

A Word on Wednesday from Pastor Tonia

"The Joy of the Lord" 1/11/23

*Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks,
and send some to those who have nothing prepared.*

*This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve,
for the joy of the Lord is your strength. (Nehemiah 8)*

Work hard, then relax. Partake in choice food and sweet drinks. It's ok. But don't forget others.

The people of Judah had been exiled in Babylon; when they returned their land was destroyed. They had to rebuild. They had to reclaim their land, their sacred spaces, their culture. Nehemiah was charged with seeing Jerusalem was secure. With determination they worked to rebuild the city wall. When they finished the wall, they celebrated - with a public reading of the Book of the Law of Moses. Hearing God's word, they were reminded of the covenant God had made with their ancestors – and with them.

Listening to God's word caused them to see their sin and reminded them of God's abundant forgiveness. This gift of grace helps us turn from our selfish desires and turn to God and to care for others, to steward our land, seek justice for all, and to reflect the love of God in what we do and say.

As we hear God's word, we are made aware of our sin, our selfishness, how we - miss the mark. At the same time, we see God's grace. God's love and forgiveness are greater than our sin. God's word shows us how we are to live. How we can respect each other and accept our differences to make a better world.

May we be about God's work and through us, may God's words restore a higher standard for life in our church, our community, our country, in the world God so loves. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with us.

Hard work. Different work. Work we never expected to be doing. Like coming out of exile, we have been reestablishing life under the pall of a pandemic, where the world was wearing masks, keeping a distance of 6 feet, being told to live in fear. We slowly began to return to a new normal. Walls came down. We quickly threw off our masks, got close. Much has not yet returned to where it was before the pandemic. And now, some people are going back into lock down.

I was surprised to see masks and plexiglass dividers again in some stores the other day. Without making a statement on the pandemic or the precautions people take, but because of where my mind was, I thought of how we exile ourselves, living behind fear, anger, mistrust, doubt. We hide from life, from others, from God. Unsure of how we can rebuild. God comes to us behind our self-imposed walls. God calls us, secures us, and tells us to live, to rejoice, and to share.

God has called us and gifted us and sends us out into this wounded world to reflect God's love to others. We share love with others through our compassion, our hard labor, our being there, our listening ears, our helping hands, our prayers. By doing the work we were created to do.

We pass through days of exile, of struggles, times when nothing goes according to plan. Situations where we need to rebuild. Days which bring the unexpected. Days which are holy. In these days we are not to grieve what was, but to experience the joy of the Lord, for therein lies our strength. We cannot control what happens to us; however, we can choose how we will react.

The Children of Israel showed their faith by hearing God's word and doing God's work. When they had finished the wall, Nehemiah ordered a banquet, a round of drinks for the whole nation. In God's generosity no one is forgotten, the people were told to share the feast with those who had nothing prepared. The time in which they were living was holy and they received the promise God had given to them – the joy of the Lord would be their strength.

Let us pray.....

Lord, strengthen us to work in and for Your kingdom. Let us find joy in You as we do Your work with our hands. Help us to stay focused on Your kingdom, never forgetting Your command to love and serve one another. Thank You for the banquet of blessings You provide for us. May we find joy in freely giving to others, as You have given to us. Help us to remember the joy, which You give to us, is our strength.

Amen.