

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“Mourning and Mashed Potatoes”

Nehemiah 8: 1-12

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There was a particular smell in my home every Sunday when we would walk in the door after church. It would hit you, those olfactory glands, and then you'd begin to salivate at the smell of something familiar, right at the door. It was roast.

The roast had been cooking since way before Sunday School and by 12:30 the aroma of it was all over the house. All that was left to do was to make a pot of rice or mash some potatoes and heat up the green beans which generally could be done by the time we kids got out of our Sunday clothes and into something more comfortable.

Sunday lunch was special around our house. I suppose at that time in our culture it was still an event in many homes... except for the unAmerican crowd who went to Luby's after church.

Sunday lunch around the table at home was what you were suppose to do... unless they were having potluck at the church house.

It was just part of the day. **“Thou shalt have Sunday School, worship, and roast, and keep them holy.”** It was a kind of Trinitarian deal.

I grew up believing that going to Luby's was a sure sign of backsliding. Sunday lunch, roast and gravy, mashed potatoes and all, was sacred. It was an event, a time of great tastes and togetherness. Nothing interfered with it... nothing stood in the way. Except, of course, watching the Cowboys on TV.

A lot of you grew up that way... where a Sunday was a kind of a feast day... and it's still that way for lots of families. I heard a young adult a few years back, describing how everyone, aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters and cousins, all descend on grandma's kitchen and they all sit at her table after church.

We're spread out now... and busier now... and we generally have more money... and so maybe that happens around a restaurant table which is “fun,” but not quite the same, huh?

There aren't too many of us who don't feel a tug inside when we watch a rerun of Andy Griffin and everyone goes over to Aunt Bee's after church and lingers over an amazing home cooked meal. **“Aunt Bee, Aunt Bee, how do you do it?”**

And then the tug at our heart is even stronger when everyone sits on the porch because there isn't anything more important than being there and enjoying that moment.

This is what we once did on Sunday to acknowledge the holiness of it... the sacredness of things. Sunday lunch was a way of saying, “Amen.” It's as American as apple pie... but it's also ancient.

When you study the history of religion... Sunday lunch has always been a part of it. Tasting the sacred seems to make us hungry... so meals and feast days and tables have always been an extension of the temple.

We saw it again in today's Old Testament reading from Nehemiah. Sunday lunch happened right in the middle of a really fascinating story. This is the last bit of history recorded in the Old Testament... about 400 years before Christ.

Israel is still a servant state...

Persia's step child.

And it had been that way for years...

It'd been 500 years, ½ a millennium, since David and Solomon had been big shots in the Middle East. You know the saga... they'd been on a down hill slide, in a serious slump, ever since then.

Corrupt politicians,

Unjust social practices,

Disregard of God's ways,

And then comes exile and the destruction of Jerusalem... the temple is demolished and so was their sense of identity. No temple, no body. This story happens after 500 years of feeling like nothing.

Nehemiah is off in Persia where he serves as the king's cupbearer... tough job... walking around all day with a cup that says, King Artaxerxes across it. **"Here's your cup."** **"Want your cup?"** **"How about now?"**

I think actually, this was kind of secret service detail to prevent assassination by poisoning but still, for an exile, Nehemiah had it made. Cush job for a slave.

But then he got word from one of his brothers about how bad things were back home. Not that he'd never heard before, about how all the walls were knocked down and the gates burned up... but this time he heard more deeply.

We all know things are bad... "out there" but there comes a day when we hear it deeper and know we have to do something... and that's called, calling... and Nehemiah was.

He wept....

Mourned for days...

And he prayed for an opportunity to change things.

One day the king asked him why he was so sad and he explained the situation and the next thing he knew he was on his way home with the king's blessing and Persia's money.

Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem... He had to organize people... and fight bad guys. He had to deal with dirty politicians and plenty of cynics who didn't believe it could be done... but Nehemiah finished the job. Twelve years later, the walls stood again, new gates and all.

So, they invited folks home... Not everyone moved into the big city. Some stayed out on the farm but lots of them came home and built houses. Jerusalem was alive again with people, hustle and bustle everywhere, and it was time again for them to be a people.

And in Israel... that means a people who worship. Which is something they'd apparently forgotten all about. 500 years of skipping church will really take the wind out of your spiritual sails.

The kids hadn't been to Vacation Bible School in centuries.

No one could remember the last time they had a revival.

No one could name the Ten Commandments...

Folks didn't know Ishmael from Issac.

