

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C
Nehemiah 8:2-4A, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 15
1 Corinthians 12:12-30
Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21
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In our first reading today, Ezra calls the people of Jerusalem into assembly, and lays down the law. From sunrise to high noon, he reads to them from the Pentateuch: the Hebrew Scriptures that we know as the first five books of the Old Testament.

This was the Law of Moses, which God had given to their ancestors, but which had been largely forgotten during the exile that had followed upon the destruction of Jerusalem many years before. Now, Jerusalem was being rebuilt, and re-inhabited. And once again, the Pentateuch was to be the law by which Israel lived.

The reaction of the people to Ezra's proclamation is striking. They are grief-stricken. The entire assembly begins to weep! Nehemiah and Ezra urge the people to stop weeping. Instead they are to rejoice and have a great feast, for this day was holy to the Lord their God.

The people are dismayed, because the law that Ezra proclaims seems harsh. To give just one example, men with foreign wives will be required to give them up. The command to rejoice is a rather heavy-handed attempt by the religious authorities to cheer up a crowd that is, in reality, little more than a mob.

But however understandable the crowd's reaction, there *is* in fact something profoundly important to celebrate. For by the proclamation of

the law, what was until then an unruly mob becomes, once again, a *people*. By means of the Law, a crowd of strangers gains an identity. The descendants of the chosen ones that Yahweh had once called out of slavery in Egypt, now recover their heritage. They reclaim an identity that will sustain and inspire them from this day forward. For Israel, God's words are truly "spirit and life."

If the identity of the people of Israel is rooted in the Law, we Christians find our identity in Christ. Whether American or Argentinian, service station attendant or soft wear specialist, we are *one* in Christ. And further, as St. Paul insists in our second reading, we are one *body* in Christ -- the very body of Christ.

The New Testament describes the Church by means of several different images. The Church, we are taught, is like a flock. It is like the branches of a vine. But when St. Paul speaks of the body of Christ, he is saying something different -- something even more profound. We are not *like* the body of Christ we *are* the body of Christ. In a real sense we are the very different members of a single body, with Christ as our head.

Consider for a moment what a gift this is. Though I have never met many of you, I am no stranger, but a part of you, as you are part of me. In a time marked by divisiveness and alienation, rootlessness and dislocation, we share an identity. We belong to one another, and to Christ. "If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share its joy." As a result, the suffering of each of us is lessened, and our joy is increased.

An athlete can rejoice in the gift of his or her body -- can take pleasure in its beauty, strength and grace. Similarly, we can celebrate the great body of Christ of which we are part. We can rejoice in the

innumerable gifts God has bestowed upon Christ's body, and are even justified in having a certain wry affection for its characteristic weaknesses and failings -- the same amused affection that a family might feel for a favorite uncle's too ample waistline or a father's funny feet.

But as St. Paul reminds us, there is also dissension in the body of Christ, and dissension in a body can only be regarded as an illness that must be healed. It is an illness that concerns us in a special way on this Sunday with which the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity concludes. Because we are divided, we have reason to weep.

St. Paul asks, "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,' would it then no longer belong to the body? If the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body,' would it then no longer belong to the body." St. Paul obviously thinks these assertions are absurd.

In a moment of anger a father might say to his child, 'you are no son of mine.' A child might say to her parent, 'I no longer regard you as my mother.' But apart from being tragic, these statements are simply not true. These are relationships that are so profound that no amount of insistence -- no amount of ill will -- can wish them away. They simply cannot be denied.

So it is with the body of Christ. All Christians have been baptized into one body. We are indispensable to one another. None of us can rest until that relationship is recognized and restored.

For as long as there is division, the action of the body is impaired. And as Jesus reminds us in our Gospel today, *action* is our reason for being. It is through *us* that Christ brings glad tidings to the poor. It is through *us* that he proclaims liberty to captives, restores sight to the

blind, and freedom to prisoners. By our prayers for unity, and by the grace of the Sacrament we will celebrate in our churches today, may these words be fulfilled in our hearing.