

February 13, 2011

Ezra 10:1-6
Matthew 5:21-37
“A New Start”

We have come to a place in our Grand Sweep readings, as we read through the Bible in a year, where the people of God are given a chance to start over. Of course God’s people are given a multitude of chances to start over through all of the texts we’ve read so far. Adam and Eve are given a son, Seth, after Abel was killed. Noah and his family and many creatures started over after the flood waters receded. Abraham and Sarah started on a journey in their old age, that began the story of the Hebrews.

As we’ve read through 1 and 2 Kings, and then 1 and 2 Chronicles, we’ve seen the Hebrew tribes split into two nations. We’ve seen bad kings ascend to the throne, followed by good kings who helped the people start over, in faithful living as servants of Yahweh. Good kings and bad kings flow through the story, so there were many times of starting over. Eventually the Northern Kingdom dissolved, conquered by the Assyrians. More than a hundred years later, the Southern Kingdom, Judah, was conquered by the Babylonians, and the people were taken into exile.

Then, in time, the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians and their king, Cyrus, helped the Hebrews return to their homeland and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. But, as J. Ellsworth Kalas points out, *“While others can help us make a new start, we have to do the most important things for ourselves. You can give me a college scholarship, but I’ll have to study; you can give me a job, but I’ll have to work it; you can lead me to Christ, but I’ll have to live out the Christian life. And the hard fact is, Judah apparently didn’t do well in establishing themselves in their homeland. They worked hard at restoring their temple, but some sort of national deterioration set in after that, and by the time Ezra appeared on the scene, some eighty years after Cyrus’s original decree, he faced a daunting job.”*

Ezra was a passionate leader. He organized able people and he led them to humble themselves before God, to fast, to trust God in their efforts. But he soon found that the people’s greatest problem wasn’t enemies beyond their borders, but problems within their own community. Many people had, once again, married people from foreign nations which had led them, once again, to worshipping foreign gods. Even the leaders and officials, both religious and civil, had been involved in this.

Ezra tore his clothing and pulled hair from his head and beard, signs of remorse and grief. The people were moved by this. He spent long hours in prayer and grief. Then he presented specific actions for reform. The first action taken was to send the foreign wives and children away, so the nation would no longer be tempted to turn from Yahweh to other gods. As Kalas states, *“It isn’t a pretty story, and it isn’t one to which we relate easily. We need to remember that the times and situations were different from ours, then see how we can apply the lessons to our own time and circumstances. But some facts remain clear: It is always possible to make a new start, but the path has rough and uneven places, so one will have to be desperately, passionately in earnest. If we are, we will find, as Ezra did, that the Lord is with us.”*

It may be helpful for us to consider the process Ezra utilized for making a new start, and then to consider specifics given to us by Jesus Christ, as we seek to be faithful to Yahweh in our time and place.

What was Ezra’s “new start” process?

First, RESTORE: If we have drifted from our faith, we need to restore practices to our lives that will help us learn about God and grow closer to God. Ezra modeled humility and devotion to prayer and worship.

Next, REPENT: If we have drifted from our faith, we need to recognize HOW THAT HAPPENED. We need to identify the ways we are at fault in this. We need to recognize that we have not benefited from our choices, but have actually been harmed by them.

Finally, RESOLVE: *“We need to tie ourselves to righteousness by a firm resolve”* (Kalas). The actions the Hebrews resolved to take, sending the foreign wives away with their children, don’t apply to us, but we do need to have clarity about specifics God wants us to resolve to do.

The Gospel lesson can help us here. Today’s reading comes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. That sermon begins with the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted; blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth...” These words are beautiful, but lofty. Everyday people can avoid being personally challenged by them fairly easily.

The next section of Jesus' sermon calls his listeners to be "salt" and "light" for the world. In Christ's time, salt was required for life; it was the primary means for preserving food. So, his hearers would have understood Jesus was calling them to do something important. Then he said, "Let your light shine before others, so they see your GOOD DEEDS and praise your Father in heaven." So--- Jesus has been more specific. Shining with light includes doing good deeds.

In today's reading, Jesus gets even more specific. I love what commentator K. Elizabeth Rennie offers about Jesus' words leading up to our reading: *"Jesus begins to reveal the meat of his text—and tough and chewy it proves to be. If the crowds thought Jesus' unusual, user-friendly methods indicated some libertarian streak in his teachings, they cringed at this assertion that not even a single stroke of the letter of the law should be abandoned...Jesus demand[s] his listeners be MORE righteous than the scribes and Pharisees..."*

Jesus then lays out what going beyond the righteousness of Pharisees means for ordinary men and women. The examples he gives are SO SPECIFIC we have to see ourselves in them.

When he focuses on anger, he moves from the most dramatic display of anger, MURDER, into a category that applies to everyone: getting angry, calling names, hurling insults, cussing out another person. These are absolutely universal human behaviors. We can't hear Jesus' words and think they are meant for someone else—for someone much WORSE, or much BETTER, as we might think hearing the Beatitudes.

Jesus spells out how to deal with relationships that have been broken by anger. Whether in religious rituals or civil court, Jesus insists we seek reconciliation with our brother or sister. Leave your offering at the altar to seek the person you are in conflict with and put things right. Settle your claim while walking into the courthouse.

Jesus focuses on how we need to honor marriage. Jewish teaching focused on BEHAVIOR, such as adultery. Jesus makes it clear the attitudes and thoughts deep within are as corrupting as actual adultery. He also directed his teaching to BOTH men and women. The traditional legal practices of his day charged ONLY WOMEN with adultery. In Rennie's words, *"But Jesus*

addresses any man who 'looks at a woman lustfully' as having committed the adultery. The woman is not painted as a seductress. Indeed, she may not even be cognizant of the man's roving eye... The responsible party...is the man."

In his words about divorce, Jesus' demands are MORE stringent than former practices. Men could divorce wives for ANY reason. Here Jesus says they can only do so if the woman herself has ended the marriage through adultery.

What about those words that direct us to chop off body parts? What is that about? These are NOT specific, but metaphors that tell us we MUST STOP doing things that harm others or ourselves. Nestled in his teachings about lust, adultery, divorce, they certainly apply to destructive sexual behavior. But I think the images can be applied to any and all destructive behavior.

It IS possible to change our ways, to make new starts, with God's help. But it isn't easy. Jesus calls us to identify specifics, break them into do-able steps and then DO THEM.

But there is one more point we need to absorb. Commentator Leonard Sweet reminds us, *"The cornerstone of Alcoholics Anonymous has long been that alcoholics must practice complete abstinence.... Yet it takes a tremendous amount of energy to renew that dedication... each and every day. That is why AA and other...programs rely heavily on creating supportive communities of their peers... who will stand by each other on ...bad days."*

One of AA's slogans is, "You alone can do it, but you can't do it alone."

Jesus makes it clear: honoring the law to love God and neighbor is to be part of every day, in specific concrete decisions and actions.

And we can't do that alone. We are called to be the kind of supportive community that helps us with our SPECIFICS. Changes we want to come about in our lives won't happen by our just wishing for them. We must cut ourselves off from old attitudes and ways and throw them away. We must take specific steps, day by day, to bring about changes. And we, with God's help, must support each other as we move forward along the way of Christ.

So be it. Amen.