

# A NEW BEGINNING

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

January 24, 2010

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

*(Third Sunday after the Epiphany)*



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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## Lectionary Texts:

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

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

*All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. <sup>2</sup>Accordingly, the priest Ezra 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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*

*<sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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 4:14-21**

*<sup>14</sup>Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. <sup>15</sup>He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. <sup>16</sup>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, <sup>17</sup>and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: <sup>18</sup>"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news*

*to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

*<sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Last Sunday afternoon in our sanctuary, an historic event happened. United Methodists and the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), shared communion together. One would think that would not be the lead news story of the day, and it wasn't, of course. But in a day when there is so much fragmentation and division and polarization in the world, you take what you can get. Even within Christianity of course there is much division. There are so many interpretations of our faith and how we should observe it and how we should live it. There are literally thousands of Christian denominations, many thinking they have the sole corner on the truth.

A member of our church told me that he lived and worked for a few years in one of the Middle Eastern countries that is overwhelmingly Muslim. He said that there was a very small American Christian community in a very large city and that there was only one church building. All the Christians worshipped in the same building. I said, well that's kind of nice. Small Christian community in a Muslim country, with all the Christians worshipping together. I like that. But he said, no, you misunderstood. The Christians worshipped in the same building but not at the same time. It was like the Baptists worshipped at 9, the Methodists at 10, the Catholics at 11 and on and on.

So Methodists and Lutherans sharing communion in Houston, Texas, and anywhere else really, is a big deal. Both of our national bodies have voted to recognize full communion with each other. I was present and voting at our General Conference in 2008 when we United Methodists voted for this, and I am proud to say I voted for it. The Lutherans voted for it last summer. Now this is not a merger or

even the first step toward a merger, just a recognition that we are both Christian and that we can share the sacrament together.

Our bishop, Bishop Janice Huie, preached the sermon last Sunday at the service, and Lutheran Bishop Mike Rinehart consecrated the elements for communion, which included for the first time bread, grape juice, and wine. The Lutherans wouldn't agree to the joint recognition unless we used real wine. So you had your choice last Sunday afternoon. I peeked as all the people were taking communion to see what the Methodists would do, but I'm not telling.

During the bishop's sermon, she told of the vote the Lutherans took last summer. The motion was made for recognition of full communion with United Methodists, and it was before the house. She said one grizzled old Lutheran minister from the north country of Minnesota made his way to the microphone to speak. She said he looked like something out of a Garrison Keillor story. So when he spoke, this is what he said: "Of all the denominations with which we have conversation and relationships, the Methodists are the least offensive. I vote we do this." And it passed overwhelmingly, as it had at our General Conference.

The service last Sunday included not only communion, but a reference to our common baptism, the singing of hymns from each tradition, a shared liturgy, and a time in front of the congregation when the bishops washed the feet of each other, symbolizing our common ministry of service to Christ. I tell you, I had worked so hard concerning the details of the service with Robert Moore, pastor at Christ the King Lutheran over in the Village, and with Mark Edenfield, and others who helped plan the service, that I was not prepared for the emotions that I felt. Our bishop had turned the planning of the service over to us, and I just wanted to make sure that we got our bishops through the service without any major embarrassments, which we did. But I have to tell you, when our two bishops stood at our altar and raised the chalice and broke the bread, I had to choke back tears. I know nothing in our world changed, but in our very conflicted world with all kinds of individualized agendas, it was nice to see Christians of very different traditions sharing a moment of unity. It is a beginning.

I hope emotions and tears happen to all of us in those moments when something sacred happens in the midst of the routine.

Yesterday I attended a wedding of a clergy friend of mine who married the spouse of a clergy friend of mine. Both had lost their spouses to death. We had known them all as separate couples, helped raise some of their children, and shared a lot of good times and hard times together. I went to both funerals of both the spouses who had died. So when Faulk Landrum and Eleanor Little got married yesterday in Jacksonville, Texas, Sandy and I wanted to be there. In the midst of the wedding, I shed a tear for all the memories and for the joy of the moment and for the beginning of their life together rather than alone.

Our first reading today from Nehemiah is the story of the reading of the Law by the priest Ezra, and as he reads, all the people wept. They wept because it had been so long since they had heard it. Through the many years of defeat and exile in Babylon, the public spoken word had not been heard. Now returned from exile, and back to what is left of Jerusalem with the temple destroyed, they hear again the word of the law of the Lord. They read the scripture in the ruins of the temple. The people wept because it had been so long since they had heard the word. They wept because they had wandered so far from passionate faithfulness, and they wept because they were reminded again that through all their experiences, God had not given up on them or forgotten them. All reasons why you and I sometimes weep today. We weep when the articulated story becomes our story and God's grace becomes real. For the Israelites long ago and for all people of faith at such times, it is a new beginning. Sometimes when we least expect it, we are surprised by a gracious presence that moves us to tears and allows us to begin again.

As the great preacher and teacher of preachers, Fred Buechner, said, "Every significant response to God begins with a lump in the throat." That is to say, we all must connect personally with God's grace before we go to work for God in the world. A heart of gratitude leads to a life of faithfulness.

It must have been an emotional moment when Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth. He has just returned home to Naza-

reth from his baptism by John in the Jordan River and from a time of temptation in the wilderness. He quickly reminds us that emotion may be the beginning of faith. It is not the end, however. The emotion must lead to work in the world, a lifestyle of faithfulness.

Jesus announced the beginning of his ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah. Actually, you won't find this exact passage in the translation of Isaiah in our Old Testament. Jesus actually takes part of chapter 58 and part of chapter 61 and shapes them together with his own twist to begin his ministry. It is about good news for the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, a time of grace and forgiveness. All of these things would be the agenda for the ministry of Jesus. According to Jesus, emotion gives way to works of justice and mercy. It should be for us as well. Poet Carl P. Daw has written:

Till all the jails are empty and all the bellies filled,  
till no one hurts or steals or lies, and no more blood is spilled,  
till age and race and gender no longer separate,  
till pulpit, press and politics are free of greed and hate:  
God has work for us to do.

Sometime when you least expect it, you may feel a lump in the throat or a tear in the eye and gratitude in the heart. It is the beginning of a life of faithfulness for mercy and justice in our world.