

**January 26, 2025**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**First Presbyterian Church, Franklin**  
**"Prepare the Way"**  
**Therese Howell**

The Hebrew Bible – the Old Testament – reading today is from Nehemiah, Chapter 8, verses 1-3, 5-6, and 8-10 . . . you might notice the lectionary skips all the verses with the difficult names! The book of Nehemiah was originally part of a single book, Ezra-Nehemiah, in the ancient Greek versions of the Bible. This section is about the final stage of Jewish reconstruction after exile, and a lot of this book is called the Nehemiah memoir, as it recounts Nehemiah's activities.<sup>1</sup>

I'm going to back up a bit, and start reading at Chapter 7, verse 73, so you get the context of who exactly are "the people" referred to in Chapter 8, beginning with the first verse. Listen for the Word of the LORD.

7 <sup>73</sup> So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel settled in their towns. When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns—

8 <sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> Accordingly, 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. <sup>3</sup> He 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.

<sup>5</sup> And 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. <sup>6</sup> Then 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Perkins, Pheme. The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version (p. 685). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>8</sup> So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> Then 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."

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God.**

Back in December, when I had to turn in the scriptures and a sermon title for today, I had decided on the passage from Nehemiah, and I thought I would preach on the Luke passage. Luke is a beautiful book, and I love to preach from it. But the Holy Spirit had other ideas, and I decided to use the 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians passage in the lectionary. So let me owe you a sermon on Luke, and please feel free to collect!

Today's New Testament scripture is 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Chapter 12, verses 12-31a. It is part of one of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. Listen for the Word of God.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

<sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; <sup>24</sup> whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. <sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God.**

In Nehemiah, the narrative from Ezra continues, with the return from exile, framing the three stages of return and reconstruction, and in today's reading, there is the grand celebration of the reconstruction by the community of faith, organized according to the Torah, the "law of Moses."

Nehemiah is presented as a dynamic, enterprising man who achieves his goal of rebuilding despite repeated interference from other leaders. The reconstruction spanned nearly a century, representing the successful efforts of previous generations, in response to the original decree by King Cyrus.

Today's passage celebrates the completion of this reconstruction. There were three phases of return and reconstruction: Temple, community, and city. The reconstructed house of God includes the rebuilt Temple, the reformed community, and Jerusalem, the holy city, surrounded by a wall. The celebration lasts for many weeks, longer than any other celebration in the Bible. The culmination of the reconstruction is when the community instructs Ezra to bring out "the book of the law of Moses", that is, the Torah. This is the first public reading of the book of Torah, and begins a practice of reading scripture that will continue in Jewish and Christian traditions, and the passage emphasizes the special bond between the people and the "book."

This passage from Nehemiah is unique in several ways. "...all the people gathered in the square before the Water Gate." The water gate is the area *outside* the Temple. "All the people" - *not the priests* - "told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses . . ." so "the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly..." And the assembly *was men and women*, "and all who could hear with understanding." Ezra read from the Torah facing the square before the Water Gate, from early morning to midday.

Initiating the reading of the Torah were ordinary people, women and men, and those who could hear with understanding. Ezra's assistants, including the Levites, were there, too, and this indicates a broader access to the teachings, and a move away from exclusive control by the priests.

The people stood up when Ezra unrolled the scroll and began reading, in respect to God's presence reflected in the book. Public reading of the law evokes a strong sense of a spiritual connection with the community's ancestors, and this is also a sign of the movement of divine presence and authority away from the Temple. As the people are together to hear the reading of the ancient teachings, they are bound to one another, to their ancestors, and to their history.<sup>2</sup> Ezra and his assistants helped the people to understand, either by translating the Hebrew into Aramaic, or explaining the content for clarity.

Note in Verse 9 that "... Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, ..." both the political leader and the religious leader are here, working together. And while the people wept, perhaps overwhelmed with grief for the many lost years in exile, Ezra reminds them that God's law is a source of joy and strength. Despite the destruction of Jerusalem and the community's struggles under Babylonian and Persian repression, they were still people of God. Not a conquered people, but God's people.<sup>3</sup>

New Testament scholar Mark Allen Powell says this about First Corinthians: "Denominational politics, doctrinal disputes, liturgical preferences—why can't Christians just learn to get along? It is an old question, as old as Christianity itself. The letter in our New Testament called "1 Corinthians" reveals that church conflict is nothing new."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Powery, Emerson B. The Westminster Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition with the Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal Books. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2024, p. 660.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Powell, Mark Allan. Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey (p. 502). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Today's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians is part of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Corinth was a Roman city, and the early Christian community had many ethical challenges with their new identity in the Messiah Jesus and their history with Greco-Roman polytheism. Corinth was a city populated with a diverse mix of people, including freedmen, Syrians, Egyptians, and Greeks who had immigrated from surrounding cities, and a large Jewish community as well.

