

“Regroup, Refocus, Renew!” (1 Cor. 12:27) Epiphany 3, January 24, 2010

Do you remember the Three Musketeers? *“All for one, and one for all!”* What a great motto! But if you know the story, you know it wasn't *just* a motto. Again and again, this commitment was put to the test. Another character might have been tempted to think, *“All for me, and me for myself”* – especially in times of danger when it would have been easier to go it alone. But no! These Musketeers had a commitment to each other – one that tested their character, their courage, their loyalty, even their love. That's what makes the Three Musketeers such memorable characters – their rising above self and standing by each other: *“All for one, and one for all.”*

That's how it should be in a Christian congregation, too: *“All for one, and one for all.”* Certainly that's the point St. Paul makes in our text. He portrays the congregation as a body – the Body of Christ. In this body, each member is important. In this body, all members work together. **“When one member suffers, all suffer together; when one member is honored, all rejoice together.”** And there is no room for selfishness. In fact, there are two things that members must never say to each other: *“You have no need of me. I have no need of you.”* To the contrary! Christ has brought us together. For His sake, we stick together. It's *“All for one, and one for all!”*

Yes, that's how it should be in a Christian congregation.

But what do we do when it's not? I have preached on this passage many, many times, but never in times like these. Before, the point seemed simple and clear. Now, I'm not so sure. What do we do when long time members say in effect: *“I have no need of you”*? What do we do when friends and relatives take off – with the flimsiest excuses? If we had changed our theology or supported a group that did, that would be one thing, but our stand has always been the church's stand. And it's not un-Lutheran to follow Scripture. Is it that we actually took a stand and didn't take forever to do it? Whatever, apparently that overrides everything else enough that they can say to us, *“I have no need of you.”*

So what do we do? This being our situation, what can we do? What must we do? My friends, this is a time to rise above self and stand by each other. *“All for one, and one for all!”* We must regroup, refocus, renew!

That is exactly what we see happening in today's first lesson [Nehemiah 8]. Let me give a little background. The year is 444 B.C. The Jewish people have returned to their land after 70 years of exile. And have they learned their lesson? You bet! Looking back, they know how stubbornly their ancestors disobeyed God's Word and ignored the prophets God sent to warn them. Looking back, they also know the consequences. Jerusalem was conquered. The temple was destroyed. The people were led off to the land of Babylon. And there they languished for 70 long years.

But now, things have changed. They have returned to their own land. They've been given another chance, and they're not about to blow it! So first they regroup. Leaders like Nehemiah pull them together and help them rebuild outwardly. Then they refocus. They seek to rebuild their lives spiritually. And that leads them to renew their commitment to God and His Word. Hence the Bible-reading marathon described in this passage.

The people initiated this, by the way. They specifically asked Ezra to teach them God's Word. And that's what's happening here. Beginning early in the morning and continuing until midday, they gather in the square for instruction. From a makeshift pulpit, Ezra reads the Word, and as he does, other scribes interpret to give the people its full meaning. Today, some might think: *How boring!* But that's not how these people feel! For them, this is a very moving experience! They weep when they hear God's Word! And why? Some think it's because they feel convicted of their sins. That may be. But when Ezra tells them, "**Do not grieve,**" that suggests a bigger and deeper reason for these tears. They grieve that they're even in this position. They grieve that their ancestors put them in this position. They grieve for the heritage they might have had but lost because of their ancestors' disobedience. Listening to Ezra, no doubt they wonder: *How could our ancestors stray so far from God when His Word is crystal clear? How could they be so foolish? Going along with Canaanite morality? Thinking it was okay to worship Baal? Consulting the stars and fortunetellers when God specifically told them not to? How could they think there wouldn't be consequences? If only they had been faithful to God's Word, we wouldn't be in this mess! If only, if only, if only!*

Now, given their history, these people have good reason to grieve. Still, that doesn't do them a lot of good. Learning lessons from the past – that's helpful. But getting bogged down in the past? No. Not if you want to regroup, refocus, renew. So small wonder Ezra tells them, "**Do not grieve.**" But then he adds something more: "**Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.**"

What does he mean? First, let's be clear what he doesn't mean. Ezra doesn't say, "*Your joy about the Lord is your strength*" – that is, your joy about what God is doing for you. Nor does he say, "*The joy from the Lord is your strength*" – that is, the joy God inspires within you. He says "**the joy of the Lord is your strength.**" "**The joy of the Lord.**" God's own, deep down, personal joy – that "**is your strength.**"

