

Third Sunday after the Epiphany—Year C
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

A colleague sent me a **cartoon** this week—it pertained to clergy, but I think it applies to a whole lot of us right now. The **first image** has a **person tossing one ball up in the air** with the caption “**What seminary (or I would add “*your training*”) prepares you for.** The **second image** has a **person juggling five balls** with the caption “**What ministry (or your work) *really is.***” And the **third image** has a **person drowning in a ball pit with two little arms poking up through the surface**, like one of those **Chuck E. Cheese ball pits**, with the caption “**What ministry *is in 2022.***” Most of us were **schooled or trained for a simple scenario**, most of us discover that **our life and work is a whole lot more complicated** than that, and there are **seasons of the ball pit**.

I talked with **one parent** this week whose **daycare had to close because of COVID** which threw their two young children back home again while he and his spouse try to work. I saw it in the **eyes of parents of elementary and high schoolers** when the **schools announced two more days of Virtual Learning on Thursday and Friday**. I hear it in **exhausted and frustrated health care professionals**. I hear it in **families and friend circles who are navigating gathering with differing perspectives on mitigation practices and differing levels of risk they feel they can bear**. I hear it in **professors who are struggling with ever changing student populations** as students come in and out of class **due to COVID and exposure to COVID** or in **business owners who are navigating employees out with the virus**—it even had the **DOT** pleading for our patience as they tried to deal with a massive snow storm with 25% of their workforce out with COVID. *It’s a ball pit kind of season.*

If we **pan out to the nation**, the **ball pit just gets bigger and more complex**. So many **problems that need addressing**, and so little **good will to work toward real solutions**. From the outside, it looks like a **whole lot more energy goes into posturing *than* in doing the hard work to get something done**, with a **whole lot of “the perfect being the enemy of the good.”**

Pan out even further, and there’s **tragic suffering in Afghanistan; catastrophic damage in Tonga; extreme weather events everywhere; elements of religious, racial, and ethnic hate; political unrest in Ethiopia and the Sudan and Russia and Ukraine**, and **countless other places** that come on and off our radar depending on the news cycle.

Everywhere we turn there’s **another ball that is good and worthy of our attention, focus, and energy**, and as I listen to people, it seems that **many of us are feeling pretty depleted just about now**. For a lot of people, there’s just **not a lot of bandwidth available**.

And the thing about **ball pits** is that it’s **really hard to find your footing**. That can be **fun at Chuck E. Cheese**. It is **not fun if it’s your life**. It’s **not fun to feel adrift as an individual**, and it’s **not fun to feel adrift as a society**. It can leave **one feeling lost and bereft**. And, in a bizarre postscript, in **June 2020, Chuck E. Cheese was the first major restaurant chain to declare bankruptcy due to COVID**—they couldn’t find their footing any better than the rest of us.

Lost and bereft, that's how the people were feeling in the passage from Nehemiah this morning. They had been in exile, lost, bereft, adrift, and *now* they had returned home to Israel, but they *still* felt like they were in the ball pit with no solid ground beneath their feet. But somewhere in that mess, they found the book of the law of Moses, and they stood in the square before the Water Gate, *together*, and they had the priest and scribe Ezra bring the law before the assembly, and he read it to the people for hours and hours. Ezra and the other Levite priests kept reading and interpreting, giving the sense of the reading so the people could understand it. *And when the people heard it they wept.* They *knew* how adrift they were, and those tears are the tears that come when you find something solid again. It's such a collision of feelings—grief about how *forsaken* you have felt *and* relief that there is *something from which to begin again.*

And Ezra and the other priests understood that grief, *but also pointed them toward hope.* They told the people this: “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep...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 message to the people was clear: “*Do not grieve how adrift you've been. You made it to THIS day, and THIS day is all you've got. THIS day is holy. There is a way forward; there is something to guide you; let the grief go, and dip into some good food and sweet wine and share the feast with those who've got nothing on their plate. You may not feel the joy, but God's got plenty of joy to fill your tank; you don't have to supply your joy; God will, and THAT'S your strength.*”

Take a deep breath people of God, and breathe THAT in.

The psalmist picks up the baton from Nehemiah and carries us forward, reminding us that “the law of the LORD is perfect and revives the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent. The statutes of the LORD are just and rejoice the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear and gives light to the eyes.” What the law and commandment give us, whether that be the law given to Moses *or* the summary of the law as given by Jesus to love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves, *what these give us* is a guide, a north star, a compass with which to find our way. These pull us out of the ball pit and give us perspective on our swirling thoughts and feelings and dilemmas; these give us wisdom and a sense of priorities and clarity and light, and yes, *even joy.* *There is something beyond this flux, something solid upon which we can stand again.*

I Corinthians 12 comes right along behind these passages to remind us in the deepest possible way that we *don't have to sort any of this out alone.* No matter how *inferior* and *weak* we are feeling, no matter how *strong* we may appear, or even be, *God has knit us together into one body in Christ.* Some other part of the body has gifts I don't have, but *need.* Likewise, *I've got something to offer that someone else needs.* *We are in this together; it doesn't ever fall all on our shoulders alone.* God gives us the gift of relationship and community, dependence *and* interdependence. God gives us a deep sense of solidarity—“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” When we feel

adrift, we are adrift *together*, and that is no small thing, and it will be our differing gifts *working together* that help us get out of the ball pit.

And then we come to today's gospel from Luke. It's Jesus' first sermon, and it's a short one: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Amen." *But even Jesus went back to an earlier text for the guts of his sermon.* Here's how the story goes: 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."

Think about that, *even Jesus returns to the text for guidance for his mission and ministry.* This gives *him* a solid place to stand and *from which* to move forward. This passage will *help him* navigate the ball pit that will shortly be upon him as he navigates more balls than we can imagine. And he, *too*, won't journey alone. He'll stay connected to God, and he'll gather others around him, and *together*, they will make their way.

As you think about your particular ball pit today, what text, what scripture, what commandment, what story or parable is the scroll being handed to you to guide you? As you think about your place in the body, what member do you need to be connected to help you find your way? As you consider your gifts, *who needs something* you have to offer, and what gift *from someone else* do you need that you currently lack?

And no matter how adrift you feel, no matter how lost or how bereft you are, *remember* that there is fat to be had, and sweet wine to be drunk, and joyous strength that has been gifted to us by God; *remember* that today is holy, and that there's a much, much bigger reality than the ball pit. We have been gifted with a roadmap within our sacred text *and* we have been gifted with one another—*together*, we will find our way. Amen.

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