

Body of Christ

What grabs your attention for hours at a time? A good book? An engrossing movie or an entertaining show? A sports event with your favorite team? Think for a moment about what would engage you for several hours.

Now consider what we heard in our first reading this morning. All the people of Israel gathered and asked Ezra to read from the book of the Law of Moses. He did so from early morning to midday, and they listened. They didn't get a snack during intermission or an ad break. They didn't look at their watches when he went over fifteen minutes. They didn't text their friends. They listened, even though the text Ezra was reading was written in ancient Hebrew and he needed a cadre of helpers to translate and explain. (Mercifully, our lector did not have to read all their names because those verses were left out.)

It's really hard for us in a text- and Twitter-communicating society to understand what that must have been like. It's even harder to appreciate the love the people of Israel had and still have for the Law of Moses, the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. We get a glimpse through today's Psalm 19, a beautiful paean to the Torah. Psalm 119 has more elaborate praise, with eight verses for each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, 176 verses in all, each of them referring to the Torah in some way -- as law, statute, commandment, etc.

This love of Torah is the atmosphere in which Jesus grew up, along with his disciples and Saint Paul. Even today in modern Israel, ultra-orthodox male Jews are exempt from compulsory military service so that they can study the Torah full-time. We have nothing in our culture that approaches it.

When Jesus showed up at his home synagogue, he may have been expected to expound on the Law, as any rabbi would have. Instead he chose one of the most powerful passages from the prophet Isaiah: the proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor, when captives will be released, the blind will see, and the oppressed will go free. His interpretation was revolutionary. *Today*, he said, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Not sometime in the distant future, but today. The congregation wasn't ready to hear that, and next week we'll see how they reacted. I'll give you a hint: it wasn't pretty.

Psalm 95, which we say weekdays here as part of Morning Prayer, echoes Jesus when it says, "Oh that *today* you would hearken to his voice." The letter to the Hebrews picks up on this psalm and its "today," saying "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb 3:13).

Exhort one another. Being a Christian means being part of a community where we support one another in our faith. At the community dinner last Monday I ate with leaders of the local NAACP and Friends of MLK. One of them, Vera Kelly, related a conversation she had with someone who said he followed Jesus but didn't go to church. She just shook her head. "How can you believe in Jesus and not go to church?" she asked incredulously.

We need each other -- not just for prayers and support and friendship, but because our God is fundamentally relational as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and made in the image of God, we, too, are fundamentally relational. St. Paul lays it all out in the passage we heard this morning where he compares the body of Christ to the human body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. The head cannot say to the feet, I have no need of you. The body cannot be all eye, or hand, or feet. Surely we all know that when some part of our body suffers, it affects every other part! In the same way, we need each other and we are affected by one another. Each of us is important to the rest, from the oldest who comes in with a walker to the youngest who cries when hungry, and everyone in between. We are all part of this community we call Trinity Cathedral, and we are all in it together.

Think about that scene with Ezra once again. What riveted the people's attention was not Ezra or his assistants, but the living word of God that came to them through the Torah. For us, that living Word is Jesus Christ. Jesus comes to us not only through scripture and its interpretation, but also through the bread and wine we consume each week in the Eucharist. And it comes through each of you, the people of Trinity. *You* are the body of Christ in this place at this time. Today. So exhort one another. Love one another. Be the gift of God that you are, see that gift in one another, and use those gifts for the greater glory of God. Do that, and you be surprised how quickly time goes by.

[Epiphany 3: Nehemiah 8:1-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21.]