It was downright embarrassing and Nehemiah knew it was time to change things... so he got the Levites all together and Ezra the priest and they organized a big rally. Put up posters, **“Everyone come!!!”** It was a pack the pew kind of thing. Bumper stickers that said, **“Yahweh’s Great in 408.”**

And everyone came... anyone old enough to hear, came and they stood and they listened to Ezra read... maybe for the first time and certainly for the first time together.

He read the scriptures from morning till noon and they stood and listened... that’s a lot of listening. We take for granted how powerful it is to know your story, don’t we. They listened for hours, probably hearing stories of calling and pilgrimage.

And stories of those who lost their way and who were found.

And they heard of a God who chose them...

And who led them and established them.

And who revealed a way to love.

They heard of days gone by and of a nation gone bad... And they wept. Every story told and explanation given... was being heard deep down and they

began to grieve, for what was and for all that had been lost and for centuries that seemed wasted and shallow.

That’s what happened the day Nehemiah gathered the people to hear the word of the Lord. He probably pictured something different... maybe an amazing, joyful moment...

Everyone’s home in Jerusalem,

Worshipping together,

Listening to Ezra preach.

He’d pictured a great Yahweh rally... kind of a Middle-Eastern, Mardi Gras experience in the streets of Jerusalem... And he looks up instead to find everyone in deep grief... they’re weeping. **“They’re crying.”**

And I suppose, sometimes, that’s all we can do. When we see what is... and what could be... all we can do is weep. They were, they were grieving. **“Look at what we once were.”** We know don’t we... what it’s like to face ourselves... to finally look honestly into our own hearts.

We’re so good at denying and so good at not seeing... And the heart gets hard... and the years pile up and maybe the sin too. And we’re just doing life on auto pilot but then someone stands up in front of us and we hear our story. Maybe who we were or could have been. **What a blind life we’ve known. Look at the hurt we’ve caused.**

Weeping is the only good response.

Or is it? Maybe it’s the appropriate first response. Nehemiah has another idea. So he breaks up the cryfest and orders the first Sunday lunch. **“I want everyone to go home... and I want you to enjoy... the best food you have... the finest drinks you can get a hold of. Go have a wonderful meal. This day is sacred.”**

Nehemiah moved them beyond their mourning. He gave them another way to respond to what they had seen. **“Go live!” “This is sacred, life is sacred... now go enjoy it.”**

So the people went home to their roast. And to their baked chicken topped with a sauce made of olives and raisins. And to some barbecued goat or maybe some “fatted calf.” **“How do you like your fatted calf?” “Medium rare.”**

And they had all the trimmings. Corn on the cob and fresh green beans. And to breads you could smell a mile away. And wines that had been saved for just such an occasion. No more mourning but plenty of mashed potatoes and gravy.

Then they topped it all off with some fig cobbler... and somebody said a prayer and then they all went out onto their porches and took long naps... and knew the day and their lives to be sacred.

What to do? ... when the truth breaks in on us... When we hear, maybe for the first time in a long time, what is true about our lives... who we are... what we’ve missed? We see how sacred life is and how unsacred we’ve lived.

We weep. We draw near in an honest way to who we are and the pain of that. Then... then we get up and get on with life. There’s a time to look at the past... and a time to push away from it. Nehemiah barked out the prescription. **“Go... enjoy... taste... celebrate.”** That’s how you respond to the sacred.

You enjoy this world God has given us. You spend time being with people and with experiences. You let yourself be present to moments and to conversations
and to beauty...
and to laughter...
over a meal... at a table and over a life.

This is the point, you know. You are the point... your aliveness and your enjoyment of God’s world... this great garden of delight. You aren’t a utility in God’s hands... You’re God’s child and as such he takes delight in your delight.

This is the response God is after. Not... **“Oh... look how bad I’ve been...”** Not, **“Let me scrutinize and scrutinize and scrutinize until finally I’ve had enough bad feelings to placate God... enough pain to pay some debt.”**

God is not interested in that... Remember the Prodigal Son? For sure, he came to himself in that foreign land, but then remember on his way home to his dad... he’s rehearsing the speech. **“I’m so bad... I’m not worthy... just make me a slave.”** The father wasn’t interested... he didn’t even let him finish the speech... he did, however, throw a party.

Listen honestly to life, hear the truth, let it have it’s impact, and move on.

There is a greater reality than your failure and your sin... A truer story than your past. The real story is... you still belong to God, God is present to you, and God wants good things for you.

We will not have a compelling faith until we understand this. Enjoying life is the mystical minimum. Playing is as important as praying. Please, play as much as you pray.

That’s probably heretical... maybe offensive... but a lot of you think it’s true. Amen?