

“They Have No (fill in the blank)”

3rd Sunday after Epiphany - January 23, 2022 - Nehemiah 8; Luke 4:14-21/C

“They have no wine...” That was the phrase that started Jesus’ public ministry; the one that Pastor Anteneh picked up last Sunday from the familiar story of the Wedding at Cana, where Jesus’ mother came to him after recognizing a serious problem for the family that was hosting. Once Mary realized what was happening behind the scenes at the wedding feast, she wasted no time and came directly to Jesus with a crucial request - a favor - wrapped up in this one simple phrase that changed not only the path of our history, but changed the life that Jesus was leading as he dwelled among us. And it all began with the recognition of a difficult reality that could bring tremendous shame and dishonor to their friends, *“They have no wine...”*

Mary was so full of faith in her Son, that she simply stated the obvious. Jesus deflected, putting her off with, *“My time has not yet come,”* then mother and son shared a silent interchange, and in the next moment Mary was telling the servers to do whatever Jesus told them to do (no matter how strange it may seem.) We know what happened next. Jesus turned water into wine for the wedding guests, knowing full well that word would spread, and he would no longer be under the radar of the world’s notice. And it all started with one tiny insight into someone else’s momentary need, *“They have no wine.”*

What followed as your “homework” for reflection this past week, was Pastor Anteneh’s suggestion that we might let that phrase lead us into imagining the many ways we might finish it, might fill in the blank that follows, *“They have no ...”* For example: They have no food. They have no water. They have no money, no means. They have no job. They have no chance. They have no freedom. They have no sight. They have no voice. They have no friends. They have no support. They have no joy. They have no faith. As I identified how to fill in the blank after, *“they have no _____”* my imaginings filled my head all week, and even became a distraction as I tended to my own comings and goings.

For instance, I was standing in line behind a lady at Price Chopper, who was complaining about grocery shortages with every item she placed upon the conveyer belt. There were no Lunchables. There were no small water bottles. There were no 100 calorie snack packs of potato chips and cookies. There were no boxes of hamburger or tuna helper. There were no jello cups. And then it hit me (especially as I silently observed her groceries - none of which came from the farm to her table.) Oh my, I thought - from what she is buying she must have 100 children and 3 jobs. But what didn’t she have? She had no convenience. Might be just an example of what we sadly identify as First World Problems (those which are not even on the screen of most of the rest of the world.) Or it may have been the Holy Spirit nudging me to look for the needs that we might actually be able to do something about.

So, let me share with you a few brief stories: Some of you may know Maria, a single mother who lives between Advent and Ridgeview in Olathe. **Maria had no rent money** in December until we helped her out with a grant through the Center of Grace. Some of you have met Wilson, a young Haitian man. **Wilson had no education** to help people who came to the clinic, until we provided a scholarship so that he could train to be an occupational therapist to serve the good people of Leogane, With God’s help Wilson will serve the good people of Leogane, about 1 ½ hours southwest of Port au Prince. He will be among the therapists when the Global Therapy Group opens our new clinic there in the next few years.

Some of you have stocked pantries at New Hope and Community 4 Kids and served the clients of Metro Lutheran Ministries. **They had no food**, until we gathered in PB & J and other non-perishable groceries to stock shelves and cooked breakfast to fill empty tummies.

In the past six months, some of you know leaders in churches across our synod and even further out - Salem/Lenexa, St James/KC, St Andrew's/Columbia, Zion/Ashley, ND; Hillside Community/Spring Hill and Falun/Salemsborg in Smolan, KS. **Lutheran churches who had no pastor** until ordained clergy affiliated with Advent and our mission support money joined with money from other CSS congregations to provide seminary scholarships and synod staff to assist in providing pastoral leadership; Most of you have contributed at one time or another to disaster relief through ELCA World Hunger. **They had no way to provide relief** to those crushed by natural disasters until our dollars went to feed and clothe, inoculate and bring water to underdeveloped areas and **those who have no anything**. By just sitting in these pews, or at home watching online - by giving your prayers, your concern, and your financial resources through Advent - you are meeting those needs every single day through God's church and your hands. Thank you.

Seems a simple, godly thing to provide what folks need; especially if you know what it is, have what it is, and are wise enough to know that it is your calling to share. We have so many gifts that we might bring to lay at the feet of the Christ child - like those first Wise Ones who came to visit during a time we've come to know as Epiphany, the season of Light, the season we are clothed in, today. And that spirit of giving is the **reason** God calls us together as Church. We come to worship. We gather as community. We reach out to our neighbors. Because that is what God wants us to do. Because that is who we are.

