

Hear With Understanding: When the Word Hits Home

Third Sunday after the Epiphany,
January 24, 2010,
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Texts: Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6,8-10;
Psalm 19;
1 Corinthians 12.12-31a;
Luke 4.14-21

Sara Miles was 46 the first time she had communion. She describes her experience of wandering into a worship service in an Episcopal church in a memoir I'm reading called *Take This Bread*. She shares how immediately the experience changed her: "In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I'd been doing my whole life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people. And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I'd experienced."¹

The rest of her memoir shares how all the various and interesting experiences of her life brought her to that place and what she did as a result of it. She started a food pantry in that church and then organized new ones around the city which provide hundreds and hundreds of families with food each week. She's described her conversion in the opening prologue as "unexpected and terribly inconvenient" and also unlikely since she is a self-described "blue-state, secular intellectual; a lesbian, a left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism."² What she stumbled into was a radically inclusive faith centered on worship, sacraments and action. She writes: "faith for me isn't an argument, a catechism, a philosophical 'proof,' it is instead a lens, a way of experiencing life, and a willingness to act."³

¹ Sara Miles *Take This Bread* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), pg. xi.

² *Ibid*, pg. xii.

³ *Ibid*, pgs. xvi.

I thought of Sara Miles and her experience of walking into worship that day as I was reading Nehemiah last week. What struck me as I was reading the text was the description of those gathered as the ones who could hear the Word of God with understanding. Story after story in the old and new testaments tell about the people who heard without understanding. How many times have we been told that the people of God, or the king of Israel, or the disciples of Jesus did not get it? Somehow this day was different. Their hearts were open and the Word of God hit home.

Every detail about this story is significant: this is a critical moment in Israel's history. I didn't fully realize until this week how descriptive this passage is of the way worship is practiced in synagogues to this day. It was certainly a turning point for Israel after the time of their exile. First of all they were called to gather in the square at the Water Gate. City gates are a place in ancient societies where the elders discern and the judges rule. The people were summoned there for just that kind of discernment. They were called to make a decision. After the time of exile in Babylon after the return to Jerusalem and the arduous work of rebuilding they were still a people divided. Like so many people who lived under military occupation, their faith and culture – their sense of connection and cohesion - was diminished to the point where their very identity was threatened. The people no longer knew the law of God. Worship life had centered around the temple in Jerusalem. That temple had been lying in ruins for over a generation. Certainly remnants of their faith had remained with them but the sense that they were together the people of God – that their life together would be centered around the law of God – that life and that sense had disintegrated. So they were called there to make a decision about whether they would again commit themselves to being the people of God who lived by the law of God.

As the book of law was opened before the people they stood to hear it read. They lifted their hands to bless God. They bowed their heads to worship. Every part of their body and being was tuned to the worship of God. In that spirit of worship they received the Word of God. I know there is a component to the ways we engage the worship of God that is quite cultural. And I do not want to take what is cultural and make it normative. But I cannot help but notice the connection between the way that worship

is described here in Nehemiah and some of our observations last week around the Jewish sensibilities that keep the mind, spirit, and the body connected. I wonder whether the engagement of their whole body in worship stimulated the engagement of their mind and heart. And I don't just mean the standing and the lifting and the bowing although there is something quite powerful about that kind of movement in worship. Sara Miles described the physicality of sharing together in communion as a significant part of what grabbed hold of her in worship that day. But I'm also thinking about the way that their worship that day, because it was situated in the city square (and not in the temple), allowed for the whole body (all the bodies) of the community to gather. Categories of clean and unclean that kept so many people out of the temple did not apply here. Women were welcomed; in fact they were summoned alongside the men. I wonder whether the presence of those typically excluded had any impact on the way that God's Word was received.

As all of them were gathered, the whole of their community, engaged in mind, body, and spirit – the law of God was read. Not just read; it was interpreted. They gave the sense of how this law from their ancient past came to bear on their life together in that moment for that time. And they got it. The Word hit home. It opened them up so that they wept when they heard the law of God. We don't know precisely why - whether it was a sense of regret that they had lost hold of God's ways or whether it was a sense of conviction when they compared their lives to the ways of God described there. Whatever the cause of their grieving, the leaders encouraged them to wipe away their tears and to mark that day as holy.

This part of the text connects back to some of the themes from last week as well. They were to mark the day as holy and were invited to celebrate that holy moment of worship by going on their way to eat the fat and drink sweet wine. There is a place for fasting and weeping in worship and in life. But this was not the occasion for it. This was the stuff of joy: of discovering once again who they were, what mattered most; it was a chance to recommit themselves to be the people of God.

That's my prayer whenever we gather for worship: that we will come mindful of the full diversity of God's people, some of whom may not be

with us in the room; that our hearts will be open; that our minds and our bodies will be engaged in such a way that the ancient stories and teachings of God's Word will come to life among us in this moment and for this time to hit us where we live and help us to discover once again who we are, what matters most, giving us a chance to recommit ourselves to be the people of God.

But there's one more piece to this passage that we cannot pass by: it's the part that keeps worship and the subsequent invitation to party after worship from creating a kind of self-absorption in us. The text doesn't read: come to worship and rediscover your own individual and personal sense of purpose and then go on your way to eat the fat and drink the sweet wine. There's a part that comes next: verse ten continues: "send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord." Worship is meant to move us back into life in a spirit of celebration to enjoy the goodness and abundance of God's world and worship also connects us to that diverse body of God's people - some of whom do not have access to that abundance.

Part of what I love about Sara Miles' story is how quickly she made that move from celebration to compassion in action. She's a great example of the kind of impact that comes when people take stock of their life and ask the question we ended with last week: "Am I living in a way that allows others to be fully alive and connected to the love and grace of God?" I'm so grateful for people like her...people like a number of you - people with incredible vision who are positioned with just the right gifts at just the right time to meet an overwhelming need that is standing before them. I admire people who are determined, and passionate, who become part of something much bigger than themselves. And I am grateful for this passage from 1 Corinthians that not only acknowledges that not all of us are like that but articulates a theology that celebrates the fact that not all of us are like that. We each have a part to play and, yes, some parts are big and visible and some are small and go unnoticed, but the body could not exist without each and every one of us playing our part. All of us working together are to be pointed toward one aim.

Nehemiah hints at the end of this passage what Jesus states explicitly in Luke. His mission and therefore our mission hinges on this call from Isaiah in Luke chapter 4 to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. Some will go at this work directly and at the highest levels. Some will work one-on-one offering compassion and sending a portion of their food, or their wealth, to those for whom nothing is prepared. Some will recognize that captivity and oppression come in many forms and will dedicate themselves to walk among those who struggle in a multitude of ways. Some will work very close to home and some will wander the world.

But all of us joined together as the body of Christ are invited in this and every time of worship to hear the Word of God. And not just hear but to hear with **understanding**;

To listen for those places where the Word of God hits home...when that happens you never know what will come of it.

Praise be to God!