

“Happy Are Those...”  
Ezra 7:1a, 6-8; Nehemiah 8:1-3;  
Romans 14:10-19; Matthew 5:15-20

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We are continuing down the east wall of the sanctuary, looking at our stained glass windows. Last week we talked about Ruth; the week before that we talked about Moses. The third window back is Ezra. It feels like when I'm asking you to look at Ezra, I'm asking you to find Waldo. My guess is that most of us don't spend a lot of time looking at that particular part of the Bible. It feels a little obscure, like we're going in search of something that we have a hard time finding. Where's Ezra? I don't know how many of you recognize this picture, but it's Carmen Sandiego. Where in time is Carmen Sandiego? Where in time is Ezra? Nehemiah?

If you remember the history of the Israelites, Jeremiah kept saying to them that the Babylonians are coming and you need to make peace with them. They said, “No.” So what happens? Nebuchadnezzar conquers Jerusalem and send the people off, at least a good portion of them, in about 605 B.C. Probably anybody with any sort of status was exiled to Babylonia, and there they lived for at least 70 years. During that time that first generation probably passed away. Then there was a second generation of Israelites there in Babylon when Cyrus the Persian comes and conquers Babylon and makes an edict saying that the Israelites can go back. Some do. Think about it. After 70 years, there probably wasn't anybody who had been in Jerusalem before. They had started to make their own lives. A few went back, but it was still in disarray. Then over the next 70 years, I don't know exactly what happened, but again, there was a group that went back. There was a cup-bearer to the king, which ended up being an important position, and it turns out he was a really good administrator. His name was Nehemiah. He went back and helped rebuild Jerusalem. So it's a process of reforming a people, a people who had been gone for maybe 140 years from Jerusalem, who had lived in Babylon. They were trying to figure out what it meant now to live again in Jerusalem and to be God's people.

One of the things that Nehemiah did was to recognize that there was a scribe named Ezra who had been re-gathering the law and putting it together again so that it was understandable, and Nehemiah had Ezra come and read it to the people. It probably sounds a little strange to us to sit there and hear somebody read something for two hours or more. It's not something we would probably look forward to. But I think there was a hunger for how do we figure out who we are again? How do we become the Israelites again and not just an exiled people in a foreign land? One piece of that was the rediscovery of the law. They read it and begin to create their identity around it.

So that's who Ezra is. He was the scribe who was able to bring the law to the people. It was an important event. It was in some ways one of those turning points where again the Israelites began to be in Jerusalem and began to shape their life together as a community of faith.

But there were some issues. It's interesting that we had Ruth last week and Ezra this week because Ruth was a foreigner. A whole book of scripture about a foreigner who

comes and participates in the life of Israel. Indeed, she is a progenitor of David. What happened when Ezra and Nehemiah went back to Jerusalem, and they had mixed marriages? There's a medallion on that window that shows the break-up of families because of the mixed ethnicities. I'm going to suggest that Ruth is telling us what to think about that. They probably went too far. This story of Ezra and Nehemiah trying to reform became so much of an issue that they made the law everything. What gets lost when you make the law everything?

I'm guessing that perhaps this is one of those forming stories for folks like the Pharisees who made the law everything. I'm noticing a conflict here. Who is the conflict with? Jesus. So as we begin to read about Jesus talking about the law, we see that there's some way he's seeing it slightly differently than the way it's become central to people like the Pharisees. We could say that they are both laying down the law—putting it out there as something that's important. The question is, how is it important? Is it something that's supposed to tell you how you are supposed to do everything each day of the week, every moment of the day? That's the way the Pharisees were beginning to use it. Their whole life was so structured by the law that they had forgotten God's grace.

It's interesting when Jesus says, "You had the law and the prophets." It's interesting to me because the prophets tend not to focus so much on the letter of the law as on the purpose of the law, the intention of the law. What's that intention? Well, over and over again, the prophets say, "Why aren't you worshiping God and treating each other justly?" That's what the law is about, getting along and letting God be the one that's God. What happens when all we do is focus on the law? We make the law our God.

It feels to me like that's what the Pharisees had begun to do. It feels to me like the good intentions of Ezra and Nehemiah led to people focusing so much on the law that they forgot God. It's a turning point. It's a time when Israel indeed begins a new life of faith, but it's not thought of as a time everybody wanted to go back to. No, if you thought about that, you'd want to go back to the time of David.

They were struggling to reform a people, and the tendency is to sometimes overdo. Jesus is saying none of the law is going to disappear because God's will is never going to disappear. Think about what Jesus is saying. Let me put it a different way.

How did Jesus get along with the Pharisees? We can see how the Pharisees took the law, which was basically to define everything they did every day of the week, all the time—the way they washed, where they went, who they could be with—everything. Jesus kept getting in trouble with the Pharisees. Why? He and his disciples walked through a field and picked some grain on a Sabbath. What did Jesus say about the Sabbath? Man is not made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath is made for man. There was man with a withered hand. The Pharisees were watching to see what Jesus would do. Jesus said, "Is it right to do good on the Sabbath?" The Pharisees didn't want to answer because they knew what it meant. Jesus went ahead and healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath holy is the first commandment. Jesus understood the will of God that was in the law, what it was about. How did Jesus sum up the law? Love God with your heart, mind, soul, and

strength, and your neighbor as yourself. He was focusing on the same thing as the prophets were. Love God, love your neighbor.

