

Sermon on 3EpiphanyC: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; I Cor. 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21
Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship, 1-21-2007 by Pastor David Van Kley

ARE WE MISSING SOMETHING?

Mary, our long-time youth director, said with obvious pain: “Our son, Tod, just won’t come to church anymore. We took him to **everything**—worship every Sunday, Church School, all the trips. But now he says, ‘I don’t need that. I don’t need **them**. I can be a Christian without going to church.’”

It’s a statement I’ve heard hundreds of times over the years. In fact, some of us here today have said it. Some of us have run hot and cold in our church attendance. Most of us have had moments at least when we’ve thought, “I don’t need this. I don’t need them. I can be a Christian without going to church.”

I’m not sure the writers of the Bible would agree.

All three lessons for today deal with communities of faith gathered for worship. In the first lesson, the people of Israel are home after years of exile. Having rebuilt the ruined city of Jerusalem, they ask Ezra, their priest, to read from the law. He finds the scroll and reads from the first books of the Bible, while other priests interpret the words. This goes on for **six hours!** The people hunger for the Word of God after so long a time! Yet, that Word also convicts them of sin: they realize how far they’d strayed from their spiritual home. As one, the community falls to its knees and weeps.

Yet, the priests would not let them linger in sadness. “Wipe away your tears,” they said. “For God has re-established our relationship! Forgiveness abounds! Uncork the wine! Break out your favorite recipes! Cook more than you need and bring portions to everyone in the neighborhood. The first “meals on wheels” in history—though probably without the wheels!

Here in the shadows of the Old Testament, a pattern for lives of faith emerges. People gather. Together, we hear and make sense of the word of God. We hear that we fall short of what we should be, but that a merciful God forgives us. We taste the goodness of God in the sacrament of a meal. We share that goodness with those outside the community. None of these things is **adiaphora**, if you remember last week’s children sermon. All are **satis est!** All are **necessary**.

Ljulia and Eduard came from Estonia to Ishpeming, Michigan as refugees. I can still see the tears rolling down their cheeks their first Christmas Eve. The lights on the houses, the candles in church, the crowds of people who came to hear the gospel—they were overwhelmed. In Estonia, they’d worshipped in houses, often with one Bible between them, always in fear of being discovered and arrested by the Soviet authorities. Was this heaven or what?!

By contrast, we often take the gift of worship for granted! On Sunday mornings,

we choose sports events over Sunday School for our kids. We retreat to campgrounds, sleep in, go shopping, work, entertain guests. The list of possibilities seems to grow longer every year. I'm afraid the consequences for making such choices will show up in time. But the greatest consequence may be simply that we're missing something. One of God's greatest gifts—perhaps **the** greatest—God's presence as we gather to worship.

In the second lesson, Paul asks us to imagine a very peculiar conversation. Your hand says to your eye, “you worthless piece of mucus; I don't need you!” Your eye says to your foot, “What an ugly piece of skin, muscle, and bone! Out of my sight!” Your foot says to your knee, “Knobby thing, I'd be better off without you.” Parts of the body talking to each other? Goofy! Disowning each other? Impossible!

Which is Paul's point. We, the people of God, are the body of Christ, created and redeemed for one another. It's theologically impossible for us to say to each other, “I don't need you.” Yet, often, this **is** what we say or at least think. “I have no need of you,” says the twenty-something to the sixty-something. Or vice versa. I don't need **that** person: her behavior irritates me. I don't want to sit next to **him**: he sings off-key. We don't like **those** people: their politics differ from ours. We don't need that gay man in our church. To Paul, such words or thoughts are absurd, impossible! Like eyes saying to feet, “bug off.”

The early church was wonder, like nothing people had seen before. Slaves and slaveholders shared communion from a common cup. Rulers and peasants exchanged the peace. A widow with no income and the richest man in town called each other “brother” and “sister.” When someone was sick, prayers were offered, **whoever** that person was. When someone was honored, parties were thrown, **whoever** that person was. And people pooled their resources. Society was turned upside down—or better, **right side up**.

The church is **still** a wonder. Last week, we laughed with Pastor Kent and the kids during a delightful children's sermon. We heard another of Keith Burden's wise songs. We enjoyed Margaret's work on the piano, her clear soprano voice. The choir sang Beautiful Savior beautifully! Over coffee, we talked about Trevor Cook's 24 points in basketball, Kelsey Pickford's exploits on the flute, nurse Loretta Nuttle Gunderson's professional certification in pain management. We prayed for Sandy McFarland's foot and Doak Adair's knee. A granddaughter whom we didn't know, Ava, became a household name. So Cheryl and LeRoy Paulson have provided these flowers today to let us know that their Ava is going to be just fine.

The church **is** a wonder! If we say we don't need each other, we are missing something; when we say we don't need the church, we impoverish ourselves.

One of my pastor friends told me about their annual meeting. A man who'd left the church in a huff a year ago showed up and sat by himself in a corner. He'd come to make trouble, people assumed, and all through the meeting, they waited for it. At the

end, he stood up and said, “I’m just a stubborn German. And I want to say to you, pastor, and all of you, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what I did and I want to be part of this church again, if you’ll have me.” Well, there wasn’t a dry eye in the place. Forgiveness came with the tears and celebration followed. I bet they sealed their celebration with coffee and cookies, that unofficial Sacrament of the church.

Yet, these gifts of worship and unity are not ends in themselves. That’s why it was **during** worship, **in** the midst of a gathered community, that Jesus announced his mission: to preach good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to captives, justice for the oppressed. Mission is not **adiaphora**; its **satis est**. **Necessary**.

That came home to Arlene at Lynn’s the other day. She saw two people in the aisle, filling a grocery cart. One was a mentally ill woman, the other a check-out girl. The woman couldn’t read the labels. She kept taking items off the shelf, putting them in the cart and then putting them back, taking them in and putting them back. Now this woman is very “difficult” and Arlene’s first reaction was: “Oh, boy. I’m glad **I’m** not in that position.” But as she watched the girl gently reading and explaining, she recognized the body of Christ in them. The disabled woman needed the girl to fill her grocery cart. The girl needed the disabled woman to fulfill her call to serve. Like parts of the body, they needed each other. I have no idea if these two people go to church or where. But they were acting **like** the church, that’s for sure! The irony is that sometimes outsiders do that better than we insiders.

The other day, mission came knocking on our church door, literally. A young woman whom we’ve helped a ton over the last couple of years showed up in the parking lot, fresh out of gas. I thought, “Oh no, not **her!** I don’t need this!” But **she** needed **me**, needed **us**, needed our discretionary fund. And **we** needed **her** to fulfill our mission in Christ. It’s no wonder people like her come to the church. They know what we’re supposed to be! The question is whether we will receive them and also whether we will we go out to meet them. If we don’t, we’re missing something at the heart of it all.

Sometimes, I wonder about Tod, who must be pushing forty by now. Does he still say, “I don’t need that? I don’t need them?” He’s missed a lot over the years. The good news is that it’s all still waiting for him—and for us—through the sinners and saints who gather in the name of Jesus Christ their Lord. Amen.