

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

"What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." This catch-phrase is supposed to draw visitors to the city, and I imagine it does. Come, play, spend, live it up...when you return home whatever happened here stays here no matter how wild or wicked it was. There is an odd sort of parallel between what happens in Vegas and what happens in church. Many Christians live with the motto, "What happens in church stays in church." Just the opposite of Vegas, in church God's Word is read, it is taught, it is preached, the Sacraments are given, the Holy Spirit is at work. In church Christians confess their sins, they hear the words of forgiveness, Christ and His Gospel is put in front of them. But then when they return home, for many or even for most, what happened there stays there. It does not affect their daily living. It does not seem to make an impression upon them. God's words are quickly forgotten and football games take center stage. The Sunday dinner is consumed without a word being said about what happened in church, about what was learned there that morning.

Four-and-a-half centuries before Christ was born it was the same way. God's people would gather to hear the words of the Lord, but throughout the rest of the week you would not even know that they had been in church. They lived just like their ungodly neighbors. They acted as though they were their own gods. They did not strive to put into practice the ways and commandments of the Lord which they had heard in His own House.

In Nehemiah 8 it was time for a change. It was the first day of the new year. The exiles had returned to Judah from Babylonia. Jerusalem had been rebuilt. Her walls, for protection, had just been completed. It was the Sabbath. The people were gathered for worship. It was a service much like ours. There was the Invocation and the people saying, "Amen." There was the reading of the Scriptures. There was preaching on what was read. And there was this...much mourning and grieving. As the people heard the words of the Law of God, they wept in sorrow because of their sinfulness. That day in Jerusalem the Holy Spirit was at work. He was uncovering the eyes of many sinners to show them how wicked they had been.

But then Nehemiah said this to the people, "Do not mourn or weep...this day is holy to the Lord your God." What! No weeping, no mourning? But the people were grieved. They were repentant of their sinful living. If you can't repent in church where can you repent? Not in church, but in your living. A life of repentance is much better than just crying tears of sorrow in the House of God. What happens in church is not to stay in church. God's Word made that day holy for the people of God. They were, now, to take His words into their lives, and their lives, then, would be holy before the Lord.

Have we here at Christ Lutheran gotten into the habit of repenting only in church? Have we made Sunday morning sacred to the Lord, but what happens in our life Monday through Saturday is nobody's business but our own? Are we Sunday morning Christians, but something very different the rest of the week? One has to wonder, however, that when we live with the theme, "What happens in church stays in church," does what happened in church really mean that much to us in the first place? Sunday morning is holy to the Lord for this reason: His Word is read and heard. But if that Word is not read, pondered, and lived Monday through Saturday, then not only are those days not holy before God, neither are we. As Martin Luther puts it, "Anyone who lives contrary to God's Word profanes the name of God among us!" Nehemiah was not against God's people showing sorrow for sin. But they were to live that repentance every day; and so should we.

Now we see that on that day in Jerusalem there was the Law, there was sorrow, there was repentance. But was there the Gospel? The people were grieving; did Nehemiah give them God's words of comfort? Did the people leave church that day forgiven? "Go your way," Nehemiah told them, "and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

There is a contemporary Christian song which twists the meaning of these words. "The joy of the Lord is my strength," it goes, and we're supposed to feel good because of that. But what about those days when we don't have much joy? Can we go our way in His strength confident, at peace, and forgiven when we're grieving over our sins, when we don't feel much like singing?

Friends, the song has it wrong. The joy of the Lord is not your joy over Him; it's His joy over you. Nehemiah gave these words to the people so that they would leave church confident, at peace, and forgiven. God was not angry at them on account of their sinfulness. He rejoiced over them, not because they had disobeyed Him, but because He was merciful and forgiving toward them. They could go their way in peace and lead lives of repentance in the strength of the Lord because the Lord had joy in His heart over them.

And this is just as true for you. Whatever joy, or lack of joy, is in your life, God has joy over you. You are His joy. It's not because we're such good people. We're not. His joy is in forgiving you. His joy is in putting His gracious words in your ears, putting His peace in your heart, and His strength in your life. Far too many Christians have the idea that God has joy over us only when we obey Him. This is not true. When a father and mother are in the hospital after their baby has just been born, and before that baby even knows them as father and mother, he or she is their pride and joy. Mom and Dad do not wait to love their baby and have joy over him or her only after their baby is a little older and can obey them. The joy they have is not based upon what their child does, but that he or she is their child.

And so with you. You are God's child through Holy Baptism. He rejoiced in giving His Son Jesus to die on a cross for you. He rejoiced to claim you for His own in the baptismal waters. He rejoices to give you His Word here in church. He rejoices to lead you in His Word the rest of the week. But through it all, His joy over you is not in what you do for Him, but in the fact that you are His and in what He does for you.

Armed with these words, the people in Jerusalem could leave church that day and live as God's people the rest of the week. And can we not as well? If what happens in church stays in church, then our lives will be empty and shallow. But rather what God gives you today is yours tomorrow as well, and the next day, and the next. Go your way today and ponder in your heart what you have heard. You are God's joy for Jesus' sake.

These are life-changing words. You are able to live in His strength, able to lead lives of repentance, able to follow in His ways because what happens in church does not stay in church. Christ goes with you. He is at work within you. He leads the way before you. Will you live without sin this week? No we will not. But do not be grieved. You have a Savior who forgives you. His forgiveness and His joy are not based upon how you live. He forgives you because He died for you. He has joy over you because you are His and He is yours. Ponder that this week. Read it anew in God's Word. Live it in your life. Tell a friend. Invite a neighbor. Do not let what happens here stay here. Amen.