

Sermon Title: Finding Fulfillment  
Text: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
Luke 4:14-21

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You already know that your pastor's brain functions just a little differently from everyone else's. There's sometimes no accounting for the things that grab my attention, and how it links to whatever else I, or those near to me might be thinking. This past week it was a troubling statistic, and I didn't recall exactly where I heard it, nor could I vouch for its truth. My recollection of a news report was that as prevalent and persistent a problem as Hunger is in our world, there are more people who suffer from obesity than are threatened with starvation in this world today. The wonders of the internet allowed me to track it down, and the statistic was attributed to a professor from the University of North Carolina by the name of Barry Popkin. He was a part of a panel discussion at the International Association of Agricultural Economists, who said that "there are over one billion people who qualify as overweight, while those who would be considered undernourished number around 800 million."<sup>1</sup>

My object here is not to get you all thinking about the politics of food, or public health. There is a fine Adult Education class scheduled for the end of this month and most of next to explore precisely those questions. The statistic came into my mind this week because when I first heard it, *my* mind wandered to the circumstances that allow me to carry just a bit more around my own waist than I need or is probably healthy. Specifically, when is it that I am most tempted to eat more than I need or desire? I can quantify in my mind why it is that people might *not* eat as much as they need or desire in a day, and for the most part I come up with reasons that are beyond the control of that individual. People don't, I think, *choose* to be hungry. But, and again the question posed itself in a personal way for me, not seeking to judge anyone else. Why do *I* eat more than I need or desire?

I think I came up with three answers. Try them on for yourself. I eat more than I should when I am bored, when I am frustrated, and when I'm seeking comfort. Gas stations and quick trips to the grocery store or pharmacy are probably the biggest culprits, and that's the boredom more than anything else...they figured out (whoever they are) that while I'm just sort of mindlessly standing in line, waiting for the person ahead of me, there's a pretty good chance that I'll snatch one of those snacks without as much as a second thought. Frustration takes me back to college days, when the paper or assignment wasn't going the way I wanted, and a raid on the fridge was a way to vent. Comfort's that bowl of ice cream or piece of pie that you search out at the end of as you stretch out on the sofa and relax before calling it a day. Take those out of my day, I got to thinking, and I bet my own battle of the bulge would fair quite a bit better.

But you probably didn't come here this morning to hear your pastor's musings on his eating habits. What has this to do with Nehemiah, or Luke, and Jesus' first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth? It was actually a single word that triggered the loose association in my mind, as Jesus had finished his reading of the text for the day from the book of Isaiah. One of the things we can't be sure of because of the way ancient texts were constructed is whether what follows is the entirety of Jesus' sermon, or only the first line cited as a sort of memory jog for something else the listeners would have been familiar with, but in either case, what Jesus said would have

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<sup>1</sup> Posted on treatmentonline.com, <http://www.treatmentonline.com/treatments.php?id=886>.

pressed the boundaries of propriety and belief: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

“Fulfilled” is the word that stopped me, and the thought that all too often in the world we live in, “fulfilled” is confused with “filled.” How do you know if you’re successful? Open one of your three garage doors, and show me the key to your secure storage garage? What do you do if you’re feeling listless, lost, in a bit of a cloud? Go shopping...or this is where I got started where I did, do a little fridge surfing. If you feel an emptiness, you look for a way to fill it. It’s *hard* for us to remember, because we really do live in a world in which the consumer is *king*, that more often than not, the very things that *fill* us—our time, our space, our stomachs, are the very things that as a matter of fact *deny* us *fulfillment*.

Back to Nehemiah, and a part of the story of the people of Israel that might be a little less familiar to you. The setting for our text follows the fall and sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar’s army. A generation has passed, and those who had been exiled had been allowed to return. The new ruler, Cyrus, the king of Persia, was far more tolerant of local religious cults, and a halting form of temple worship was allowed to resume. The walls of the city that had been destroyed were being rebuilt. In short, Israel’s fortunes seemed to be slowly but steadily improving. But in Nehemiah’s telling, at least, there was one essential thing that was missing. All the external pieces of Israel’s prosperity were slowly rising from the ashes, but at the end of the day they were hollow, because the real source of Israel’s fulfillment was missing—their life was not grounded in what they knew as “the Book of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel.”

And so, on the first day of the seventh month, the people were gathered together, and Ezra opened the Book, and he started to read. And he read of the powerful acts of God from the history of this people. He read about Adam and Eve, of Babel, and Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob; of Joseph, and Moses, and the parting of the Red Sea. He read of freedom that turned quickly to the bondage of the wilderness, and seemingly meaningless wandering through desert and mountain, and of God’s constant, saving presence.

