

**WILLETTON UNITING CHURCH
WHERE LOVE AND HOPE MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

INHERENTLY COMMUNAL

January 26, 2025

(3rd Sunday after the Epiphany)

READINGS

1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 14, 24-27

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

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

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, Ezra the priest 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. 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.

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. 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.

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

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.

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."

Luke 4:16-17, 20-22, 24, 28-30

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

REFLECTION

(Rev. Toby Keva)

It was really nice to attend the church service here at Willetton with my family while I was not on duty and I did not have to do anything! (Except for the fact that, for one reason or another, I still ended up being the last person in the church who had to make sure that all the doors were locked!) Regardless, it was really nice to be a part of the worshipping community here.

Now, besides all the beautiful music and songs, and wonderful visual presentation, the parts in the service that I really looked forward to; the parts that was the most meaningful to me were the reading of the Bible and the Reflection. This is true in other church services that I have attended as a congregant.

For sure, I have my own personal quiet time when I pray and read the Bible on my own. But I still find listening to the Scriptures being read as we gather together in the church more meaningful than reading them on my own. "Why is that?" I wonder. How come the same activity, done in two different environments, result in two distinctive experiences?

Let me start with my attempt to answer the question by talking about the obvious first. You see, we live in the modern world where the emphasis is on the individual. During a wedding, as an example, the bride/bridegroom makes an individual vow to love and look after the other person.

Our justice system is also based on individual and not on collective responsibility. A person cannot pass his culpability to a group of people, even when the crime was done collectively. I'm not a lawyer, but I don't think anyone can escape the law by saying that he was caught in a mob frenzy when he committed the criminal act. In the eye of the law, every person is responsible for his action.

So, it's quite obvious that the individual is the basis of our Western society. This principle is also reflected in the way we live out our faith. In baptism or confirmation, for example, each person makes individual proclamation of faith and commitment to follow Jesus.

For sure, individual commitment is an important part of our Christian faith, but it is not the whole picture. The Jewish and Christian faiths have never been about an individual affair only. We can see this in both of our readings today from the book of Nehemiah and the Gospel of Luke.

Both readings have one common thread: both tell the times when the Scriptures were being read. But both occasions, the words of God in the Scriptures were read not during a personal devotional time, but during a communal time of worship together. In our reading from Nehemiah, the Scriptures were even read in a very public setting when the 'entire' returnees from exile gathered!

But, we are also told that the Scriptures were not only read; it was also interpreted to the people.

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

(Nehemiah 8:8 NRSV)

So, it is not enough just to read the Scriptures; the words of God in the Scriptures must be interpreted to the people to be understood and applied appropriately.

This, I believe, is the answer to the question why I find it more meaningful to listen and reflect on the Bible in a worship service than during my own time. The Bible does not stand alone. It cannot exist in a vacuum. The Bible must be read and interpreted *by* and *for* the people of God.

The implication is this: our faith cannot grow alone; it can only grow within a community of faith. It is in the community that we hear and learn from the words of God in the Scriptures. It is in the community that *what* we hear and learn will be affirmed or challenged.

Now, of course, no community is perfect and it can turn toxic. We hear about it in our reading from Luke's Gospel when the people in the synagogue in Nazareth turned against Jesus. It got even worse: those people became murderous and tried to kill Jesus by throwing him off the cliff!

Now, I don't think any of you has ever come anywhere near that kind of mob violence (and I pray you never will)! But what's depicted here is true: an otherwise nice and kind person can turn violent when he is caught up in a mob mentality. We have also heard story after story of otherwise smart people being brainwashed in a cult, even to the point of them committing acts of violence.

So, the community itself can be a harmful environment. This is the danger that we must also be aware of and guard ourselves against.

But, regardless of the risk that a community can turn bad, the Scriptures are quite clear: God's mission must be accomplished by and within the people of God, not outside of them.

Despite of his negative experience in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus still went to other synagogues to proclaim about God's Kingdom. After he left Nazareth, he went to a synagogue in Capernaum. There, he was received not only with an open hand, but with hunger for the truth that he was proclaiming.

It was this positive experience in Capernaum, not the negative one in Nazareth, that was the most common experience that Jesus had during his ministry. Indeed, Luke ended the chapter by telling us that Jesus "continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea." (Luke 4:44 NRSVU)

Friends, I once read an article about the pain that we all experience when we are rejected by someone or by a group of people. Have you ever wondered, why; why rejection is painful and can even be harmful? Experts say that it is because, for our ancestors, to be a part of a group of people was a matter of life and death. Our ancestors could not survive in the wild against the beasts and the elements by going alone. Indeed, scientists believe that we are the dominant species on earth not necessarily because we are smarter than the other animals, but because of our ability to work together with other humans.

So, from the very beginning, our well-being is found in our relationship with other people. No wonder that to be ostracized in biblical times due to a disease, like leprosy, was equal to a death sentence. Most people could not survive living alone outside of a village or a town or a city, away from other people.

No wonder that, for people like the Apostle Paul, the Body of Christ was never an individual; it was the local community of faith as a collective.

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."

(1 Corinthians 12:12 NRSV)

The Spirit of God gives multiple gifts not to one person only, but to different people. In other words, God never designs the body of Christ on earth as one individual person, but as a group of people working together to achieve a common goal. One person alone cannot fulfill the mission that God has entrusted the Church; the mission has to be fulfilled by the Church as a collective.

So, today, let us individually remind ourselves that the *whole* is always greater than the *individual*. Let us *individually* make the commitment to strive for the benefit of the *whole* and not only for the benefit of a certain individual or group of people. This is right not only for the Church, but also for our society and for our nation.

Amen.