

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity¹

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of Book of Nehemiah.⁴

“The words of Nehemiah [*knee-uh-MY-uh*] the son of Hachaliah [*hack-uh-LYE-uh*]. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu [*KISS-lew*], in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan [*SHOO-shan*] the palace, That Hanani [*huh-NAY-nye*], one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

“And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father’s house have sinned. We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them

from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there. Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand. O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.

“And it came to pass in the month Nisan [**NYE-san**], in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes [**arr-tuh-ZURK-seas**] the king, that wine was before him: and I took up the wine, and gave it unto the king. Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence. Wherefore the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid, And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire? Then the king said unto me, For what dost thou make request? So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said unto the king, If it please the king, and if thy servant have found favour in thy sight, that thou wouldest send me unto Judah, unto the city of my fathers' sepulchres, that I may build it. And the king said unto me, (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time. Moreover I said unto the king, If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come into Judah; And a letter unto Asaph [**AY-saff**] the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace which appertained to the house, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.”

Or,

Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Book of Daniel.⁵

Amen.

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October 2, 2005

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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, according to the Revised Three-Year Common Lectionary, Year A, 2005.

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³ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 42 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxvii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxv (CIPBC 1963).

⁴ Nehemiah 1:1—2:8 (KJV).

⁵ Daniel 1:1-end (KJV).

⁶ Zephaniah 3:1-end (KJV).

⁷ St. Matthew 21:23-end (KJV).

⁸ *E.g.*, Philippians 3:4b-14.

⁹ *E.g.*, Isaiah 5:1-7.

In his epistles, St. Paul is dealing with an essentially Gentile church. They have been given the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and what St. Paul and all the Apostles claimed is that in those mighty acts the messianic mission of Abraham and his descendants is fulfilled. By baptism, we Gentiles enter into that death and resurrection and become part of the messianic community that began with Abraham and is consummated in Jesus. So Paul tells his congregations what that means in terms of the way they are to live. This is the fruit that God expects from us as well.

God expects us to become like Jesus himself, living sacrificially and not focusing on the gratification of our physical appetites. He expects us to be worthy of emulation, even as Paul held himself up as an example to follow. He expects us to preserve and care for His property and that means more than just real estate. It means the Bible, the sacraments, and the great store of virtue and of theological insight that our predecessors in the Church have passed on to us. He expects us to love one another, to remember the poor, and most of all, God expects us to be His ambassadors to the world, representing Him in all our activities and relationships—promoting His agenda of righteousness, peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation among all people. God expects us to be the spiritual descendants of Abraham, to whom he said, “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

Good people, you don't have to account for what the whole Church does. But you do have to account for what you do here with the tremendous resources God has given you with which to work. Just remember this. What you want is of no importance. This is God's Church, and what He wants is what matters. This, I believe is what this Gospel has to say to this little church.

Thank you for inviting me back to preach to you. I love you all, and I wish you well.

“In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim [**dgeh-HOY-uh-kim**] king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar [**neb-you-cad-NEZZ-urr**] king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim [**dgeh-HOY-uh-kim**] king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar [**SHY-narr**] to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god.

“And the king spake unto Ashpenaz [**ASH-peh-nozz**] the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes; Children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank: so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king. Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah [**hann-uh-NYE-uh**], Mishael [**MISH-eh-ull**], and Azariah [**azz-uh-RYE-uh**]: Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel the name of Belteshazzar [**bell-teh-SHAZZ-urr**]; and to Hannah [**hann-uh-NYE-uh**], of Shadrach [**SHAD-rack**]; and to Mishael [**MISH-eh-ull**], of Meshach [**MEE-shack**]; and to Azariah [**azz-uh-RYE-uh**], of Abednego [**uh-BED-nih-go**].

“But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king. Then said Daniel to Melzar [**MELL-zarr**], whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah [**hann-uh-NYE-uh**], Mishael [**MISH-eh-ull**], and

Azariah [**azz-uh-RYE-uh**], Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat. Thus Melzar [**MELL-zarr**] took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse.

“As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar [**neb-you-cad-NEZZ-urr**]. And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah [**hann-uh-NYE-uh**], Mishael [**MISH-eh-ull**], and Azariah [**azz-uh-RYE-uh**]: therefore stood they before the king. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm. And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus [**SYE-russ**].”

