

## Regrets

First Reading: Philippians 3:12-14

Second Reading: Nehemiah 8:1-12

Today is ... what ... January 26. Tonight, at a second past midnight, it will be January 27. There's no debate. There is nothing you can do to change it. It's automatic. In the same way, when I was growing up and our family went out to eat, everyone at the table knew exactly what my father would say when the food was served. The waitstaff would approach the table bearing plates laden with the diversity of choices we had selected from the menu. As the server placed the plate before me, my mother, or my sister, without fail, my father would say, "Mmm, wish I had ordered that."

Dad elevated regret to an art form. If he bought a car, he'd be out on the dealer's lot perusing what he missed out on. A house plan would appear in a magazine ad, and he'd be remorseful about the deficiencies in the layout of the home they just built. He'd purchase a washing machine, and as he opened the door to let the installer do his job, he'd be disappointed he hadn't selected the model that sat next to his purchase in the appliance showroom.

Soren Kierkegaard, the legendary philosopher, theologian, and purveyor of angst, said, *“I see it all perfectly; there are two possible situations - one can either do this or that. My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: do it or do not do it - you will regret both.”* It is a mark of our humanity that we worry over roads not taken, opportunities not seized, goals not achieved, words spoken or actions committed that cannot be taken back, promises broken. I have regrets, you have regrets, all God’s children have their regrets ... well, apart from the occasional sociopath I suppose.

Here’s a regret — I am horrible when it comes to thank you notes ... which is not good, and there is no excuse for it. Spending so much of my life writing, the task of sitting down yet again and coming up with something original to say to someone often seems a hill too high, and so I carry the guilt of gratitude unexpressed. There’s no excuse.

Here’s a regret — Inheriting a portion of my father’s modus operandi of buyer’s angst, there are times when I compound a mistake by trying to convince myself that the purchase I made was not in error. Have you ever done this — You buy a pair of shoes that you’ve been looking at for a long time, convinced of how good they will look on you ... only they don’t feel all

that good ... in fact, your toes feel like they are in a vise ... but they look good, and so you tell yourself that they fit okay, and will only feel better once they stretch out a bit ... Wrong! By the third time you put them on you finally admit they are killing your feet and you cannot imagine taking another step in them.

Regret. You have visited there, haven't you? The conversation that doesn't end well and the paralyzation of not knowing how to reconnect and repair the growing chasm between you ... Or, perhaps, you pursue the greener pasture beyond the fence, only to realize it's painted concrete.

Everyone is bound to experience regret. The question is whether the regret becomes the poison that eats away at you or the seed from which a future sprouts. Consider the contrasting thoughts of 2 separate authors — Kurt Vonnegut penned, *“Of all the words of mice and men, the saddest are, ‘it might have been.’”* On the other hand, Portuguese Nobel laureate Jose Saramago wrote, *“If I'm sincere today, what does it matter if I regret it tomorrow?”* One perspective has the power to enslave you and the other perspective leaves open the door to mercy and has the benefit of lessons learned.

Today we read of a people bearing their regrets and coming upon a fork in the road. Will they carry their regrets down the dark path where spirits are consumed by the rust of bitterness, or will they turn toward the path where regrets are understood as lessons learned and thus, are transformed into the wisdom of experience that comes with a clearer vision about covenants to be embraced going forward?

The setting is Jerusalem some 80 or 90 years after the exiled Israelites began returning home from Babylon, having been released from captivity by the Persian king, Cyrus, who had conquered the Babylonians. What the returning exiles saw upon their return to Jerusalem was a city flattened in a way you don't have to imagine but can clearly see from contemporary drone videos over places like Gaza City or Aleppo. Similarly, you can see it in the old film reels shot over cities like Hiroshima or Dresden after WWII. Can you imagine the pull of discouragement and disillusionment when the reality hits the returnees of how many decades it will take to rebuild and restore their beloved Jerusalem? And remember, it would be over two millennia before Caterpillar built their first backhoe. So, construction was a bit more complicated.