Ezra is making a very meaningful point here. In effect, he's telling the people: If anyone has reason to grieve over your ancestors' mistakes, God does. But He's over that. What's past is past. What God cares about is what's happening now. And the choices you are making now – they fill Him with joy! His people are back on track! You are seeking to do His will! You've regrouped and refocused. Now you're renewing your commitment! That pleases Him no end! And God blesses that which pleases Him. God supports and defends that which pleases Him. So

keep that in mind! Grieving over what was and what might have been – that will just wear you down. Knowing God is pleased with what you’re doing now – that should build you up! Yes, you’re doing something hard, but it’s the right thing, it’s God’s thing, and there’s power in knowing that! Yes, you’re on a difficult path, but it’s the right path, it’s God’s path, and there’s power in knowing that! God honors those who honor Him. He will be your rock and your fortress. So **“do not grieve!”** Think what you’ve got going for you! **“The joy of the Lord is your strength!”**

That is a good message for us today – especially as we think about Paul’s words on what it means to be the Body of Christ. Yes, hurtful things have been said and done to us, but we cannot dwell on that. Yes, we might have taught more clearly on certain values, but we cannot dwell on that. What’s past is past. The important thing is what we are doing now – which is seeking to be faithful; standing upon God’s Word; carrying out our mission to help people build strong, effective Christian lives with the resources of God’s grace. That’s what God’s called us to do. That’s what we are trying to do. So we’re on the right track! And there’s power in knowing that! God honors those who honor Him. God blesses that which pleases Him. Faithfulness gives Him joy! So to us there’s a word of encouragement here, too: **“Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!”**

Actually, if we’re going to dwell on anything, let’s dwell on what it means to love and serve the Lord in this new situation – what it means to be the Body of Christ. For each member is still important – now more than ever! All members must work together – now more than ever! And it’s still true that **“when one member suffers, all suffer together; when one member is honored, all rejoice together.”** There is still no room for selfishness. We must still never say: *You have no need of me. I have no need of you.* Now more than ever our attitude must be: *“All for one, and one for all!”*

This attitude will help us to regroup. Instead of wringing our hands over what’s past, it will prompt us to pull together and ask: *How can we support each other? Where can we pitch in? What needs to be done that isn’t getting done?* That’s part of what it means to be the Body of Christ. And by the way, some of you are doing a great job at this! Your concern for shut-ins especially! Like at Christmas when some of you got together to go caroling at their homes. Thank you! For that’s pulling together. That’s what will help us regroup. That’s the attitude of *“all for one, and one for all!”*

Adopting this attitude will also help us refocus. When times are tough, it’s easy to lose sight of what’s important. How do we get back on track? That takes joint effort. While anyone can point the finger at what’s gone wrong, it takes the whole body to figure out how to get it right. And that includes mulling over key questions like: *What kind of church is God calling us to be? What special needs do we see around us? What resources has God given us for serving others?*

And what can we do to make a difference? That's what's really important, and it takes the whole body to refocus on that. It takes pooled faith, prayer, and insight; pooled effort, resources, and commitment. And, of course, it definitely takes mutual support: "All for one, and one for all."

That's also what will help us renew our congregation. Let me share a great example. Last Sunday, I got an e-mail from a friend who had visited a new LCMC mission congregation. The folks there had been through tough times, too, but my friend wrote: *The people...are very friendly. We heard from many of them that even though they are a new congregation, they are "filled with the Spirit." It was evident that the people...had chosen to be worshiping and working together for a purpose, and they were excited about the opportunity. One of the women said that they just express a need and someone volunteers, "I can do that." One gets the feeling...of excitement and hope, because this group of people has chosen to start anew.*

You see what I mean! That's the attitude of "All for one, and one for all!" And what a difference it makes! That's how it should be in a Christian congregation. That's part of what it means to be the Body of Christ. And that's certainly what it takes to regroup, refocus, renew. So that is the encouragement we take home with us today. Our congregation has so much going for it! Rich possibilities lie ahead! Christ has brought us together. For His sake, let us stick together – joining hands, remembering what's important, opening ourselves to what God has in mind – and doing it with the attitude: "All for one, and one for all!" Amen.