Or,

Here beginneth the third Chapter of Zephaniah.⁶

“Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city! She obeyed not the voice; she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to her God. Her princes within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves; they gnaw not the bones till the morrow. Her prophets are light and treacherous persons: her priests have polluted the sanctuary, they have done violence to the law. The just LORD is in the midst thereof; he will not do iniquity: every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not; but the unjust

He will not tolerate self centered indifference to those expectations.

Now you don't have to be very bright to recognize that the farmers in the parable are the Jews, and the agents of the landlord are the prophets, and the son who was killed is Jesus. What is less obvious is the fruit—the results that God expected to receive from His investment. So the let's take a look at that.

We really have to go all the way back to Abraham. We don't usually think of Abraham as a messianic figure, but just look at what God said to him when He called him out to be the father of God's chosen people. God said, “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed”. That sounds to me like a universal messianic mission.

The whole business of the fruitfulness and prosperity of Abraham's descendants and the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the Holy Land and the expansion of the empire and the glory of the Temple and the exile and the restoration were all aimed at the fulfillment of that promise: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

The Jews were chosen and empowered by God to be the instrument by which every person on earth, all tribes and peoples and tongues would be brought to the knowledge of God and obedience to Him. The Jews were to me a messianic people, and that was the fruit that God expected from them. He did not expect them to just enjoy being smugly superior to everyone else.

Isaiah talks metaphorically about all the things that God did for His people in order to empower them to produce the desired fruit. “What more could I have done?”, says God, “and yet you have let me down.” He then pronounces the word of judgment—the same word that, in the parable, Jesus induces His hearers to pronounce upon themselves.

that: Isaiah did not do that; Paul did not do that; Jesus did not do that. And I'm not going to do it either. Those men all remained with their people and shared the burden of their guilt. Jesus bore in His body the sins of the whole world. I have no intention of doing that.

On the other hand, my integrity as a preacher requires that I speak as the Scriptures speak and not as I would like them to speak. As Martin Luther once said, "I am captive to the word of God." So you see my dilemma. So here is what I'm going to do. I'm going to look at this passage and extract a theme, then I'll try to break it to you as gently as I can.

The first thing I need to tell you is that this is not really your Church. This is God's Church, and you are not free to do with it whatever you want.

And when I say that, I'm not just talking about the property, although that is one of the resources God has given you to work with. I'm talking about the whole heritage of Scripture, tradition, sacraments, creeds, music, art, and personal wealth that God has made available to each of you. These are resources that God has placed in your hands, but you are not free to use them simply to satisfy your own desires.

That's what St. Paul saw happening in the church at Philippi.⁸ That's what Isaiah saw his people doing,⁹ and that's what the tenant farmers did in today's parable. That's also what I and many others see happening in many mainstream churches today. So we all need to ask ourselves this question: am I using the resources God has placed in my care to accomplish His purposes, or to accomplish my own? Do I really believe that this is God's Church? Or do I think that since I occupy it, I own it?

The fact is that God has certain expectations of us, and, while He is always more ready to forgive than we are to repent,

knoweth no shame. I have cut off the nations: their towers are desolate; I made their streets waste, that none passeth by: their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, that there is none inhabitant. I said, Surely thou wilt fear me, thou wilt receive instruction; so their dwelling should not be cut off, howsoever I punished them: but they rose early, and corrupted all their doings.

"Therefore wait ye upon me, saith [SETH] the LORD, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy. For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering. In that day shalt thou not be ashamed for all thy doings, wherein thou hast transgressed against me: for then I will take away out of the midst of thee them that rejoice in thy pride, and thou shalt no more be haughty because of my holy mountain. I will also leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD. The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies; neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth: for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid.

"Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem. The LORD hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy: the king of Israel, even the LORD, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more. In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing. I will gather them that are sorrowful for the solemn assembly, who are of thee, to whom the reproach of it was a burden. Behold, at that time I will undo all that afflict thee: and I will save her that halteth, and gather her that was driven out; and I will get them praise and fame in every

land where they have been put to shame. At that time will I bring you again, even in the time that I gather you: for I will make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith [SETH] the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-third Verse of the twenty-first Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁷

“And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority? And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

“But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

“Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons. Jesus saith [SETH] unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them. But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus is very judgmental. So if I am to preach on this passage, it would seem that I would have to speak to you in a judgmental way. You don’t need some one to come in and lay a guilt trip on you and then leave you to deal with it. The great judgmental prophets did not do