

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
on Epiphany 3 (21 January 2007):
Nehemiah 8:2 -10; 1 Corinthians 12:12 -27; Luke 4:14 -21

Law and Life

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:27

It is not unusual that whenever I ask a person to read one of the scriptures for worship, the immediate response is: "Are there any hard words?" Today's reading from Nehemiah represents a lector's nightmare. With its listing of names that seem to come from some ancient Jewish version of a large law firm's letterhead, who among us would not at least pause before publicly reading it? As I hear this lesson read once more, I am reminded of a true story from my previous parish.

Bill Lipe was an old dairy farmer, turned politician. Bill was as unpretentious as the earth. Yet, underneath his simplicity lay a great deal of common sense and no small amount of savvy. Bill regularly attended the 8:00 liturgy and served that congregation as a lector and chalice bearer. Although he was the majority leader in the county legislature, Bill was not an orator. Yet, his sincerity and presence more than adequately compensated for his unpolished style. In the best sense of the phrase, Bill was an ordinary guy.

All of which is to say that, as the mystery of life turns out, the lectors' schedule happened to assign Bill to serve when this reading from Nehemiah came up. It also turned

out that on this occasion Bill did not prepare very well for his reading, taking a bit of a pass on what he evidently saw as his all-too-familiar liturgical responsibilities. As you can imagine, the result was nothing short of tortuous, as Bill confronted – seemingly for the first time – the list of the men's names that surrounded Ezra, as the priest read the Torah to the assembly.

At first, the 8:00 congregation heard Bill's stammering as a mere mistake, something that can and does happen to just about all public speakers. However, as Bill continued to grunt and grind his way through "Maaseiah, Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchiah, Hashbaddanah" the congregation realized that we were on the verge of a verbal disaster. It was no longer a matter of being tongue-tied; what we were witnessing was the lectionary's version of mud wrestling. And Bill gave every bit of evidence that he was determined to prevail, irrespective of the results.

Having recognized a long time ago that Bill was no Richard Burton, the congregation's initial response to the experience was to regard the lector's mangling as just another of Bill's charming malaprops. Then their

response evolved into a good-natured chuckling over what would make delicious fodder for the coffee hour post-mortem. (The silver lining in this ominously dark cloud was that I knew that they would not be critiquing the day's sermon!) Yet, very soon thereafter, all who had ears to hear found themselves in absolute agony.

People held their breath in empathetic horror; they moved their bodies to the edge of their pews, contorting them this way and that way in a physical effort to push the reading ahead. Finally, when, by God's grace, the sweaty-browed, red-faced, exhausted lector uttered: "The Word of the Lord," never did a congregation mean more fervently its response: "Thanks be to God."

But there is more.

As you know, the Sunday scripture readings come on a three-year cycle of organization. (Yes, some of you can perceive what comes next.) God, in the Holy One's sense of mercy and redemption – or perhaps his mischievous sense of humor – placed Mr. Lipe's name on the lector's list to read, once again, the passage from Nehemiah. So, three years later, not wanting to miss a chance at redemption and having learned his lesson about preparation, Bill came to church early that morning, put on his vestments, and with the sincerity of those who procured a second chance, told me that he was ready.

With that, he revealed a small piece of notepaper, on which he had phonetically spelled out in pencil every last one of those Hebrew

names. And by God, he would read them.

I smiled -- pastorally -- at Bill, and said a most fervent prayer, and we entered the "House of the Lord."

The second go-round at reading Nehemiah was less like hearing the birth of an elephant than the first attempt, and the congregation seemed to be able to relax, as Bill got into the lesson with a minimum of damage. Yet, the reading of the passage from Nehemiah was not exactly – fluid. The phonetical pronunciations did not quite come across in a way that conveyed the narrative's point. Even though the way the lesson was read still hid the point of the reading, we were, nonetheless, all grateful for small mercies that Bill – and by extension, all of us – had gotten through it.

But there is still more.

Three years later, guess who was scheduled to read Nehemiah 8:2-10? Right! I do not remember what happened the third time. Perhaps it was then that my post-traumatic shock syndrome kicked-in. I am not sure, but I do know that there is only so much stress and anxiety that the human brain can take before it shuts down.

