

Everyone is Handicapped Somehow

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 (Courtesy Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

8:1 all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel.

8:2 Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month.

8:3 He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

8:5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up.

8:6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

8:8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

8:9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

8:10 Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

When I was in seminary, one of the jobs I did to earn a little extra money was as a respite care worker for handicapped people. While being trained for this job there were posters for insights and encouragement all over the walls and one sticks with me to this day. It was a poster of a beautiful, handicapped, child which said, "Everyone is Handicapped Somehow". This of course, relieved me to no end, because ever since my meeting with Dr. Sister Helen Kerry, the Philosophy professor at Centre, I have believed that wisdom is when you know what you don't know.

That is a philosophy that, to me, unites all of humanity. "Everybody is handicapped somehow" brings us all down to the level of the unified need for grace. It is a great equalizer. Even the greatest *golfer* of our times has proven he has a handicap! There in front of me may be a Down syndrome person, I may be able to do a lot more than that person, but, Lord, help me, there is a shining loving soul in that imperfect body that rings truer than my own life in many ways.

I realized with that poster philosophy that my every day prayer needed to be, "Lord, please help me not to get to the point where I judge and am judged by what I *cannot* do." The need for grace is what this poster was all about, and that is what our Old Testament lecture is all about.

As the result of gathering together for hours in worship, the people at the Water Gate who were listening to Ezra, started to weep. Their "hidden faults" had been exposed. The Law had been read, with proper interpretation, the priest clarified the Law so clearly that all were sure that the people really understood what God was trying to tell them. And the people listened with their faces to the ground - in embarrassment? Or was it shame?

Some pastors today would feel just great about this! Making people feel embarrassed and ashamed of who they are seems to be the cornerstone of some theologies; because there is a *power* that the leaders of any group would have over people who are weakened with shame and fear. But that is not where Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites who taught the people wanted to leave the people.

It seems that all those in leadership positions unanimously knew that God would not want them left there with their heads hanging down. God wanted them to be full of hope. Because sad people have a very difficult time helping others, and shamed people have a tendency to live in fear, which also tends to curb one's generosity. No, there were human lives around them that were suffering; "those for whom nothing was prepared" and *those people* were not going to benefit from a theology of shame and fear.

And besides, God is not punitive - God is full of grace and love and generosity. And these theologians knew that for the people who had heard and understood what the scriptures were saying; to them a great miracle had occurred! These people learned what they had not known - and that was the beginning of wisdom! THAT is a reason to rejoice! And if the people had been left in their pain of shame, they would have lost the miracle of understanding that was happening in them! The listeners understood that they were all united in knowing that everyone is handicapped in some way and that God loves us all the same. And God loves us all **not for who we are or what we can do** - but in our shared understanding of **our weaknesses** together and how dependent we are on each other and our relationship with God.

No wonder that the preachers started telling the people they didn't need to mourn or weep! They were telling the people - "You don't need to feel sadness about yourselves or your lives . . . you listened and understood *the words of God!* God is joyous!" They said, "This day is holy to GOD!" They did NOT

say, "This day SHOULD be holy to YOU." NO they pointed out that this is a day that made God very happy! Because they came, they listened, and understood! So, they were told to go out and be happy! Because Joy is God's greatest strength! Being happy - sharing joy with each other and with those who are needy - that is God's strength! Joy is God's grace to all - joy is the gift he wants to give all - not shame! Joy unites - shame leaves you alone and lonely.

In an interesting addition to this insight we have in our Epistle reading, Paul, who had been trying to point up to the people that they were not seeing their hidden faults. It seems people were categorizing and prioritizing spirituality based on who had what gift of the spirit. Paul was trying to bring unity to the people because they were dis-membering others from the faith because of the perceived differences.

Everyone is now a part of the same group, regardless of if you were a Jew, like the founder was, or a newcomer - like the Greeks who converted. And it isn't like an organization, like a sports club - it is a spiritual experience. The goal is certainly not that everyone should end up looking the same and having perfect Pecs. In fact, Paul writes that God gave greater honor to the inferior member! No, as parts of a spiritual form each soul needs to be their own unique self - and not attempt to be carbon copies of each other. Each gift from each uniquely God-inspired soul is needed to complete the Body of Christ.

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" Now, in reality, everyone can survive and even thrive without having the use of **all** their body parts. That is what being handicapped is all about. So this has really nothing to do with the literal understanding of how a body functions.

What spiritual lesson is being shared here is that there is something precious and important in each and every soul. There is no human on this earth that is unnecessary. God resonates louder and clearer with each joyous soul that finds themselves belonging with the rest of humanity. Not that they are separate, better, superior, or even less than or weaker, or alone. When people get together and find that they love each other - that they need each other - that they see God's joy in each other - then the strength of God, the power of God, the goodness of God, increases.

Our world seems to be tearing apart. We have the wealthy Northern Hemisphere vs. the impoverished Southern Hemisphere, the western culture vs. the eastern cultures, the wealthy people vs. the poor, the environmentally aware vs. those who deny global warming, the Republicans vs. the Democrats, the atheists vs. the believers . . . and the list goes on.

When Jesus taught us to pray, the first word he said was "Our." Exactly who and or what is excluded from that? Would Jesus not mean, in reference to our creator God, all? All humanity, all nature all beings . . . the universe and all that is in it, belongs to God. And we are all parts of God, too. We have been called to be welcoming and unifying, to become parts of the body of the universe.

Can we let go and allow ourselves to become part of the rest of humanity? It is a little easier when we realize that we are handicapped. We are poor when we think of our spiritual gifts. We are captive in our images of who we are and who we can be. We are blind to so many things that we don't know that we don't know yet. We are oppressed by imagined circumstances that really only appear to stop us from reaching our goals.

Jesus stood up and read in the synagogue, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus fulfilled these. Can't you hear him saying to us now, "Go! Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord . . .for the joy of the Lord is your strength."