

Because they understood

Nehemiah 8:1-12

January 27, 2013

(Invite three “volunteers” to come to front of sanctuary: Marcos, Liz, Japhy)

I have one simple question to ask each of you this morning? Who are you?

Marcos, you are a musician, a composer, a Dominican, a husband, a father ...

Liz, you are a teacher, a church leader, a missionary, a wife, a mother, a grandmother ...

Japhy, you are a daughter, a student, an artist, a dancer ...

Each of you may be described in many different ways -- by gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, occupation, roles, relationships. But which is most essential? Of all that defines you, what comes first? Who are you?

What do these three people have in common? They are children of God. They are baptized children of God, baptized into the family of God, brothers and sisters of each other and of Jesus. They are followers of Jesus together. Their lives have followed different paths, but they are on the same journey. Their lives have and will follow different paths, but here, right now, they are on the journey together. (Dismiss “volunteers.”)

Who are you? Who am I? I will tell you. Before everything else and above everything else, I am a follower of Jesus. This is who I am, and this is what connects me to you. This is more essential to my identity than my gender or my age or my nationality or my interests or my personality or my job, more essential than any of my other relationships.

Say it: “Before everything else ... above everything else ... I am a follower of Jesus.” What do you think? I made you say it, and it is easy to say it here, on a Sunday, in the church sanctuary. But what about tomorrow? In the classroom? At the office? At Walgreens? At the Gallagher-Bluedorn? At Friendship Village?

When I vote, when I invest, when I shop, when I meet with a client, when I read the newspaper, when I teach my students, when I text my friends, when I go on Facebook, when I talk to my mother or my wife or my daughter or my friend or my doctor or my financial advisor or my city councillor -- before everything else, above everything else, I am a follower of Jesus.

We need to get that straight. We need to be clear about that. We need to understand. We need to understand who we are.

We need to understand who we are. That's what the gathering in the city square in Jerusalem by the Water Gate was all about. It is a remarkable story. It was a remarkable scene. It wasn't a spontaneous gathering, but a planned event. They had built a platform ahead of time just for the occasion, and had designated some men to stand beside the platform on either side, and others to move among the people to instruct them.

It was late in the sixth century BC. The people of Israel had returned to Jerusalem after a fifty-plus year exile in Babylon and had been working under Nehemiah's leadership to rebuild the city walls that had lain in ruins all that time. Much of the work of rebuilding the city was now completed, but there was still work to be done! Their most important and difficult work was still unfinished: the work of restoring their identity.

Because when the people of Israel were forcibly relocated, they lost not only their homeland, but also their culture and their language and their traditions. They were intermingled with the Babylonian population, immersed in Babylonian culture, inundated by Babylonian ways of thinking and behaving and worshipping. They became ... just like everybody else. They lost their own distinctive identity. They talked like Babylonians, thought like Babylonians, lived like Babylonians. Sound familiar?

But, to tell the truth, the loss of their distinctive identity happened way before the exile. They were already just like everybody else -- no more just, no less cruel, no more merciful, no less greedy, no more loyal, no less vain, than any of the nations around them. Exile only took from them what they had already given away freely of their own accord.

But now they are back home, and they need to know who they are. Who are we? Who is our God? What does it mean for us to be God's people, God's chosen people? And so they turned to the book, to the book of the law, to the law God gave to Moses, to the law that defined their covenant with God, to the book of the law that told them who they are.

It is a remarkable story. It was a remarkable scene. Who was there? Men and women and children, children who were old enough to understand.

Who is here? Men and women and children old enough to understand! Where else in our culture does this happen? In what other place, or at what other time, do people of all ages and genders gather together to listen to a common story meant for all of them? Anywhere else? Something special happens here!

They gathered -- men and women and children -- and they listened. It was a long sermon! About six hours long! And, actually, that was just the scripture reading. The sermon came after lunch!

After noon, after the reading of the law, Levites came to the people and explained it to them. The text in Nehemiah says: "They gave an oral translation of God's Law and explained it so that the people could understand it." They had to translate because the law was written in Hebrew, but the people now spoke Aramaic. Their loss of identity was so complete that most of them couldn't even understand their own language anymore!

They gathered and listened and worshipped. The entire event was an act of worship, punctuated by shouts of praise to God and marked by physical demonstrations of reverence and humility. They stood when the book was opened and raised their arms in praise, then sank to their knees and bowed their heads. It was a solemn moment, a sacred moment, a moment intended to remind them of their sacred identity, of their call to be a people set apart, not just like everybody else.

Once it was done, once the law had been read and explained to them, once they understood, two things happened.

The first thing that happened was this: they cried. The people cried. They understood who they were supposed to be, and they understood who they were, and they wept -- tears of grief, tears of shame, grief and shame for who they were and for who they were not, grief and shame for what they had become. But maybe there was joy too as well as grief mixed in their tears. They heard and they understood! They understood who they are, who they are meant to be!

What happens to us when we hear the word? What happens to us when we hear and understand, when we see ourselves as we are, when we understand what we are meant to be? We are Jesus' people. We are defined by our relationship with Jesus -- before everything else, above everything else. This is who we are meant to be. Is this who we are?

And the second thing that happened, once they heard and understood, was this: they went home and ate and drank joyfully and shared what they had. They shared what they had with others, because they understood! It says "with others," which certainly includes "with each other," but "with others" means ... with others!

Because they understood!

This is who we are! Gracious people, generous people, God's people, people like God. This is who we are! People meant for community, people created to be in community, people meant to share what we have, with others.

This is who we are.

Today we welcome six new members into our church family. We welcome them into our community. We invite them to share our journey. We promise them -- and we ask them to promise -- to share what we have, with each other and with others.

And this is what we understand. It is our community only because God has created it and created us for it. It is our journey only because Jesus has invited us to follow. And we can share whatever we have only because God has given it.

This is who we are. We are God's people, people God has called into community, to share what we have, with each other and with others. And we are Jesus' people, followers of Jesus, together, before everything else, above everything else.