Well, during the reign of the Persian king, Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah, a 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Jewish civil servant serving in the Persian administration, was appointed as governor of Judea. Interestingly, Nehemiah's prior appointment was as a cupbearer to the king, meaning it was his job to test the wine before serving it to the king. If Nehemiah keeled over dead or deathly ill, the king wouldn't drink the wine. So, relishing a break from that glorious duty, Nehemiah set about managing the restoration of Jerusalem. The reports he had heard from the city were grim — *“The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.”* Nehemiah's first visit to the city only confirmed what he had heard. He said, *“You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.”*

Nehemiah, as with the Israelites in general, carried the guilt and regret of a people whose long record of entitlement and indifference to their covenant with God had fractured the foundation of their community and led to its eventual collapse. Before taking on the task before him, Nehemiah prayed, *“hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and*

*night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.'"*

An earnest prayer, to be sure, but did you notice the tenor of it? There is an admission of shared guilt, the complicity of all in the breaking of the covenant and the collapse of Jerusalem. There is no effort here to evade accountability. Nehemiah wasn't even born when Jerusalem fell, but he does not excuse himself from complicity in its demise. There is regret, but Nehemiah doesn't seek to avoid accountability or project blame, and so the regret fails to pull him down the path of bitterness and blame. Nehemiah's regret is real, yet with this acknowledgment, it is as though Nehemiah is saying, *We are guilty, no doubt about it. We brought it upon ourselves, and the price was steep. So, here we are, what is possible from here forward?*

You see, Nehemiah recalls what God had told Moses long, long ago —  
*“If you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.”*

Fast forward to our text in Chapter 8, Nehemiah and the people have completed the construction of Jerusalem’s wall, and the people congregate near the Water Gate, before which was an open space for gathering. It is important to note that they gathered not by edict, but by their own volition. This is a grass-roots gathering, a collective understanding that something has to change. They quickly assemble a platform for the occasion and send others to find the priest Ezra and implore him to ascend the platform and read to them from the Torah, the Law — *“They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.”*

You know those occasions when you are forced to attend some corporate training or continuing education event? The boredom in the room is palpable. Nobody wants to be there, and everyone just wants to get it over with. The Nehemiah account, however, conveys the opposite of that. There is a yearning to hear the Word of the Lord.

For the past few weeks the McQueen room has been packed in the hour before worship, as folks have come to learn more about how the calling of God touches them. Similarly, on Wednesday, as schools closed and events were postponed, compromised and paralyzed by this polar vortex that brought a thin manna-like crust of snow, the McQueen room here was again well-populated by folks who braved the weather to gather around this very account from Nehemiah, intent on seeking to understand what God may be saying to us through this scripture. When indifference is pushed aside by interest and intent, the energy of the occasion is transformed from death to life.

The Israelites gathered near Jerusalem's newly constructed wall yearned to hear the word of the Lord — men, women, anyone who would be able to understand. And to that end, out in the crowd were Levites



(teachers of the Law) who were helping the people to comprehend what was being read. Nehemiah reports, *They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.* When is the church alive? When are people growing in faith? When we gather in community to hear the Word of the Lord, wrestle with its meaning, support one another, and together yearn to hear what God may call forth from us. The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Rome, said, *“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”* Elsewhere, Paul says, *“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*

Back by the water gate of the newly rebuilt wall of Jerusalem, look at what is said when Ezra finished reading the Law and the Levites finished making it intelligible for the people. *And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to*

*them, “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.”*

Standing before the rebuilt wall of Jerusalem there was gratitude for this glimpse of a future for Jerusalem. Yet, at the same time, in hearing the Word of the Lord, there was regret for all the indifference and unfaithfulness, all the neglecting of neighbors and responsibilities, all the vanity and disregard for God’s calling that had led to the collapse of Jerusalem and the exile in the first place. *“For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.”*

Everyone is bound to experience regret. The question is whether the regret becomes the poison that eats away at you or the seed from which a future sprouts. Regrets — will we live with them or learn from them. *“This day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* What brings joy to the Lord? When God is in our presence and we recognize it, and are sensitive to it as we meet the day; when we don’t pretend to be something we are not, or vainly try to hide our mistakes, errors, and sins, as though God isn’t already aware of them; when we don’t

hide from but rejoice in the presence of the Lord; when the presence of the Lord and the Word of the Lord inspire us to participate in the healing and restoration of the people wounded by our actions or inaction, by our words or our silence; when our regrets are transformed into our calling; when we embody the grace given to us.

*The joy of the Lord is our strength.* Perhaps the prophet Isaiah sums up this story best — “*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*” May it be so. Amen.