

Readings chosen from the Daily Office for May 20, 2015

Ezekiel 11:14-25

Psalm 101

Luke 10:17-24

Gracious God, let your Spirit come among us, that my words and our actions might give glory to you, Creator, Redeemer, and Inspirer. Amen.

“I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh”

Ezekiel wrote about renewal while he lived in exile. He was taken there with the first wave of captives, and his prophetic ministry continued before, during, and after the destruction of Jerusalem. He spoke to the crucial issue of God’s presence with the exiles, since up until that point God had primary been known in the context of the First Temple and its rituals. He also spoke of the time when the people of faith would be gathered back together.

In Ezekiel, along with our Gospel text, we are given a vision of renewal. For the scattered people to be of one heart speaks of their unity. In Acts chapter four we are told that “the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul” They shared their lives and resources together and carried out their mission as one body.

Beyond shared mission, we also are given an image of individual renewal. Nadia Bolz-Weber is a theologian and Lutheran pastor who has written and spoken about this process of receiving a new heart of flesh as the “divine heart transplant” where we can learn, sometimes through the uncomfortable and invasive process of surgery, to have a heart where previously we might have been callous or cold.

For me, this places our psalm in new context as well. The Psalm speaks of communal purity in terms of expelling the evildoer, but I’m curious how we can expel the parts of ourselves that are not in line with divine compassion. How can we open up to have our heart of stone removed and replaced with a living, beating heart?

When Jesus says “I saw Satan falling from heaven like a flash of lightning” I hear him speaking of about the amazing work that he is hearing about from the seventy as they regather and tell of their success casting out unclean spirits. Ezekiel saw how God was present with the dispersed disciples, but in Luke, the imagery of Immanuel, God-with-us, is even more powerful.

The seventy had been sent out two by two, and were returning with reports of such success that Jesus couldn’t help but share a dramatic image of how the heavens and the earth are being cleansed, with the enemy falling like lightning. When I imagine this thunderstorm, I imagine a dramatic divine rainstorm, pouring out the healing waters of life for all people.

We don't always hear reports of this kind of success. But I think its important to remember that with God it has happened, and it can happen again. The disciples were not of noble birth or raised to be official prophets of the temple. Jesus went so far as to call them infants! He said: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." Jesus went on: "For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it"

It is a miraculous vision of God working through those who might not have been expected to lead— Sending out the seventy, after all, happens after the feeding of the five thousand, when all kinds of individuals all went up on the mountain to hear Jesus and Jesus invited them to sit down and break bread together across lines of ethnic, cultural, religious, and economic difference—lines that in their "normal life" might have been inseparable. In those days, people didn't break bread with those who were different.

This image of diversity in the followers of Jesus is followed in our text today by the more finely tuned questions of "who is our neighbor" and "what are our priorities as we serve God and neighbor" addressed in the story of the Good Samaritan and the two sisters, Mary and Martha—while Martha is almost frantic in her focus on the important work of preparing a delicious meal, Mary sits at Jesus' feet, in the posture of a disciple, prepared to learn in order to teach others. Martha asks Jesus to tell her sister to help her prepare

the meal, and Jesus reminds her that Mary has chosen the better part, and that it will not be taken away from her.

Its easy to forget that the Good Samaritan was a member of a group of people who had for a long time been considered outsiders, those who were thought to not belong to the Judean tradition—today, I wonder if it could be the story of the “Good Iraqi” and yet, the Samaritan was the one who saved the life of the man on the side of the road.

I think all these stories point to what the Pentagon and our women and men in the uniformed services can be when we are at our best. Serving often requires being sent out, going beyond the boundaries of where we thought we would be sent, and it is in that place of exile that at times we can find we are able to work together across lines of difference that would normally separate us—to break bread with those who might be different from us, whether that is a difference of gender, race, sexuality, family background, political orientation, or even nationality. This is never easy or perfect, but it is holy work.

We are equipped and sent out as imperfect people called to be part of God’s victory over evil and death. I’m particularly mindful of this as I remember those six U.S. Marines and two Nepalese soldiers who died in a helicopter earlier this week bringing aid to those in need following the earthquake. We know all too well that the dangers of serving in uniform are real—on the battlefield and off of it. And yet, and, like Mary, we are called to stay focused on what is really important—a life of purpose, lived abundantly for the sake of God, our friends, family, and our neighbors. Like Martha, we may find

find ourselves distracted with many things, or even angry with those who we might see as sacrificing less than we are.

But as we know from the story of the Good Samaritan, sometimes it isn't about who doesn't pitch in to help, but rather, about who does. Who is willing to be part of the work of transformation and healing in our world today? Who has been a part of my own transformation, and how can I be a neighbor to them? Beyond that, am I willing to be sent? When we go forth in the power of God's Name, we are a crucial part of God's work of healing—of establishing peace wherever life may bring us. And sometimes this means that beyond just the risk of putting ourselves in a place of physical risk, we have to be willing to opening up to have our hearts and minds transformed, and reformed, to be given a new heart in a place where our heart had turned a little stony. Sometimes the person who will heal us and feed us and rescue us is someone who is not of our own gender, race, background, or even nationality.

Sometimes we are part of healing those who are in exile, and sometimes we are the ones who are in exile, and who find healing in an unexpected place, from an unexpected quarter.

Amen.