

“Fulfillment is Real”
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; I Corin 12:12-14, 27; Luke 4:14-21
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Just now we heard the story of Jesus keeping Sabbath in his hometown synagogue. The Bible says that he returned to Nazareth, in the Galilee area in northern Israel. Jesus returned home in the power of the Spirit. His reputation for being a gifted teacher and wonder worker was building, people were excited to hear him speak, and see what he was like. When he was handed the scroll of Isaiah to read at the weekly gathering of God’s people, he found the place where it said:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

This is a combination of Isaiah 61:1,2 and 58:6. But then he surprises the crowd ... he tells them that this ancient promise from God to give them freedom and healing is fulfilled in that very moment, in the crowd’s hearing it read by Jesus. God’s Word heard by God’s gathered people in the presence of Jesus, who is anointed by the Spirit is powerful. It’s the good news we all need, it brings freedom, and recovery and the Lord’s favor into the lives of all who hear. God’s Word is powerful and Jesus is with us when we gather in his name.

Let me tell you a story of my trip to Israel where I learned about the power of God’s Word and the presence of Jesus Christ. At the church of the Primacy of Peter, next to the Sea of Galilee we stopped for our final site of day 3 in Israel. The sun was low and the light was soft, everything appeared pale blue and misty grey, the sky, the pebbly beach, the square stones of

the church building, the gently rippling water. Tired and still shocked at being in the Holy Land, we reached for our cameras out of habit and snapped the obligatory photos.

Many of our group went inside the small church built around the traditional site of the rock that Jesus ate breakfast with his disciples on. The time He revealed himself to his disciples after his resurrection. I, on the other hand craved the open space of the sea and headed for the beach with a few others. It was quiet and I looked for rocks to take home and I was assured by the guide, “take some rocks”. I imagined that this soft hazy lake so big it’s like a sea, the Sea of Galilee, or Gennesaret as it is called in Hebrew, was where so many encounters with Christ took place. I tried to take it in and really remember it.

This place where Jesus took off across the water to get a break from the crowds, only to find that crowds caught up with him. This is the place where Peter showed a great burst of faith when he asked Jesus to call him out onto the water, to walk across it as Christ was. This is the place where the storms could be wicked and life-threatening, yet obedient to the Son of God when He demand to settle. The place where the lowly fishermen were called to become disciples, to drop everything and follow Jesus.

Well! Our demanding itinerary soon called to us, it was nearly time to go. Shortly into our tour I had already learned that we were going to be moving hastily from place to place and to another place and another. So, I moved quickly up the small hill and popped my head into the church, I haven’t been inside the Church. I knew I needed to hurry, and I took a couple of pictures and sat down to pray.

Then I noticed that a couple people had sat down in the pews to pray. I thought, “I should do that”, so I sat. But my mind wasn’t in a prayerful state. I was surprised actually to realize I hadn’t prayed yet that day at all. So, I searched my mind for the prayers waiting inside of me. With the images of Jesus eating breakfast with his disciples on this rock floating through my

mind, I had only one prayer, “Jesus please reveal yourself to me as you revealed yourself to the disciples”. No sooner had that thought, prayer, formed and tears welled up in my eyes but I was called to the bus, it was time to go.

It’s funny, as much as the disciples had seen all the signs and wonders worked by Jesus, and had heard all of His teachings about the final days of His earthly life and even his predictions about his resurrection, as much as they knew, they were still surprised by the revelation of his newly resurrected body on that beach that early one morning by the Sea of Galilee. After Jesus’ crucifixion and death, the disciples had returned to what they knew best, to back to their trade of fishing.

They needed the familiar territory, a place where they could work by rote and find comfort in what they knew, nothing about fishing had changed in their time away. The nets still needed mending, the time for the best catch was still at night, the direction to sail the boat to get to their best spot, still the same. How to gather the catch and clean the fish ... none of this had changed, life returning to normal.

In John chapter 21, we read that the yet unrecognizable risen Jesus appears on the beach as the disciples are just getting back from an unfortunately, unsuccessful night of fishing trip and Jesus tells them to throw their net over the other side of the boat, they do that and they get a huge catch. John 21 reads, “Then Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.”

Here on this same old beach on the Galilee, in the soft early morning light, doing what they had always done, perhaps blocking out their grief, disappointment and fear, they encounter the most profound change to human history that would ever be, they encounter the extra

ordinary in the ordinary, their friend and teacher, the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, over breakfast, once again.

All that happened on a beach like the one I had just visited. I didn't leave home with a lot of expectations of the Holy Land, but one thing is for certain, I have always craved that Jesus would reveal himself to me. Now in this short moment of quiet thought, literally a narrow minute of time squeezed on both sides by busyness and moving on, I had just prayed the deep and genuine hope of my soul, that I would encounter the Risen Christ as the disciples did on that beach thousands of years ago.

I knew when the prayer was prayed that it was significant, but soon enough we were off and preparing for the next day, and frankly it was forgotten. A visit to Tabgah, the traditional site of the multiplying of the loaves and fishes was our second stop on day 4. Again a church was built around the rock that is believed to be the very rock that Jesus stood on when he told the disciples to hand out bread and fish to the hungry crowd. The place where thousands gathered to learn from Jesus and the disciples encountered his immense power once again. In this place a colleague offered some teaching and devotional time through a sermon.

There we were, a lot of pastors, elders and church members, sitting in a circle, listening to a teacher open up the Word of God. Our teacher told us that Jesus' miraculous multiplication of the bread was a sign of his power to feed all the people of God, not only bread for our bellies, but spiritual food for our souls and life-giving food for our daily living, all through God's Holy Word in the Bible. Our teacher reminded us that we have access to this bread of life through our relationship with Christ, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by the gift of the Holy Scriptures. You see that we are fed by the Living Word, Christ himself comes alive before us when we read the scriptures, and something spiritual and something real happens inside of us when we feed on God's word.