Now I tell this tale to you in hopes that you will have at least one aid in remembering Nehemiah 8:2-10 – or at least a way of recognizing it when next you come across it – or even have to read it! For remembering Nehemiah 8:2-10 matters. It matters because we have much more in common with this lesson and its

circumstances than one might first see. A little historical context helps to make my point.

You see, the reason Ezra was standing in the Jerusalem square, using a specially constructed wooden pulpit to address the assembled people, was that the Persian king, Cyrus, had released the Hebrews from their exile and captivity and supported their return to their ancient homeland. The Hebrews were to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the temple and to reconstitute the nation.

In the mid-fifth century B.C., Nehemiah, an entrepreneurial engineer, began the task of rebuilding the city walls, while Ezra, the priest, sought to rebuild the identifying wall of the people's faith and spirituality. This morning's lesson depicts a climactic moment in both endeavors.

I find this lesson interesting and important because of the parallel I see between the circumstances Nehemiah and Ezra faced with those you and I face. They needed to rebuild both the walls of Jerusalem and the spiritual walls of their faith. This is, in my view, the same work and the same challenge you and I so frequently face now as members of Christ's Body, the church.

Within the parallel, I see both a challenge and an opportunity for us because the church needs to be rebuilt, restored. We have allowed her walls to crumble from neglect. And our sense of the faith, our spirituality needs to be reclaimed. We have wandered away from a

passion for God and allowed Christ's Body to become flabby. We have lived a long time in exile and in separation. Consequently, we, too, have a great challenge and a wonderful opportunity to rebuild and to rejoice.

In these comments, one of the threads I wish to point to is how we rebuild the walls of the church and our love of God and what this has to do with the relationship between law and life. For you see, Ezra and Nehemiah called the Hebrew people back to their biblical and spiritual roots in an effort to prevent the tragic backsliding that resulted in their captivity and exile. Yet, their efforts, in spite of faithful intentions, fundamentally failed. Getting back to roots, to traditions, to "law and order, to what is familiar is not enough and (history tells us) usually is dangerous. On the other hand, turning our back on those traditions is not a helpful way forward, either. So, what are faithful, committed people like us to do, if we are to accept the challenge and the opportunity to rebuild the city walls of the church and to reclaim a living biblical faith?

One way to do this in a period of cultural history that seems only to know a "red" way or a "blue" way is to recognize what the relationship between law and life is. I want to suggest in this sermon and from our lessons this morning that there is another way to live with faith and integrity and that a manifestation of this way of life rests within an arm's reach of every one in this church.

There are books in front of each of you. One of them is the specific resource to which I am referring. I am aware that the black book is Holy Scripture and that it would at least be prudent of me to say that this is the resource of which I am speaking. However, at the risk of being misunderstood – not to mention being run out of town, the resource I have in mind is the Prayer Book; and I say this not because I do not honor the Bible – I most certainly do. (Come to any of my Bible Studies, if you need proof.) No, I refer to the Book of Common Prayer because it contains the liturgy, the worship guidelines for our tradition; and for me liturgy is scripture and tradition in action. The Prayer Book is one great example of how law and life share an essential and fruitful partnership.

I am suggesting, at great peril I fear, that the prayer book is our *Torah*, and that the truest, deepest meaning of *Torah* is not simply “law” but “guide.” What rests between those two red Prayer Book covers is God’s Word, combined with God’s people’s experience of that Word; and because it is in our hands – within arm’s reach, its contents are meant to be put into action – in and through the likes of us.

Yes, the Prayer Book and the worship and spirituality it conveys can be avoided by us, taken for granted. It is very easy simply to read the words (or to have them read for us) and to hide behind them, convincing oneself that we have kept the prayers and that this is what going to church is about. Too many of us are tempted to worship with the

Prayer Book’s resources in the manner in which Professor Henry Higgins (of *My Fair Lady* fame) regarded speaking French.