In our Old Testament lesson from Nehemiah today, we are watching a people remember who they are. Israel - God's Chosen People - had finally come out of their captivity in Babylon and returned to their homeland. And among their first actions in rebuilding their nation and their lives, they began to reconstitute their community by coming to Jerusalem for one of the three great festivals. Standing on the site of their destroyed Temple, Ezra, the priest, began to read the Law of Moses - a reminder of God's message about who they were and whose they were. As they stood there all day and listened to words that had not been shared in public for a very long time, they knew who they had always been. They remembered who they were, and whose they were, and they began once again to live as God's people.

The Word of the Lord has power to change lives - one by one - or one to one -- just as it turned the rag-tag returnees from Exile in Babylon into a renewed and restored Chosen People of Israel. ¹⁰Then Nehemiah, the governor, 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."* He was telling them to go and live their lives - enjoying what you have, but remembering to return portions of it for those **who have no (fill in the blank...)** for this day is holy to our Lord...and the joy of the Lord is your strength...

For those who do not understand why we spend time and attention on Hebrew history, (the Old Testament as we call it) here is a perfect example. Nehemiah is marking the gathering - a reconstituting of the People of God into worshiping community. He is doing this in the midst of the Feast of Booths (Succoth/Harvest/Thanksgiving) and the

religious observance of a time of thanksgiving for a return to their homeland from Exile in the foreign land of Babylon.

The stage is set by reading the Word of God, through which the Holy Spirit will continue to work (as Martin Luther puts it in the Small Catechism) *“it is the Holy Spirit that has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole (Christian) church on earth...”*)

And as Lutherans who have been in a sort of pandemic exile in the foreign land of Covid 19, we can appreciate the history of the Jews as they return to worship - solidifying their identity and the centrality of God in their communal and individual life. Just as we are doing today. We gather to hear the central message from God through Spoken and Visible Word. We reconstitute our community through feasts and religious festivals, which are expressions of who we are in the religious and cultural landscape.

We are children of the Old and New Testaments. Joining our Hebrew brothers and sisters, our first century Christian brothers and sisters and our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in a long historic parade of those who love the God who loves us. And also as God loves **those who have no (fill in the blank.)**

The Holy Spirit’s work is one of the major themes in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus’ life is guided by the Spirit from the moment his mother, Mary, conceives by that Holy Spirit, and his identification with the Spirit’s work is clear throughout Luke’s story-telling. So, just as Luke is echoing words from Nehemiah, Jesus was echoing God’s words that were first spoken through the prophet Isaiah. By claiming this as his work from God, Jesus is revealing who he is, and identifying with the Spirit-inspired Word of God as his source and norm.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus enters the synagogue at Nazareth and steps up as the guest of honor (interesting concept) who will read from the Holy Scriptures that day. It is likely that everyone there knew him and his family, and would have heard the reports of what had happened at a wedding in Cana - not too far away. Jesus had begun his public ministry because they had no wine...a serendipitous moment that could not be taken back or redone. So now Jesus was not just a native son, but a Miracle Man, who must have smiled in his heart as he was given the scroll of Isaiah.

So, he found the place for the reading he chose for **this** gathering, and began to read in the scroll of Isaiah, chapter 61:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He 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.”

He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the assisting minister, who would remove it to its place of dwelling. Jesus sat down, and everyone was focused on what this favorite son of Nazareth would say about the Scripture that he had chosen to read. For this was the Word of God through Isaiah. Would he recall the glory days of Israel when they would finally be freed from captivity and occupation? Would he actually restore someone’s sight? Would he deliver them from their poverty by some miracle? Or would he interpret the ancient words in a new way that inspired them to be the People of God that they knew

themselves to be - and yet had almost lost sight of over the generations of waiting. What message was this rabbi about to bring from the heart of their sacred texts? Unlike his actions at Cana, was this his hour, and had his time come? The room was filled with breathless anticipation, and they eyes of all in the synagogue were fix on him:

"Today, right here and right now, at this very moment, the Scripture I just read has been fulfilled in your hearing..." (Pause.) At first, there must have been shocked silence. And for a moment ***they had no words***. But then came their responses to the reality that was sitting in their midst...but that part of the story is for another time... Amen.

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

All 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... 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 worshiped 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. ⁹And 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."

I Corinthians 12:12-31a -- For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. . .

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Luke 4:14-21 -- Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He 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.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”