

An Exclusive Place for Welcome  
Epiphany 3C: Nehemiah 8.1-10  
January 23, 2022  
The Rev. Scott Walters

A week ago, we buried my father in Arkansas. It's lovely and strange at once to step into the pulpit for the first time after a life event like that. Just as it's lovely and strange to go back to whatever the particulars are of anyone's life are after a loss. It's strange to go back to doing "what the living do" to borrow a phrase from a friend of ours.

But part of the strangeness is that lots of you here know what's been going on with Ardelle and me, but some of you don't. You might be newish to Calvary or just have the sense to avoid social media. And I've been in church before when something was said or done that assumed some prior knowledge, or involved an inside joke, or used strange vocabulary, and it made me feel like an outsider. If I told a cradle Episcopalian to meet me in the narthex, they'd know what I meant. But most English speakers might respond to the word "narthex" with "gesundheit."

Before the funeral, I was standing in the foyer ... or is it foy-YAY? Depends on whom you ask. But there is definitely no narthex in the chapel of John Brown University, where Dad taught in the Bible Department for 40 years. I was standing in that entry area just inside the front doors, when one of Dad's colleagues was offering her condolences. And she said that in a former life as a nurse she had observed a great difference in dying patients who were "believers."

She didn't use the term "believer" because my dad was a Monkees fan. Dad wouldn't have even gotten that joke. As most of you didn't either, apparently. But "believer" was the word people used in the world I grew up in for "Christian." And I had a complicated response to it last Sunday. On one hand, it was familiar. It was a reminder of where I was, not just geographically but culturally and theologically. It's probably more accurate to say that "believer" means "real Christian," in that context. Which is why it also felt like a distance opened up between me and the person I was speaking with. Because I don't use that term anymore myself, in part because it suggests that my relationship with God is defined by ideas or doctrines I hold in my head. But the distance was also because I wondered if that word was used to distinguish some followers of Jesus from Christians like me. It may have marked a boundary around a community that did not include me anymore.

Let me just say that I do realize that 98% of the overthinking I've just confessed, all over a word that's so much more common than "narthex," is about my own peculiar experiences and insecurities. Please don't assign anything like an exclusionary motive to the person who used the word "believer" so innocently that day. But my recoil in the moment was a reminder that, no matter how inclusive and open minded you like to think you are, we are always creating little cultures of meaning and inclusion by the words we choose and the customs we share with other people. And as soon we build those little communities of story and shared experience with some people, other people necessarily stand outside them.

I'm no sociologist, so take this for what it's worth. But isn't this how all human societies are formed, from the smallest to the largest? A few people share an experience that becomes a shared story that they derive meaning from and tell it to others. This happens in families, in churches, in cities, in nations. It happens among fans of sports teams and in minority communities and pretty much everywhere human beings interact. We're always making little

societies and cultures. And it's essentially a truism that a shared experience or unit of culture only has meaning insofar as it *isn't* experienced by everybody. That incredible dinner you had with four other friends, after which you all got food poisoning is not, thankfully, a story that includes me. And every time you tell it in my presence, I'm looking in from the other side of a little wall, innocent as it may be. A story that includes everyone and everything isn't a story at all.

One of the interests of a social psychologist named Jonathan Haidt is how a healthy human society needs people of conservative and people of liberal dispositions. Now don't get tripped up on what passes for liberal and conservative in your Twitter feed or on your TV. Having a liberal or conservative disposition doesn't necessarily have much to do with your opinions on gun control or income taxes. Rather, a conservative in a society is one who values and tends to the boundaries, one who tends to the norms and institutions and moral codes that have been passed down that make a group distinctive and coherent. It's absolutely necessary work. Without it, there's no human society at all.

On the other hand, someone with a liberal disposition will be inclined to wonder about the ones our boundaries are excluding. They'll wonder about exceptions to the rules and question the validity of institutions and social structures that a culture has been built upon. This is also absolutely necessary work. Any society that can't look beyond itself and evolve to include new stories and people and information will suffocate. A great sickness in our society right now, says Jonathan Haidt, is that we don't believe the world has much need of the people on the other side of the liberal/conservative divide. And it's killing us.

