

Sermon for the Third Sunday after The Epiphany
RCL Lectionary, Year C
[Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10](#) / [Psalms 19](#) / [1 Corinthians 12:12-31a](#) / [Luke 4:14-21](#)

January 24th, 2010
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Counting Blessings
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

A colleague, a priest in a neighboring parish, reflected in a gathering this week on the remarkable experience he has had as his parish has undertaken helping provide overnight shelter for homeless men this winter. Most striking to him was the conversations he has with some of the men at the shelter – who with no home, very little or no money, and barely the clothes that they wear or carry, yet remark on how blessed they are by God. We had to chuckle over this contrast with the tendency all of us have, even with much greater material wealth, to complain – and often – about what we don't have!

It's this experience that I've encountered again and again over the years as I work with those who, by choice, ill-fortune, or a mixture of both, live in radical poverty. It's an experience many of us have as we work with people at the monthly lunch at Our Lady of Mount Carmel. We meet people who seem so less fortunate than we are – people who have so much more reason to complain about their lot than we do. And yet they often seem so much more able to proclaim God's blessings in their lives than we are.

One of our favorite sins as a people – and I mean sin in that old-fashioned scriptural way – “missing the mark” – is that we keep looking outside of ourselves for salvation. We look beyond what we have already, beyond our friends and families, beyond our means, beyond our resources, however we measure them. How we know the dread some of us feel as the government seemed this week destined for a train-wreck around health care reform. Maybe that's yet another sign that we cannot look to our leaders to save us. Health care indeed needs reform, it seems to most of us, but that reform cannot rest on the shoulders of a few cloistered in great chambers in Washington. They cannot save it on their own. They cannot save us. Maybe that's why our best leaders talk more about service than saving. Perhaps the greatest political problem for Washington is not Republican or Democrat, but the notion that we, the people of this country, much of the time expect them – mixed up together as they are – to rescue us rather than lead us.

How easily we forget the strange and mysterious promise at the heart of our tradition that *we already have everything we need*. I suppose that's a reminder for all of us today as we meet as a parish shortly to discuss where we've been and where we're going. So often we have focused on what we don't yet have. Yet our life in the Gospel is already unfolding with abundant grace in what we *do* have. And perhaps the greatest thing we have for that mission and ministry in Christ is one another. We are indeed deeply blessed.

One of the great hallmarks of our spiritual tradition is that our sacred writings are not interpreted or proclaimed in a vacuum. Even when we read them on our own, we recognize that we are surrounded by not only a vast

heritage of story, debate, and discussion, but by the Spirit of our God, illuminating the words of scripture as though we read them each time anew. They are made alive, most especially in the life of community gathered.

When Ezra began reading to the people come together again in the period of the reconstruction of the Temple after a long and painful exile, the tradition that made them a people was re-born. It was made anew in their hearts and lives as they picked up the customs of their ancestors and lived into them – re-birthed them in a way – in their own time again.

When Jesus begins reading from Isaiah in the synagogue in his hometown, he is not only bringing the words to life, but he is embodying them in himself. The fulfillment he offers is not “out there” any longer, but present among those listening, moving among them with a radically transformative presence.

Most of us have read that quote from Gandhi – even on the occasional bumper sticker: “Be the change you want to see in the world.” In this sense, Jesus *embodies* the new reality of God’s promise made through the ancient prophet. This is what we mean when we talk about an *incarnational* faith – not just belief in God born in Christ and laid in a manger; not just assenting that the anointed one baptized by John in the River Jordan is the Lord come to save us; but the very reality of God’s commands for justice embodied in the being and actions of Christ: good news taken to those who most need to hear it, freedom to those who are bound, sight for the blind; the recognition that a God who is so often depicted as wrathful and angry with the failings of the human family, so “out there,” has instead found favor with us, and deigns to set us free by coming among us, by becoming a part of us.

And we, of course, as a faith community who call ourselves the “Body of Christ,” are meant to embody this, too, in all our actions. We declare the year of the Lord’s favor. We marshal our resources for the blind and captive. We take good news to the impoverished. We, too, who are anointed in all of our humility through our baptism.

This is far and away from our cultural tendency to expect things to happen to us from the outside, or await the saving hand of someone else. Christian communities *make things happen*. We forge ahead even with meager resources. We become the justice and the change we want for the greater world. And Paul reminds us today in this great introduction to his song of love in First Corinthians, that we do this together – never alone. It might matter that we need each other. Indeed we do. But more importantly, God needs us, and needs us together, shoulder to shoulder, cheek by jowl, laboring for the communion of divine grace and favor in the world.

Jesus, in his radical poverty, embodies this truth of blessings for us this day. We are reminded as a parish that each of us and together, we are called to embody the blessings the world needs; that we already have what we need in the gifts of one another; that we proclaim that the promises of God’s favor are not fulfilled tomorrow or next year, or when the government acts, or when our pews are filled, or when the accounts hit a certain balance. But they are fulfilled *now* in our hearing, in this moment, in the deep, still places of our souls and community where God is already cultivating new life and new justice, broken open, poured out, and shared for us and for our world.