It was in that reading, Nehemiah wants us to know, that the people began to understand everything that had happened in their lives: not only the good and redeeming things of the most recent past, but even the heartbreak and horror of defeat and captivity. The people, Nehemiah says, didn’t just hear, they *understood*—the Word that was being spoken in their midst was *fulfilled* in their hearing, and all the people wept for joy. Because the fulfillment for which they longed was given to them, not in temple worship or reclaimed homes, not in fortified walls or renewed prosperity, but in God’s Word, made present in their reading.

“Today,” Jesus said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

By his time, the mantle of foreign occupation had returned to Jerusalem, but the iron fist wore a velvet glove in the form of Rome’s general tolerance of local customs, so long as proper allegiance was sworn to the Emperor. If you played along, you were able to live a long, full life, as those who guarded the scrolls from which Jesus read had done. One of the things that meant was that the promises contained in those scrolls had been conveniently set into the sweet by and

by. Of course the poor would be filled with good things, and justice would flow, but those were promises for tomorrow. *Today*, people of faith needed to be *obedient*. Pay your taxes, say your prayers, and no trouble will come your way. Your life will be full.

But Jesus heard something different in Isaiah. And it confirmed what had been whispered to him as softly as the cooing of a dove at his baptism. The object of this life is not to fill your days. Our calling is that life might be *fulfilled*. And that fulfillment will lie, not in the things you can gather and store for yourself, but in the ways in which you allow your life to be the means through which those who are most vulnerable in the world around you have everything they need. Your life, Jesus insisted, will be fulfilled not when you figure out everything you need, and fill it up with just those things. Your life will be fulfilled when you finally hear the call of the world's deepest need, and pour yourself, your gifts, your heart and soul into that place, so that captives are released, sight restored, oppression ended, and together we see the dawn of the Day of the Lord's favor.

Sitting at the back of the narthex this morning are lots of copies of thirty-eight pages of dense text, providing ample proof that we have had a very full year as a congregation. And between the lines are many more stories of the ways in which this congregation has been at work in the last year, trying to fulfill its calling to be a community of worship, learning, and mission.

You can't put a number on the glue sticks and construction paper, the scissors and markers by which our children have begun to put their own unique colors on the stories of our faith, nor could you count the hours their teachers spent in planning and leading them in the discovery of their faith. The best you can do is say "thanks!"

We can count the number of people who worship, and catalog the hymns we've sung, the prayers we've prayed. If you're interested, I could give you every sermon that's been preached to you. But what couldn't be accounted for is whether, or how often, one heart has been raised while another has been set on edge. We have worshipped faithfully, but the fruit of worship is not found in the pile of words left behind. I prefer the test of the apostles, who met Jesus when they broke bread after walking the road to Emmaus with him: did our hearts *burn* within us?

And in terms of mission it has truly been a remarkable year. Harbor House, the Katrina Work Trip, the Youth work trip to Germantown, PA; Heifer Project, and our partnership with Edison School, and endowment grants to wonderful and important programs in our community. It's all there in the pages of that annual report. It's been very *full*. But beyond *full*, the Spirit nudges, I truly think it *has* been fulfilling, because together we poured ourselves out in ways that I don't think we knew we were capable of.

At the meeting of our Presbytery Council this past week we reflected on an article that talked a lot about the "giving patterns" of mainline Protestant Churches. The article was written almost ten year ago, but not much has changed in the last decade. Giving, as a percentage of our income, is less than it was a decade ago, and that giving was less than it was a decade before that. The point of the article, however, was not to cry doom and gloom, but to wonder what turns it around. What is it that makes a church truly generous?

The authors pointed to a particular correlation—careful to note what we were all taught: correlation is not causation! But, the authors noted, it was those congregations which had a conscious commitment *beyond* themselves which seemed to buck that trend of diminishing returns. It wasn't the churches that had built the biggest buildings, or had the greatest increases in membership. It was not correlated to worship style. It had to do with whether their focus was *inside*—seeking to fill themselves up—or *outside* looking to fulfill their calling in a world of need.

It all comes back, to my mind, to Professor Popkin, and my own personal battle of the bulge. I know what makes me fat...and it's a concentration on my own comfort; it's boredom born of that comfort; it's anxiety that something in this world might challenge me, and push me in new directions. What fulfills me is another thing altogether. It's when I see a table of joy-filled young people growing in God's love on a Wednesday evening in the church basement; it's a group of adults who come together to study, to share their lives, to ask each other hard questions, and push each other in love. It's the thought that if there's a disaster in this world, Presbyterians will be there, offering housing, hospitality, hope; and the image of a cow, or a flock of chicks, or a hive of bees given to a family that has nothing so that they can not only survive, but thrive. The dynamic of salvation is not seeing how much I can hold in my hands, but how deeply, and fully I can give...*we* can give, to the poor, the blind, the captive, the oppressed. Not when *we* are full, but when God's Word has been fulfilled in us.

“Today,” Jesus said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

That it might be so, let us pray.