

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC

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Motivated to Work Together

Luke 4:14-21, I Corinthians 12:12-31, Nehemiah 8:1a, 2a, 3, 5b, 6, 9a, & 10

Some people ask the question, why do we read scripture in worship? The question can also take the form of why do we read so much scripture? Or why do we read scripture that doesn't have a story or seem to make any sense? Or why do we read several scripture readings that don't connect each other? Or why do we read scripture that doesn't seem to connect to our lives?

One part of the answer is that it is tradition to read scripture, we always do it. Another part of the answer is that in our particular brand of Christianity, we see scripture as the centerpiece of our faith. It is not the church leader (Pope or pastor), the church teachings or creeds, or the tradition of how we have done things over the years that is the important thing. It is how God has spoken and continues to speak through scripture, God's ongoing revelation through the Bible, that helps us to understand what we are to do and where we are called to go in our lives.

Another part of the answer is that it is scripture can give us guidance about how to live our lives through God's commandments, the history and experience of a people with God, the stories of successes and failures, and examples of the lives of saints and sinners. Some of the ancient stories are very helpful, especially when we take time to study them from the beginning to the end as the class on Moses is

doing. But other stories don't seem to have much relevance to our lives and we have to really examine them to get guidance. For instance, do you know your stories of Tamar or Dinah? Most people do not because they are hard stories, and hard to apply to our lives.

Using the lectionary scriptures instead of following the stories, can also give us some problems. The lectionary is a plan put together for churches so that we can experience all the scriptures of the Bible in three years. The lectionary also matches the scriptures to the seasons of the church year. Preaching the lectionary requires the preacher to find ways to apply all of the parts of the Bible to the life of church they are serving, which can be difficult. I confess sometimes it is also a challenge to see how the Hebrew Testament, Psalm, Gospel, and Epistle readings connect to each other much less to our daily lives.

Sometimes it takes a lot of prayer to hear what God wants preached on Sunday morning. So after some of that prayer, I would like to propose something to you about the three scriptures we heard. Rather than being about one thing, I see them like the links in a chain, one right after the other that actually apply very much to our church here and now today.

The first is the reading from Luke. Jesus comes to the temple and reads the passage from Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release

to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The story of Jesus reading this scripture in the temple appears just after Jesus has come out of prayers and fasting in the wilderness. He has spent time listening to God to understand God's purpose for his life and ministry, good news for the poor, release for the captives, healing and setting people free.

Organizations like churches often engage in a strategic visioning process. Discerning their purpose and the overall goal for their existence. It is also good for individuals to seriously discern their life mission. If we were to do some strategic visioning, if we were to immerse ourselves in prayer the way Jesus did, I would imagine that we would find that it would be a good place for us to start if at least part of his vision and his purpose would become our purpose. As individual followers of Jesus, but even more as his church, it only makes sense to me.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians can give us the second link in this process. Once we have a vision, we need to identify the resources and the gifts we have to reach for that vision. How will we get to the goal? Paul reminds us that each of us has incredible gifts to give. But no one of us is sufficient unto ourselves. We are not the whole, but parts of the whole body. We cannot do it alone, but we don't need to. We each have gifts and resources that when put together can become something whole and wonderful. No one of us is enough, but

none of us is alone either. We have each other to lean upon, depend upon, and work with. And so, encouraging each other, supporting each other, sharing with each other, working together we become the church.

So we have our vision, goal and purpose. And we have our gifts and resources to get us there. But even a portion of Jesus' purpose is a big undertaking. How will we make it? How will we sustain ourselves and continue when we get tired, when the journey becomes difficult?

Again we can turn to scripture. Our third reading gives us some guidance. The story behind this scripture is that the people of Israel had been set free from the exile in Babylon. Unfortunately, the people returned to see Jerusalem and the walls around the city were in ruins. The people had no protection and were devastated and living like refugees, hopeless.

Along came Nehemiah and he called for people to come and help him rebuild. A few showed up but there were few materials. In their despair, people ridiculed the efforts of Nehemiah and his group and asked why they tried when there was no hope. But Nehemiah and his band were not only people of vision, and of action, but also people of prayer and faith. They not only completed repairing the wall, they reaffirmed their covenant with God. And then, in the scripture we heard read today, they gathered to read and listen to the book, pray, worship, celebrate, fellowship, and thank God together. They recognized that they

had been able to achieve because God was their strength. And they shared their feast with those who had none because God had given them so much.

So from our three scriptures we learn, we need and have been given a vision- what we are to do and be- carrying out Jesus mission as his disciples, our resources- how we will get there- each other and all the gifts and resources God has given us, and our motivation, support and strength for the journey- prayer, worship, celebration, fellowship and most of all God.

Three different ancient stories, three seemingly disconnected scriptures, linked into a whole. This is how God has spoken and continues to speak through scripture, God's ongoing revelation. This is one way God helps us to understand what we are to do and where we are called to go at Hillcrest today. May we continue to listen for, and follow, God's revelation. Amen.