

An Ethic of Love
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Nehemiah 8:10-18
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By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, And our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4).

In 587 BCE, the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, and exiled Judah’s best and brightest to a foreign land. And they stayed there for nearly fifty years, ten years longer than their ancestors had wandered in the wilderness. Civil servants, artisans, engineers, poets, astronomers, tradesmen, scholars, priests...all became servants of Babylon’s royal court. And they had daughters and sons, and their daughters and sons had children, too. And Jerusalem, and its temple, and the God they’d covenanted with all seemed a distant memory.

And then one day, The Persians conquered the Babylonians. And King Cyrus believed that his subjects ought to be able to worship the Gods they wanted to worship. And he told the people of Judah, that as long as they remained loyal subjects, they could return to their homes, and rebuild their temple.

Of course, Cyrus’ decree was just that – it was a decree. And it would take nearly 25 years for the temple to be rebuilt. Here’s the thing: When Jerusalem was conquered, not everyone left. Some were left behind. And of course there were neighbors to the north, the Samaritans, the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, who had been conquered by the Assyrians a century-and-a-half before Judah’s destruction. They tried to piece together an existence in the rubble that remained.

So you’ve got returning exiles, and abandoned Jerusalemites. Each feels equally decimated. Each grieves the loss of their temple. And each group seeks to claim their experience as authentically Jewish. And each grimaces at the other group’s vision of the new cult. And the locals don’t take too kindly to the return of the prodigal exiles.

In the end, it will be the returning exiles, whose influence secures and cements the face of Second Temple Judaism. They don’t have more divine authority than the Samaritans. And they don’t have more intelligence. And it isn’t that they outworked their rivals. They just have more resources, and more political capital, and more sway with the authorities. And no matter the culture, it’s not the righteous that write the history books, it’s the victors.

Today, we’ll talk about Ezra and Nehemiah, the leaders of the returning exiles. In many ways, these men should be rightly celebrated. Ezra the devout priest, and Nehemiah the able administrator, worked hard, really hard, to give shape to a national religion.

I’ve never had the distinct privilege (or misfortune!) to be charged with leading a capital campaign to rebuild a church sanctuary. It’s hard enough to raise sufficient funding, and to generate ample compromise for a group of 100 families to move into a new building. But special kudos to the project manager who can endure twenty-five years of construction, including multiple setbacks from local and national authorities, and still have the energy, vision, and patience to finish the job.

And I can tell you that I've never been forced to endure a world where I no longer had a temple. The physical structures that have shaped my faith, and those of my ancestors, are almost wholly intact. I don't have to imagine what they might have looked like. I've seen them. I've touched them. I've known them. And I still do!

Nehemiah saw his purpose as restoring the temple for his people. And he did that. And he should be commended for it.

And all my life, I've been drawn to sacred texts. I've heard the stories, and I've sought to know them better. And I've never wanted from a lack of people to teach me, or engage with me, or to tell the stories of old. And while I know that I bear a responsibility to share the tenants of my faith with those whom I encounter, and with those whom I love, and with the children I will raise; I have never been forced to contemplate a world where the story – God's enduring acts of love and grace – where the story might end with my generation.

Ezra guarded a sacred scroll. He kept it in his heart. And he knew the law. And he made sure that the generations to follow would, too. His purpose was to tell the story so that others might hear it. And he did that. And he should be commended for it.

In today's passage, Ezra and Nehemiah, reading from the sacred scrolls, remind Israel of an ancient tradition, Succoth: the Festival of the Booths. This festival is still practiced today. Families gather branches and other greenery, and they create booths or huts, in which they dwell for seven days. This action is to remind them of the ample provisions God supplied to Israel during the wilderness years. And the text tells us that all those gathered at the square in front of the Water Gate, celebrated this feast for the first time in nearly three generations.

I'm not sure how to put this in proper context, but I'll try. Imagine if after WWII, our country's fortunes had been reversed, and our lands were overtaken by an enemy who forced us to abandon our religious traditions. And then imagine in 2018, our fortunes changed. And for the first time in seventy years, Christians had the opportunity to acknowledge Palm Sunday or Pentecost, or Muslims the opportunity to acknowledge Ramadan, or Jewish people the opportunity to celebrate Passover. Can you imagine the eighty and ninety-year-olds in the crowd? Doing something they barely remembered from their youth. And seeing their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren introduced to the stories of old. What a beautiful, poignant moment!

Ezra and Nehemiah, despite any faults they may have, bring renewed energy to a tired and weakened religion. And their zeal still permeates the faith of their descendants.

But we do need to acknowledge their faults. Theirs was an exclusive faith for an exclusive community. Steeped in the tradition of the Deuteronomists, they sought to keep Israel a purified people. That meant that this small, exclusive band of refugees was God's chosen, God's ordained, the "real covenant people." And so laws and codes were followed with a stiff rigor, the most damaging of which, was the abolition of mixed or interracial marriages. Because mixed-marriages also meant mixed communities, mixed traditions, and a lighter grip on local real estate, they represented a threat to the cohesiveness of the newly-revived cult. And the temporary need for such rigor resulted in generational abuse – it became a justification to keep Judaism contained, rather than shared.

Fleming James laments that each man, and indeed the generations that followed, placed too equal an emphasis on both ritual and ethic. Yes, just like the prophets of old, they believed one should do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly. But one had better do so only within the boundaries of the law.

Love was bound to clan. Service had to respect Sabbath. Rules meant order. Order meant holiness. God and system were inseparable. And the text said what the text said.

Their story makes me think of our U.S. Constitution. For more than two centuries, citizens have debated and celebrated a document that seeks to ensure the rights of ALL its people. I believe the exact phrasing is “promoting the general welfare.” The document’s amendments tell us we can say anything we want to say; and we can bear arms; and we can have a drink (until it says we can’t again!); and we don’t have to testify against ourselves; and we all have a voice – we can vote; and we’re all guaranteed our rights.

And I think for most of us, this country brings us so much joy. Here in North Carolina, we are surrounded by natural beauties: mountains and oceans, and rolling hills. And we are full of diverse, intelligent, caring, creative, innovative, independent, sparkling people. And this beautiful, flawed, painful, jagged, joyful, complicated, mysterious place – all of it – it’s some kind of wonderful. It’s wonderful, because collectively we believe in a shared ethic of love. We believe that such an ethic is paramount to our long term survival.

But guess what. We can say anything we want; and we can buy as many guns and bullets as we want to; and we can vote for whomever we want, just because; and we can take the fifth, and we can drink a fifth, and we can do a hundred other things, just because...just because it’s our right. Just because the text tells us it is so. And just because such a practice maintains the status quo.

And too often, I believe that we choose to equate the practice of *just because* with the ethic of love. And when we do so, we do not elevate the ethic of love. We cheapen it. We devalue it. And we make what’s intended to be pure, impure.

Ezra and Nehemiah restored a zeal to Israel. But that zeal Samaritanized and stigmatized non-Jews. But I am grateful for their zeal. Four centuries after their death, Judaism was a thriving religion. And in that religion, a new prophet was born: Jesus of Nazareth. He was heavy on love. And a little light on the just-because. People said he’d come to abolish the law and the traditions. But Jesus said:

“Nope, I’ve actually come to fulfill them. And here’s how: that ritual you practice, it’s got to be steeped in an ethic of love. Because when you love, you realize God’s got the power to transcend any boundary humanity dares to create. And when you love, even when temples fall, and sacred scriptures get misplaced, God is still present. And God is still working. And God is still loving, searching, yearning for Her people.

Sardis Baptist Church, may we be steeped in an ethic of love! Amen.