 4:14-21; Psalm 19; 1-21-07

Life seems to move forward more smoothly and with more certainty if we can find some meaning in it. That is a big understatement. When we find meaning and develop a better understanding of what is going on and why, we become more able to react in a positive manner. We feel that we can handle life and whatever it is that comes along instead of having life handle us.

It takes some of us a long time to realize that we have responsibility for the direction of our lives. We sometimes bump along at the will and whim of others, like we are bouncing and bumping and floating down a river on an inner tube. Often it takes someone or something to stop us from taking a free fall through life. It takes someone or something to help us understand, to empower us to take up our own responsibility in living our lives to their fullest extent.

In the book of Nehemiah we find Ezra standing before the Water Gate, reading the Law of Moses to the nation Israel. These people had returned from a long and difficult exile in Babylon—a time when their traditions and laws were kept as best they could be. We can be certain that those who remembered the law tried to keep it and pass it on to their children, but living in a place where there is no center for one's faith can make this effort very difficult. So, now they were back in the Promised Land beginning again.

Ezra called them all together at the Water Gate, the gate in the wall through which water was brought into the town and a place where all could gather. He wanted to reacquaint the people with the law so that their culture might continue and grow. Not only did Ezra read the law of Moses in Hebrew, but the Levites, the priestly family of the nation Israel, moved among those gathered to interpret the law into Aramaic, the common language of that time and people. The people wept when they understood how they had fallen away from obeying the law. But their leaders told them this was a holy day and instead of weeping they needed to celebrate the new moon festival, as a time of new beginnings. With a little understanding the people went on their way renewed and restored in their faith and having some direction.

Paul in his letters to the Corinthians tried every way he knew to give his readers a little understanding of how they were to live and function as a Christian community. He struggled with that little church in Corinth, made up of so many personalities and talents, as he sought ways to encourage them to move forward and sustain their faith as a united body.

He compared their functions to the varied functions of the different members of a human body. He hoped this would make clear to them that each and every member of that congregation had an important role to play. While they were all different, all roles were equal. Their purpose was to work together toward a common goal, setting aside all personal agendas, for the benefit of all. Just as Ezra sought to help his people find their way to God as a united body, Paul sought the same.

Then there is our reading from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is in the temple reading words of prophecy from Isaiah. He had just returned from 40 days and nights of

temptation in the wilderness and was full of the Holy Spirit. We will commemorate these 40 days and nights beginning next month when the season of Lent begins.

We can be sure that some of those gathered found comfort in him telling them that he was the fulfillment of the prophecy. He was the one for whom they had been waiting. We can be equally certain that some of those who heard him were offended and frightened by what he told them. They preferred the status quo and were sure they would know the Messiah and not have to be told that he was among them. Jesus goes on a few verses later to remind them that a prophet is not without honor except in his own country. He understood that he would not be well received by all but that the message he came to bring was vital for those who would listen. His public ministry, which we believe lasted about three years, began at this time. Through his words in the temple he tried to give a little understanding as to who he was and why he was there and what his mission would be. For those who followed him he offered direction toward lives that would be fuller and richer.

In all of our readings, one person sought to help others understand what they needed to know to make significant contributions to life. Their efforts, as well as ours, have a ripple effect that goes on and on and on through time and space. Each effort was rather small and focused on a single group of people. Yet, had they not made these efforts, who knows what might have been lost? Perhaps, two world religions.

Often we think our attempts to help others understand life and its living fall on deaf ears. We especially think this if we raise children. But there is, most often for all of us, a time when we realize that those children of ours have soaked up a great deal more than we ever knew just by living with us. And we also learn that there have been other influences on them, for better or worse. They do not always take the advice we freely offer, but, as they mature, we come to understand that they have heard us.

Our influence does not stop with our families, it ripples out from wherever we are and touches others. Because of this we have the opportunity to make things better and fairer for all we encounter. Of course, we can make things worse for them, but if we live our faith as we understand it, the results will always be for the better.

The choice is always ours to determine if we will leave our part of the world a better place for us having been there. A little understanding of the life and teachings of Christ and putting them into practice can change things. Realizing that we are all essential to the process of carrying the “good news” wherever we may go is vital. And knowing that everyone involved in this mission has an equal and important role to play helps us share responsibility knowing that those things we do not do ourselves will still be handled well.

The messages of Ezra, Paul and Jesus remain relevant for us as individuals and as a community of faith. It is up to us to hear them and to reflect on what it is they mean for us in our time and place. An understanding of these messages helps us find our footing on the pathway of life as we seek the will of God and as we seek to reach out to others to make life a little better for them. A little campfire song sums all of this up. I am sure some of you have heard this song if not sung it at one time or another. But maybe not. The words are these.

It only takes a spark to get a fire going,

And soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.
That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it;
You spread his love to everyone; you want to pass it on.

What a wondrous time is spring, when all the trees are budding;
The birds begin to sing, the flowers start their blooming,
That's how it is with God's love once you've experienced it;
You want to sing, it's fresh like spring; you want to pass it on.

I wish for you my friend, this happiness that I've found;
You can depend on him, it matters not where you're bound.
I'll shout it from the mountaintops; I want my world to know;
The Lord of love has come to me, I want to pass it on.

Amen