Paul also had a little trouble with the law. He got thrown in jail, but that's not what I mean. That's not the kind of trouble I'm talking about. He had trouble with the Jewish law and the way it had been used. He said it ends up becoming just that which leads us to sin. He said it's not that he was throwing out the law, but now we need to know the grace of Christ that helps us understand and leads us. Think about the kinds of things he talked about—caring about others in this passage today. Where God wants to take us is righteousness, peace, and joy. Righteousness: right relationships with each other, the idea of getting along. Peace is really about harmony, shalom. So it's how do we live so that our lives and other folks' lives make that beautiful music, that we become harmonious. And joy—I think that's a way of talking about a deep appreciation of life. When you have that deep appreciation, there's a certain joy that just bubbles up. These are the things that Paul is directing us towards, and I think Jesus, as well. In fact when Jesus ends this part of the Sermon on the Mount, what does he say? "Unless your righteousness is greater than the scribes and Pharisees, you won't enter the kingdom of God. Think about what that says: the righteousness. I don't think he's saying that you have to outdo the scribes and the Pharisees in living out the letter of the law, you have to let your right relationship with God and people take precedence and see how the law leads you to do that.

It's easy to want the letter of the law unless it's being laid down on me. I don't mind asking somebody else to do it the way I want it done or the way I think it should be done, but think about having it laid down on you. When does that help? You've got to do it this way, even if it seems stupid. Or, you've got to do it this way but you don't understand why. The law by itself is not enough. Who wants to do things just because we're supposed to do them? We do them because we understand why we do them. The rules we have for a game—we understand why we have them. They help us play the game. But again, think about the rules of a game. They don't tell us all the things we do in the game. They tell us some limits. They help us think about how to play together.

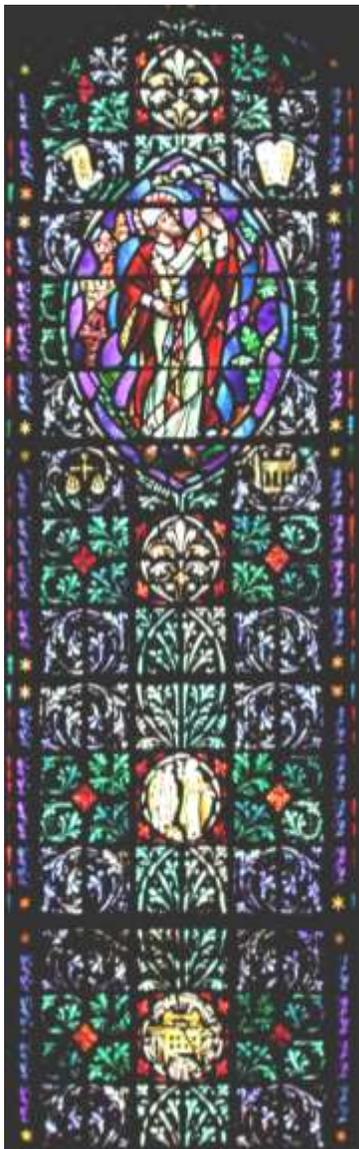
Sometimes, as we're walking through life, it feels like what I need to do is find that one thing. Perhaps I just need to find Waldo and everything will be fine. Or maybe I need to figure out where I am in time, or where I am at all.

I remember one time, I was out hiking in the mountains not far from here, and I'd only been here a year. Going into the woods here is very different than going into the woods in Colorado. You don't have these big peaks that you can use to find your way out. So I went down this path and wound around a little bit and realized that I wasn't sure exactly where I was. There was a moment of panic. I've never been lost in the woods. For a moment I thought I was lost. Then I calmed down a little bit and realized I really wasn't that far and that I had only come down hill, and if I just took a lay of the land I knew that if I went uphill I should find the road.

Sometimes that's what I feel like this is all about. Jesus wants to help us find the lay of the land and the direction we need to go so that eventually we come out on the road.

It's when we come out on the road that we begin to realize that sometimes when we are in the midst of the trees it's a little hard to tell where we are going. But remember that Jesus gives us the lay of the land and in some ways he gives us due north—love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Get that lay of that land and begin to listen to God, think about where he is. He takes us down that road; a road that is paved with righteousness, peace, and joy. A road where we help one another, as Paul finishes up his piece. A path of righteousness, of right relationship with God and with one another.

I labeled this sermon “Happy are those...” because in the Psalm that I used today, it says “Happy are those who follow the way of God, the road to life.” As we allow Christ to give us the lay of the land, and find our way to the road and follow that road, it really is a place of happiness. Happy are those who follow the law of God, the will of God. It's a gift God gives us. Ezra knew that. Paul knew that. Jesus knew that. They invite us along. Amen.



## EZRA

Our sanctuary was built in 1940-42. Stained glass windows were planned as important features, and were provided by gifts, bequests, and memorials. The windows, created by Charles J. Connick and associates of Boston, were installed from 1942-1958.

The third window from the front on the east side portrays Ezra, the “second law giver” (Book of Ezra).

Ezra holds a scroll representing the Holy Scriptures which had been written at that time (about 400 B.C.). Ezra collected and corrected these writings and put them in proper order. The rebuilding of Jerusalem after the return from captivity in Babylon (Ezra 6) is symbolized in the background. Ezra carried out drastic reform in reestablishing the Law, and established regular synagogue services in which chief place was given to the reading and exposition of the Law.

The small medallions around the main picture show the tablets of the Law of Moses, a scroll representing Ezra's interpretations, scales to signify Ezra's judgement of his people, and the temple.

One of the larger circle medallions illustrates the casting out of foreign wives and their children. (Ezra 10) Another shows the Ark of the Covenant, the chest which held the sacred law and symbolized the presence of God.

This window was given by Mrs. Charles L Thompson, in memory of Charles L. Thompson. It was installed in 1948.