Remember how Higgins dismissively said that the French don’t care what they say as long as it sounds good. Using the Prayer Book’s resources can be quite similar for us, in that we can skate through worship without allowing its words and their meaning ever to touch our hearts and minds, much less to offer transforming guidance to our very lives. Worship in the Episcopal Church – and most surely at St. Martin’s, sounds good; and if it doesn’t take too much of our time, all the better. Yet, when Ezra read the *Torah* to the people, when he read the Law of Moses in the square, the people wept.

They wept, not because his elocution mangled the words and the possibility of understanding those words. No, they wept precisely because they dared to hear the sacred content; and in hearing it they recognized how far they had strayed from God and how deeply, passionately God loved them. They wept because they heard how far they had strayed from the guidance of their truest and deepest life – life with God -- life that God had given to them. They wept because without the guidance those sacred words contained, without the discipline those laws provided, Israel wandered and fell prey to harsh captivity and isolating exile from doing their own thing. And now, in their unexpected freedom given through an alien Persian king, they wept at the epiphany that God’s law and life provide.

What is the relationship between law and life? This is far from the first time that I have raised this question with you. So it is that this is not the first time that I give you my baseball analogy to indicate the answer. In baseball, it is a crucial rule, law, that a batter gets three strikes before being out. Yet, just because one obeys and honors this rule, this law does not mean that a batter is a good hitter. And hitting the ball is the object -- and joy -- of the game.

From another angle, this time from the *Rule of St. Benedict*: The first two virtues of this "Rule," this spiritual roadmap, are "stability" and "conversion." Those who seek God and wish to follow his Christ know that this demands stability, that is, being rooted. We cannot be flitting around on the surface, if we expect to have meaningful life. We cannot expect to grow, if we are not firmly planted in rich soil. So, *the Rule of St. Benedict* speaks of the necessity of taking seriously where one is and what one is. Stability. Or as that contemporary voice, Woody Allen would opine: "90% of life is showing-up." Stability.

In times of trial and anxiety, we desire and need stability. Yet, stability alone is only a temporary resource. Stability alone can end up with a hunkering down posture and an expectation only to get by with a minimum of damage. This is where "Conversion" comes in. It balances stability, even as it receives balance back. For conversion alone, creating as it does a fast-growing tree, results in something that stands only for a short time. Roots stabilize growth,

while converting growth keeps roots from creating just a stump.

The relationship of law and life, of stability and conversion is not an "either/or" enterprise but a "both/and" perspective. The Prayer Book seeks to place the depths and rootedness of the Bible and the biblical tradition into our own hands so that we, in turn, may be deeply rooted in that sacred resource for the expressed purpose of being open -- open to God's surprising and marvelous abundance.

More often than not, our culture fosters options of "law," getting it done right, tradition versus "Whatever!" and "doing your own thing." In contrast, you and I have received something else. We have received a heritage that says that we are rooted in God's Word and God's life. It says that we are not on our own, abandoned to the whims of an uncaring universe. We have roots. We have guides. We have experience, and we are called to "do this in remembrance of [God's Christ, God's own Epiphany.]"

Yet, it is precisely because we are rooted in this knowledge of God's love and life that we are also called upon to be open -- open to the maturing, transforming reality of God and our life with God.

There are forces that wish us to hunker down and just return to the basics, to what is familiar and safe -- to the laws. Mostly, these are forces rooted in fear. They have forgotten that the purpose of God's stability, God's Word, God's *Torah*, God's law is for our continual conversion.

At the same time, there are forces that wish to push forward but may forget the need to move forward toward God's embrace, God's future. In such cases, we need to remember that conversion without God's stability, without God's presence and guidance, leads to chaos and exile.

So, I close with two questions, remembering St. Paul triumphant proclamation at the end of our second lesson this morning: "You are the Body of Christ and individually members of it." The first question is: Will you and I have the stability, the depth, the commitment to rebuild the crumbling walls of the church? The second is: Will we do this not to return to the safety of what we know or even what we like but to be truly Christ's Body in the world?

As in Ezra's and Nehemiah's time, if we dare to pay attention to the words by living them, we will have our answers, and our new life.

"You are the Body of Christ and individually members of it."

Amen.