Images of eating and being fed, of crowds of God's hungry people feasting (there were 12 baskets of food left over!) after that huge feast. Images of being nurtured and energized, of hosting and receiving hospitality, pictures of satisfied tummies and cheered hearts flooded our minds as we listened to our teacher talk about the miracle of Jesus turning a few loaves of bread and a couple fish into a hearty meal for thousands of needy followers. All of a sudden, while still floating in the imaginings of this real miracle, my prayer was answered. God showed me that in this right-now gathering of faithful Christ followers, during a regular old sermon, a good one, but still just a sermon, in the gathering of people who were seeking to hear God's Word and understand it, Jesus was present, and feeding us. For me, this was real.

Sure I've been taught by professors at VST. I have read, Bible commentators and theological authors that Christ is present in our time of worship. The Bible tells us in Matthew 18:20 that where two or three are gathered in Christ's name that he will be with them. In fact, we are told that we as Jesus followers are the very Body of Christ, for He must be with us, when we gather in His name.

Paul tells the church in Corinth, a group of people with lots of issues, far from perfect, that despite their human tendency toward sin, they ARE the Body of Christ. We gather here, in Richmond Presbyterian, for worship every Sunday with the hope and expectation of meeting Jesus, encountering the Risen Christ.

But somehow for me it took being in a foreign land, with a culture and history and experience far outside my own, where we were doing something so familiar from home, sitting with Presbyterian friends, listening to a preacher I've heard lots of times before, talking about one of the most familiar miracle stories I know ... an anachronistic, Western worship in an Eastern place, a juxtaposition of protestant theology in a Roman Catholic site, in a Jewish country shared by Muslims, the strangeness of an Egyptian mosaic of birds and plants by the Nile, in a church, in an ancient church, set next to the Sea of Galilee where no such birds or plants ever

existed. it took this strange mix and match, this awkward, discordant layering of human stuff, history, theology and culture, to realize that all I'd been taught about worship, as unique as it was, that gathering in community to hear God's Word, read, and taught, that it is ununique, that is all true, eternally, transcendently, true.

Not for us Presbyterians, or true for us western church goers of the middle class, but it's true. Worship of God centered on God's Word is a spiritual reality that transcends our culture and history and brings us into the realm of glory, presence of God, the Shekina. Not because the music is like a professional concert or because the building is a feat of grand architecture or because the minister is an eloquent speaker, but because that is how God made it to be and God supplied us with the only worship tools we need, scriptures, the Spirit and each other. During worship, when gathered with the intention to hear God's Word for us, we really do encounter the Risen Christ.

Our reading from Nehemiah today reminds us that God's ancient people experienced the power of God's Word, just as much as we can today, despite the differences in our traditions, our cultures, our customs. It doesn't matter. The people before Ezra and Nehemiah, they wept and celebrated in great joy after a whole morning and afternoon of listening to Ezra read from the Torah and interpret its meaning for them.

In our story from Luke, Jesus reveals himself as the fulfillment of God's promise given through ancient prophet Isaiah's famous and precious words – through Christ, the Living Word, God will bring good news to the poor, bring sight to the blind and free the imprisoned. When I think of these stories, I long to be back in the presence of the bodily tangible Jesus Christ, sitting on the cold stone risers of the small crowded synagogue just up on the hill in Nazareth, listening to his words and actually forming longitudinal waves in the air particles that physically encounter my eardrums, transmitting his voice into my mind. I want to have

confirmation of Jesus's power in my life and an experience of his real presence. I want to be special like the disciples, the first ones, and have a personal relationship with him.

The deepest desire of my heart came out in that quickly uttered prayer that I barely had time to finish. And here I was the very next day, knowing that simple prayer had been answered. Jesus the Risen Lord was revealed to me in the most ordinary and familiar, sometimes even boring and obligatory part of life, sitting and listening to a sermon among a group of faithful and flawed believers. Simple as that! Jesus literally showed me in that moment, that we are the Body of Christ and when we gather in his name He is present and that His Holy Scriptures have all the power and goodness we need to be nurtured, and fed, and satisfied and filled in this life.

So, Richmond Presbyterian, Whatever it is that you are endeavoring to do as a small community of Christ followers here, in your city. It's significant, it matters. Our worries about budgets and maintenance and who will do what to keep us going. Jesus honours these concerns, because he wants to fill us with power to serve him, so that we like the moon that reflect the light of the sun in the night, reflect the shekinah, the presence of God, God's glory, reflected back out to each other and beyond.

He wants to fill us with his power, so that we will share his saving grace with the world. We just maybe take it for granted, or forget too often that the way he will feed us and strengthen us for this journey of this life is through his Word, given and spoken, interpreted when we gather together in his name.

We can be like the hometown crowd of Nazareth, we can take for granted that Jesus is ours, we know Him, lots of us have walked with Him for a long time. We can be disappointed that we aren't feeling special enough, is he really here for us? We want big happen. We can be discouraged that his fulfilling of God's promise to welcome all people into his family doesn't

seem to be enough to get us through our day, a day full of human distraction and human brokenness. But whether we sense it or not, like Paul taught the Corinthians, we ARE the Body of Christ, we are intimately connect to and dependant on Christ and to each other, and as such we've got a great deal of important work to do: the heavenly, glory-filled work of feeding God's people, of sharing God's word, the wonderful and miraculous reward of in-turn being fed by Christ.

So, be encouraged, be heartened, be of good cheer. God's glorious presence is dwelling in us. Reflect it, revel in it, feed on it, enjoy it. Because Richmond Presbyterian, together we are the body of Christ.

Amen!