Well, speaking of handed down stories, I suppose it's way past time that I at least alluded to one of our scriptures for the day. It just so happens that we had our daughter Kate paint those beautiful lines from Nehemiah on the wall of our kitchen in Little Rock. "Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared." Isn't that lovely? Our hope was that this image of an abundant, joyful feast that extended beyond our table to others would inform the little society that is the Walters family.

But the Bible is a remarkably diverse collection of stories and perspectives and, if you will, dispositions toward the world. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah actually represent some pretty strong conservative instincts within the Hebrew community after they returned from exile. The Babylonians tore them from their homes and communities, and hoped to destroy their culture. Imagine what it would have taken to preserve Hebrew identity and religion while in exile. Imagine the task of protecting and passing down the stories, the rituals, the moral codes that bound the Hebrews together under those circumstances.

The book of Nehemiah tells of the return from exile, the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and reading the Law in public, the people promising to obey it and form their common life according to Torah again in their homeland. They were creating a place of inclusion and safety for a people who have been living in fear and oppression for generations.

But in Nehemiah 13 we read this: "On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them... When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent."

They built their walls, read the Torah, and then they sent away their foreign wives, children, neighbors. Sent away all the non-Jews, all the gentiles in their midst... All the people, in other words, like me and almost certainly like you.

But here's how holy scripture works. We don't get a redaction or qualification within the story of Nehemiah. What happened happened. And we read it as such.

But the Bible also includes the book of Ruth. I'm sure all you Calvary insiders remember my sermon on Ruth back in Lent vividly. For everyone else, you need to know that Ruth was a Moabite who had been married to a Jew. She came to Bethlehem from Moab with her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi after the death of both of their husbands. One day Ruth is gathering grain in the un gleaned corners of a man named Boaz's field, as the Torah required. It was a way to make sure foreigners and the poor had enough to eat. Ruth and Boaz fall in love. They marry, and Ruth and Naomi find a new life after their lives had fallen apart in Moab. But the book ends, not just with the happy ever after of Ruth and Boaz, but with a genealogy in which we learn that Ruth has not only survived, and has not only become the wife of a certain faithful Jew named Boaz, but that one of her descendants will be none other than David. Which means Ruth, the Moabite, is also in the lineage of Jesus.

Can you appreciate this contradiction? In one place in scripture, Moabite wives are sent away, because the Law seemed to require it. In another place in scripture, a Moabite wife makes her way into the lineage of the great (if also very contradictory) King David. And she made it into the story because a Jew fulfilled the requirements of the Law with regard to tending the boundaries of his field.

If you're looking for holy scriptures that present a single, unadulterated, and righteous perspective, I'm afraid you're going to have to look elsewhere than the Bible of Christians and Jews. But I've come to believe that these contradictions are not flaws. They are features. They are essential to how scripture goes to work on our common life over time.

When we take the broader view, we see that the Bible affirms that there will be times in our lives when we need to build safe places, preserve traditions and stories and values that a hostile world seeks to dilute if not destroy altogether. And we should thank God for the conservative tenders of our boundaries, our handed down truths, our oldest shared values. We will also see that the Bible tells us that our boundaries, and even something as foundational as the Law, which was written on tablets of stone by the finger of God no less, must have openings through which new people and perspectives can enter. In fact, preserved within the tradition itself are reminders to look out beyond the borders of the tradition. God may be sending someone into your life whom you can't imagine having anything useful to offer. Someone who looks for all the world like an enemy. You may even have the chapter and verse to back your rejection of the person God has sent to bless you.

What the Bible leaves us with is the hard but holy work of building Christian society, by which I mean building relationships right here, in this context, that share stories and language and liturgies that are peculiar to Calvary Church in Memphis. They're not everyone's story or everyone's way of being Christian. Nor should they be. But if they do their work faithfully, they will gather us as one quirky but distinctive society of Jesus's people, with a particular history, particular norms and words. There will be moments when we need to tend firmly and carefully to our traditions and to our boundaries. And there will be other times when we need to make sure all those borders can be breached, tending just as faithfully to the openings in our lives and language and understandings.

To that end, we could do worse than inscribe on our walls the words of an ancient priest named Ezra, who built walls to keep out the likes of Moabites, Ruth's people. But one who also said, "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." What version of Calvary might we become, what joy ... what strength might we find, if we lived more fully into this simple, beautiful charge, which God has given to us though a complicated priest named Ezra?