

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a  
Luke 4:14-21

“Come and Be Filled”

Some time ago I was listening to a Christian speaker talk about a recent airline flight. He settled in at the end of a long day, only to find himself sitting next to someone who was very anxious to start up a conversation and fill the next 2 hours.

When his cheery companion asked him what he did for a living, he thought about his answer for a long time. He knew there were at least two ways to truthfully answer the question.

He described his inner monologue “Well, if I tell him that I am a Southern Baptist Preacher, I’ll probably scare him into being quiet for the rest of the flight. If I tell him that I’m a Professor of Religious Studies, he’ll probably spend the next two hours telling me all of his theories about religion in the modern society.”

I found myself chuckling quietly under my breath. I knew from my own limited experience exactly what he was talking about. I have had plenty of people ask me the same question, and I know that the way that I answer it can change the direction of the conversation. If I answer it in a way that gives them the opening to continue the conversation, they almost always reply in one of two ways:

Either they will tell me that they are a member of this or that church and what programs and activities they are involved with at the church;  
or they will go into a long discussion about why they don’t feel that the church is necessary, how they feel they can live a good life without the church or any sort of organized religion. Usually they will go on so say that they either were brought up in the church as a child and decided to leave or simply stopped going – or they have never had any experience in a church at all but still consider themselves an expert on the subject.

I generally enjoy the first response, learning how the church has been meaningful to someone else.

I generally find myself at great unrest with the second response, because they are in effect doing their best to convince me why what I consider to be one of the most essential parts of life is actually not essential at all.... and there is very little chance that they will actually listen to an argument that disagrees with what they have to say, unless they want to kill time by getting involved in a theological debate without much substance to it.

It is difficult to describe the importance of a community of faith to someone who has already dismissed the idea. And yet God’s faithful have known for thousands of years that they needed to gather together to hear God’s word in community with one another.

Consider what we heard from the Old Testament passage for the day:

[Ezra] read from [the law of God] facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday ... they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And then in the New Testament reading we hear of Jesus, who entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day, was handed a scroll, and began to read.

How many times had he seen others do this? We heard just a few weeks ago that from the time he was 12 he was in the temple asking questions and amazing all those who heard the answers that he gave. How many times had he heard others offer interpretations – some good and certainly some bad – of the Word of God?

And Jesus spoke – perhaps for the first time in the synagogue. The people who had heard him talking with the teachers of the law would certainly been waiting with great anticipation as he rolled the scroll back up and handed it back to the attendant.

What great teaching will he share with us? What great Rabbi of the past will he speak of first? What debate will he want to begin?

That was what they expected to hear, because that was the normal pattern for a teacher of Jesus' day: When they read a passage they would follow up with words of wisdom from other great Rabbis.

Instead Jesus tells the people that God's prophecy has been fulfilled in their hearing. What miraculous news! You may be wondering how the people reacted.

First they asked: "Who does he think he is? After all, we know where he came from, we know his family, he is no one special."

When Jesus said more, the crowd wanted to throw him off a cliff. It wasn't a great first day in the ministry.

One of the first questions I always ask when looking at the lectionary readings for a given Sunday is "Why are these passages connected for this day?" The connection between the Old Testament passage and the gospel reading is clearly the importance of the public reading and interpretation of the Scriptures.

The readings also tell us two different reactions to the reading of the Word. Some reacted with anger, some reacted with apathy ("who does he think he is?").

Others reacted by saying "Amen, Amen," and lifting up their hands. They bowed their heads and they worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

We have come together today as we have, and as we will – and we have heard the Word. If what we have heard has not challenged us, we have not listened. If it has not led us to respond in worship, then we have missed the message.

That is what those who do not gather each week are missing – it is not that you cannot be a good person without coming to church; it is not that you cannot lead a good life without being a part of a congregation. What they are missing is not primarily what they do for the rest of the week. What they are missing is the way the week begins. It begins with a reminder that we have been created to worship a creator. It begins with a charge to go out into the world with a renewed purpose of not just what we are to do, but why. We gather together to be sent back out into the world. We gather to be filled, so that we may return to the world.

In a recent conversation, a stranger who learned that I was a minister asked me if our church had a sign out front that we put different little sayings on each week. I said that no, we were one of the few in Gainesville who don't have such a sign. I started thinking about what we would want our sign to say if we were to put one out for everyone to see. There are a lot of answers I suppose, but the one that stayed with me was "Come and be filled." Come and be renewed, have your weekly dose of faith, hope, and love restored for the days and weeks to come.