The new Christians in Corinth had questions and issues and concerns, and Paul seeks to address a question concerning spiritual gifts.

A footnote in the New Oxford Annotated Bible states, "In Chapters 12-14, Paul counters an overemphasis on glossolalia (speaking in tongues). Judging from the amount of space devoted to the subject, the gift of tongues must have been highly prized among the Corinthians."<sup>5</sup> The footnote goes on to state that not everyone in the church spoke in tongues but those who had this gift looked down on those who did not.

Paul didn't deny this spiritual gift, but he made a list of spiritual gifts! In the first 12 verses of this chapter, Paul listed the spiritual gifts from the greatest - love - to the least - speaking in tongues. He stated that all are necessary for the body of Christ. Paul insists it is the same God, the same Spirit, that grants each of these gifts to Christ followers for the common good.

Paul uses the metaphor of the church as a body from Greco-Roman political discourse. He claims weaker body parts are more indispensable, and more honorable, and God arranged the body in this manner, giving more respect to the weaker member, and that all members depend on each other.

Paul says that the church is "the body of Christ" and the individual members are like various body parts: hands, feet, ears, eyes. The parts are different from one another, but all are necessary and important. Powell states that "Paul presents the unity of the church not as an ideal or goal to be realized but rather as an accomplished reality that needs to be recognized: all individuals (and various factions) are connected to one another whether they know it or not (and whether they like it or not). When any one part of the body suffers, the whole

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<sup>5</sup> Perkins, Pheme. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version* (p. 2016). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

body is affected. The church must learn to act as the unified entity that it actually is.<sup>6</sup>

I hope by now all of you have had the opportunity to watch the video where Pastor Eddie Bellis and his wife, Laura Marzano, introduce themselves. There is a moment in the video when Pastor Eddie appears to speak in tongues when he talks about the COM, the MDP, the PIF – which is now referred to as the PDP. Thankfully he stopped before we heard about the PNC, CLC, CPM. Church acronyms are a lot like speaking in tongues!

Pastor Eddie talks about his experience as an interim pastor. As we have learned, Interim pastors are hard to find, and good interim pastors are even harder to find! Interim ministry is a call, with special gifts and skills. We have been fortunate to have good bridge pastors to help us during this time.

Pastor Eddie talks about the great team here at First Franklin, and while he is probably talking about the staff – and they are great – I would include all of us, too. That's right, the congregation of First Franklin. When Pastor Chris left, the staff, and the session, and many others in the congregation stepped up to take on tasks and responsibilities so the church could keep moving forward. This congregation is blessed with people of many gifts, talents, and skills.

Part of Pastor Eddie's work is to help us celebrate our past and look forward to our future. Our bright future, as he states. Pastor Eddie points out that it may take up to two years to do this, and to find the person called by God to First Presbyterian Church in Franklin, Tennessee. Despite a new and improved call system with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), it may take that long. But we need to remember that this is God's time.

Along with the tragedy at Antioch High School this week, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) lost one of its most faithful leaders. The Rev. Dr. Cliff Kirkpatrick died this past week. He served three terms as Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and led the Church through some difficult times. He worked to unite the Church, as well as to bring the PCUSA together with other Reformed bodies and other denominations. Despite the challenges he faced, Cliff was always smiling!

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<sup>6</sup> Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (pp. 530-534). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

The Rev. Dr. Gradye Parsons, who succeeded Cliff as Stated Clerk, said he heard Cliff say thousands of times, “Our role as Christians is not to be in the judgment seat but to be in the witness box.”<sup>7</sup>

I think that is what First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, does well – work from the witness box, sharing God’s love within and outside the church. And I believe, like the people who called Ezra to unroll the scroll and read the Torah, that this congregation will work with Pastor Eddie to prepare the way for our bright future, using our gifts and skills to move forward, as one body, unified in Christ. I look forward to the journey and to celebrating its eventual resolution!

May it be so.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/rev-dr-clifton-kirkpatrick-former-stated-clerk-and-world-mission-director-dies-79>