

1) The story we just heard from the Book of Nehemiah—

it wasn't the most riveting of tales, I grant you; but at least it did seem to make sense.

Standing before all the people, Ezra, the priest, reads from the Law of God.

Everyone listens with deep respect.

At first, they weep; but then they are urged to rejoice.

Full Stop—*Here ends the lesson—Thanks be to God.*

If you look at the service leaflet, however, you'll note something odd.

Two verses from this reading have been surgically excised.

From Nehemiah 8:1-10, verses 4 and 7 have been ever so deftly deleted.

What was it that the Lectionary Loppers thought we didn't need to hear?

Let's put those verses back where they belong, and see what it sounds like—here goes:

*The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose.*

*And beside him stood Mattithia, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand*

*And Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchajah, Hashum, Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshulum on his left hand.*

Ezra opens the book, the people stand, Ezra blesses God, the people say AMEN and worship.

Then the text continues (again re-inserting the lines omitted):

*Also, Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, the Levites helped the people understand the law while the people remained in their places.*

*SO, they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation.*

*They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*

2) After all that, one is tempted to say: *Thanks be to God for the Lectionary Loppers.*

*We really didn't need to hear 26 otherwise unknown entries from the Jerusalem phone book.*

In the Good Old Days prior to the current lectionary, those names WERE included in this reading.

The unfortunate Reader of the First Lesson would invariably approach me in a panic:

*How am I supposed to get through all of these?*

And listeners to that reading would lean in, wide-eyed—like a circus crowd

breathlessly waiting for a tight rope walker to miss a step and tumble headlong into the net.

(Kind of like you just did with me.)

SO—GOOD CALL, LECTIONARY LOPPERS—but, then again, maybe not.

On second thought, perhaps we DO need to hear those names—each and all—

especially because of what each DOES, what ROLE each plays, what DIFFERENCE each one makes.

3) Here's the setting for this story:

- A wall surrounding Jerusalem has finally been rebuilt—no small accomplishment!
- For generations, the land has lain in ruins, the people devastating by conquest and exile.
- Nehemiah gets permission from the Persian emperor to oversee the wall's rebuilding; but his efforts (long story short) are sabotaged from without and undermined from within.
- But finally completed under Nehemiah's supervision, the wall now affords a measure of stability and security for the people of Jerusalem.
- Yet Nehemiah and his colleague Ezra, a scribe and priest— they both know that SPIRITUAL moorings are more important than PHYSICAL ones.

So they gather the whole city to hear the reading of God's long neglected Law.

Men, women, children, at the Water Gate, the public square.

Ezra reads from the Torah for hours; everyone listens intently.

- 4) But Ezra has a serious problem—it's been way too long since God's Law has been heard. The words sound not just ominous, but strange—even unintelligible. The conditions under which the Law was given, and those under which it was recorded—both were very different from the pervasive, protracted crisis the people are facing now. The listeners who have gathered all bring their own agendas—and their own blind spots. In short, Ezra needs help—lots of help. Enter Sherebiah, Josabad, Kelita and company. They answer questions, provide illustrations, offer explanations, give updated interpretations. In the process, they surely check signals with Ezra and with each other. This proclamation of the Law is NOT an instance of *NOW HEAR THIS—DON'T TALK BACK!* Individually and together, what Ezra and his 26 helpers do is convene a Spirit-ed Conversation about the Law of God with God's Covenant People. Jeshua, Hilkiah, Pedaiah and Pellaiah—they aren't priests, or scribes. They are not theological professionals; they are Levites, lay religious community leaders—leaders with a love for God, a love for Torah, and a love for the community—a community who has lost its sense of identity, its sense of purpose, its sense of hope. And to this disoriented community—poor in possessions, poor in spirit, and poor in understanding, Bani, Akkub, Shema, and Hanan "GIVE the SENSE"—a sense of center, a sense of direction, a sense of who the people are (appearances to the contrary)—a sense of who they are, individually and collectively, as the Children of God's Relentless Love. That the community has lost its sense of who they are is indeed worth weeping over; that the community is regaining its sense of who they are, thanks to the efforts of *Mishael, Malchajah, Hashum, and Hashbadana*—well, that is worth a celebration—so Ezra and Nehemiah urge everyone to party—and not just to party, but to share with those who have nothing to bring to the pot luck.
- 5) Last week, from John's Gospel, we heard a story about a wedding where, thanks to Jesus, lots and lots of water somehow—just how we aren't told—becomes lots and lots of wine. Thanks to Jesus, yes. But thanks, as well, to the servants who draw that water from the well, lug it all the way from the well to the big stone jars, then tote the water that (quote) "had become wine" to all the guests at the wedding banquet. Without the work of those servants, the water wouldn't have BEEN there to become wine, and, without their doing the further transporting work, the wine would have soon gone sour. Those servants aren't named, but in their setting, they, like Uriah, Hodiah, Azariah, and Zechariah, they are bridge builders, without whom the critical connection would not have happened. Similarly, each of Ezra's 26 interpreters forges connections in his own particular way with words—connections that would otherwise be missed by listeners gathered at Jerusalem's Watergate.

6) Deeply etched in my memory is an instance of what I think is going on here.

{Jay Palermo story}

Simply put, Jay did what, by myself, I could not possibly have done.

7) St. Paul today is seriously worried about the Christians in Corinth,

All seem obsessed with how superior their own roles are to those of other community members. The HEALTH of the Body, says Paul, is dependent on the WHOLE of the Body.

And the members of that Body are interdependent on each other.

Not just their viability but their credibility is compromised and threatened when, rather than giving voice in concert to their distinctive but complementary roles,

members shout over top of each other about who is greater at “giving the sense” of the Gospel.

You have to wonder what would have happened at the Water Gate, if Ezra had read the Law, and Maaseiah, Meshulum, and Mattithia had each hollered, *Don't listen to HIM, listen to ME!*

If Jamin, Shabethai, and Anaiah had walked away in disgust, muttering,

*If they won't listen to ME, I'm not going to say anything at all.*

To state the obvious, there would have been, for those who desperately needed it, no sense of the Law of the Lord—a Law that, as today's Psalm sings:

*revives the soul, gives wisdom to the innocent, light to the eyes, and rejoices the heart.*

To connect the dots just a bit further: had there been dissension among Ezra's 26 colleagues; that wall around the city of Jerusalem—

that wall Nehemiah labored so long and hard to rebuild—

it would not have served as a protection, defending the community the from chaos outside.

it would have become a prison wall, exacerbating the chaos inside.

Walls can only do so much.

8) It was, in the old phrase: “meet and right” for the Biblical storyteller

to cite each and every one of those 26 names.

(And, I submit, it was “seriously wrong” for the Lectionary Loppers to cut them out.)

Every member in the Community of Christ at the Church of the Redeemer,

is, by his or her baptism, named—not just as valued, loved, and important—though surely that;

but each of us is named as well as an amateur theologian, a meaning interpreter—

one who is charged with the duty and the gift of “giving the sense,”

of translating the Loving Law of God into words and images

that can be tasted, touched, and seen by others.

As and when that happens, the Word of God comes alive, it is “fulfilled in their hearing.”

In this challenging, energizing translation task, each of us has a distinctive role,

a particular ear, a particular voice that can make a saving, healing difference.