

Sermon for Epiphany 3c
January 23, 2022
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Today we will gather at noon, either in person or virtually, for the annual meeting prescribed by the bylaws of Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church and the Canons of the Diocese of the Rio Grande.

In addition to the standard presentation of reports, the vestry will present the budget for 2022 and votes will be taken on the budget, amending the bylaws, and electing 4 members to the Vestry, 1 person as delegate and 1 as an alternate to Convention and Deanery.

These are important functions of the congregation. I urge you each and all to attend either in person or online. This is who we are as the Body of Christ – heirs of the promise of God to the people of Israel.

It's not as if the people of Israel could avoid the annual meeting. They return to the promised land after their exile in Babylon, and they are called together for an annual meeting so Ezra could read the annual report to them and they wept.

This may seem to be an unusual response, but the people had been in exile and the Book of the Law had been misplaced. So when they returned to Israel lo and behold, it turned up. So with the reading of the law the people realized they had not been following the law.

I can hear my Father now. Being a lifetime state policeman, "Ignorance of the Law is no excuse."

In a world in which the gods acted capriciously, and one never knew what was going to offend the gods, the Law had provided a guide so you knew whether you had stepped outside the law. So obviously, they cried.

So Ezra and Nehemiah and the Levites had to reassure the people not to be forlorn, but to celebrate that the law of the Lord had been found, and this was a Holy Day for celebration, and they were all urged to share food and wine with those who had less.

So the Body gathered together as the people of Israel just as we shall gather together as the Body of Christ. It's an important way of looking at our roles in this Parish devoted to the building up the Kingdom of God in Los Alamos. We are each and every one important.

The Apostle Paul has to remind the members of the Church he founded in Corinth that the members of the Church, are, in fact, "the body of Christ and individually members of it."

The Church is NOT a club - something to belong to. It's not like Kiwanis or Rotary or Lions. Members of those organizations pay dues to them, attend meetings when they feel like it, and turn in their membership cards when they grow tired of the organization's activities or become angry at what it does or the changes it makes. The Church, committed to God, should be very different. It is – we are – the body of Christ.

We are the body of Christ, and each of us individually is a member of it. But we are not individuals without the body – only within it.

It's not an easy concept – especially for Americans. We tend to think of ourselves as rugged and independent-minded individuals.

We are not Christians alone; we are not separate actors choosing our own views without reference to the faith. We are together – parts of the whole. Our congregations, the Church, are each and all part of the body of Christ.

This communal reality is how the Bible sees us.

The Bible knows nothing of individuals apart from the community. Abraham was called out to be the father of a people. Moses was called to lead the people out of slavery into the Promised Land. Nehemiah and Ezra gather the people assembled after the exile to hear the law as a community of the promise.

The gathering at the Water Gate makes it clear there is no such thing as an individual Jew separated from the people, and the Law and the Prophets, and the worship of the temple. Any promise of God was made to the whole people as a whole and not to any individual.

The individual's relationship to God came from their place among the people. The Law of God was for all of them together and individually only as part of God's people.

When Jesus read from Isaiah and then taught his former neighbors, their immediate problem was that they saw Jesus as they knew him in relationship to his life in Nazareth.

Jesus was still "Joseph's son." He had grown up among them. They knew his mother. They knew his brothers and sisters. He was part of the familiar world. How could he possibly be other than that?

In a way, the same thing can be true for us. We have all grown up with familiar interpretations of who He is. We have all grown up with familiar and more or less comfortable interpretations of who we are. And moving out of the familiar way of seeing a person or understanding a person, whether ourselves or someone else, is not easy.

However, when we look at the difficulty these people had, we do get a clue as to how difficult it is for us to shift our understanding of our relationship to God, from the individualism we have grown up with to the Biblical perspective of being part of the Body of Christ.

Paul is writing to a congregation in conflict. A congregation he founded. Some of the people interpret the gift of forgiveness as an excuse for immorality. Some of the people assert that they have special knowledge of God and warrant a greater authority over others.

For Paul, this is all nonsense. Who do you think you are? So Paul turns to the great description of the people as the Body of Christ. The human body becomes his example. It doesn't matter if you consider yourself a hand or a foot or a mouth or an eye, all the parts of the body are dependent on all the other parts of the body. We are all essential workers in building the Kingdom of God.

And, for me, at least, that is the most important thing to remember.

We don't make the Body of Christ. God does.

We don't provide the gifts that keep the Body of Christ alive and functioning and doing His work in the world. God Does.

We don't define who or what belongs in the Body of Christ. God does.

And as Jesus went to Nazareth "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

So Christ calls us to the same tasks in our time and place.

We are to use all of the gifts of the Body of Christ to do God's work in God's world.

We are to seek justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God, in Christ's Body, doing our part to achieve whatever that may be.

We act together, not as isolated individuals, not on our own strength, not with our own wisdom, but as among those whom God has bound into Christ's Body to manifest God's Love for all in our time and place.

To quote a friend of mine who dismissed her congregation each week with a challenge:

"You have been to church, now go into the world, and be the church."

Amen.