

Devotion: July 15, 2020

Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 5-6, 8-10

8¹all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. ²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, '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.'

During these trying times is your happiness bucket always being emptied or always being filled? It is the old question of "is the glass half-empty or half-full?". But does it really make any difference how you see the glass, how you view that bucket? If you are thinking theologically, the answer is a definite "yes. " We must choose sides. Nehemiah, helps you make that call. Clearly, for the people of God, the glass is half-full. The bucket is being perpetually filled.

Nehemiah emphasizes "For the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Recognizing this joy reveals the total picture of humanity. We are not half-empty, but half-full. While it is true that we are flawed and fractured and may never be able to remain filled and satisfied for very long, we can return again and again and again to the well of God's love and joy and draw from it all that we need to refill our strength and our joy.

“In the beginning, there is struggle and a lot of work for those who come near to God,” said a Christian writer, Amma Syncletica. “But after that, there is indescribable joy. It is just like building a fire: At first it’s smoky and your eyes water, but later you get the desired result. Thus we ought to light the divine fire within ourselves with tears and effort.”

You see, I don't believe that God much cares whether we are happy, but I believe that he cares enormously whether we are faithful and therefore joyful. Happiness is largely a matter of outward circumstance. We must possess certain things to be happy: health, money, security, success, and power. None of these things is required for joy. True joy lies in knowing that we are saved by God. It is by grace alone through his gift of faith alone. This knowledge brings the peace that surpasses all human happiness. We can have this joy and peace no matter how grim our circumstances - even amidst poverty and ill health, despite failure and weakness, and no matter how sinful we are.

Vaclav Havel, the Czech poet/President, spoke these words from his years of suffering oppression and persecution: "I am not an optimist, because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist, because I am not sure everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart.... Life without hope is an empty, boring and useless life. I cannot imagine that I could strive for something if I did not carry hope in me. I am thankful to God for this gift. It is as big a gift as life itself."

Amen to that!

O God, we dare to come again, asking for forgiveness. Too often we have tossed and turned through nights of emptiness and awakened without hope. We have seen clouds without rejoicing over refreshing rain. We have confused freedom with license and mistaken humble service for weakness. Heal us and lift us up, we pray. Amen.