

**Sunday, January 27, 2019 – Third Sunday after the Epiphany
“Centered”**

Nehemiah 8: 1-3; 5-6; 8-10

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Story Framed Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Among the many great gifts God gives us, one that might not be the first to come to your mind is the organization and structure he puts into creation. If you don't believe me, imagine if the core of our solar system, the sun, simply stopped doing its job. We'd quickly slingshot off in some random direction as its gravity ceased holding us in place. Between the cold, the darkness and the lack of energy that keeps our weather patterns working, we'd all be in serious trouble very quickly, one way or another. Perhaps that's far-fetched. Consider our bodies – if the core mechanisms that keep homeostasis to regulate your body temperature just failed, so too would your body. The same goes with families, when core values and truths fail relationships fall apart and people have a tendency to look out for themselves.

The people of Israel were a people who had been ripped from their core of life. Seventy years earlier Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem, the temple, and taken the inhabitants captive. Then when Persia defeats Babylon, a kinder overlord allows bands of Hebrew exiles to their ancestral homeland, which lay in ruins. I can't help but think of the displaced residents of the fires in Paradise, CA, or Santa Rosa a couple years ago, or even of New Orleans, yet to return to homes decimated by Katrina way back in 2005. But with Israel there are no relocation services, no FEMA trailers, no insurance adjusters. No wonder so many of the exiles decided **not** to come along for the journey to rebuild Jerusalem, and only small remnants or bands of people went. And you know, for such meager supplies and manpower, they hadn't done a bad job. They had managed to rebuild the walls of the city but still they lacked direction, leadership, an organizing core around which their life could revolve.

It wasn't until seven months had passed that the people assembled together as one on a plaza near one of the gates and Ezra the scribe read aloud from the book of the Law of Moses. He read from daybreak until noon – and some of you think that *my* sermons are long. And they listened attentively to God's Word. Why so attentive?

If you are someone who has lived part of your life not knowing God or having him close in your life, you'll probably get this faster than someone who never remembers a time without God. What I mean is, you might remember a time without that centering piece. If you've ever found yourself confused, lacking direction, wanting inspiration, panting for refreshing waters of meaning to pour through your soul, then you're one in spirit with these people. We're talking seventy years here – a lot can happen in seventy years. Seventy-four years passed in Russia between the Bolshevik Revolution that made a communist government until the dissolution of the USSR and while a small core of people in Russia and behind the Iron Curtain kept their faith all those years and passed it down from generation to generation, there's something about living through such disapproval where the grandkids and great-grandkids kinda melt away, leading to a mostly secular populace in Russia today. I wonder how many teens and twenty-somethings, grandkids of the original exiles, were among the 42,360 people who returned to the Land – their land that they had never known. Culturally Israelites from Israelite families but floundering on questions of meaning growing up in Babylon with friends and neighbors who worshipped other gods and thought other kinds of things, and all they wanted to do was fit in.

Yes, they listened attentively to the Word of God because it gave their mission meaning and purpose. Here we are again, God's people, in our own land, depending on Him and His promises and living our lives as He meant them to be. "Great is the Lord!" cried Ezra and the people raised their hands shouting, "Amen!" As they heard the word of the Law, they even wept.

It gets me thinking – what is the core, the center of your life? Your family? This congregation – there are all these activities that we all do and ways we behave and live – where do we find meaning?

Please take out the insert that was passed out to you today. I'd like you to think a moment about all the activities you do in a typical week. Write them down. As you're writing them down, list on the other column your rationale, or your motivation for that activity. For instance, perhaps you list cooking dinner – is your rationale to provide a delicious meal for you and your family? Is it to finish dinner quickly so you can run off to another thing? Is it a task of drudgery to be done because you must eat? Is it an act of love and joy? When you're writing

your rationale, don't think about it, go with the first thing that comes to mind. *A few moments for writing and reflection – also listed on screens.*

How did that exercise go? Any patterns? Any causes for concern? I'd imagine I'm like a lot of you, when I get busy my motivation for some of the things I do is simply the fact that it needs to get done and I'm the only one to do it.

I'd argue that the trend that comes out most often as your rationale for each activity is actually your core. Some cores are performance based, other times we might feel like we have no core at all. And then there is the core, the only core, that gives life real meaning and purpose.

God may not promise happiness, stacks of money or good health, but He does offer meaning and joy. I speak to you as someone who sometimes loses that perspective myself. We've been given the key to Paradise – not a vulnerable, destroyed town in northern California but Paradise itself, welcomed into the waiting arms of a Savior who calls Himself our brother and friend. He died for us. When we are not centered around the core I'm not saying that we're outside of God's promises or that we've lost our salvation – but I do think we're missing out on purpose and meaning that are not just for some future far off but for today. It's like the person of many hobbies – you all know someone like this – they get on a new kick every few months. They go out and buy all the equipment, take lessons and so on but what are you left with in the end? A kayak, a set of golf clubs and rock climbing gear collecting dust in your garage. Without that right core that gives us meaning and purpose, so many great blessings go unused.

The good news is, if you're looking at your life and feeling like your core is off-center, it's never too late. You're still part of God's family and the gift is there. Israel gathered around God's Law. We gather around His Word – in Scripture readings both together in worship and on our own, in praying with each other, receiving Jesus' body and blood regularly, these things keep us centered on the right things in life. As time and priority get carved out for these things, you may find your attitude toward otherwise unsavory activities improving, or perhaps priorities and levels of busyness changing to accommodate more central and more important parts of living as disciples of Jesus.

I've seen this happen in the lives of people in our church – cases where a sudden illness has the effect of that person taking their walk with God more seriously. I've seen kids lacking direction who, centered on God's Word developed joy and purpose in using their studies and later their career to serve God's people. I've witnessed lives changed as people learn to place healthy boundaries in their relationships and through financial courses like "Financial Peace University." I've seen people see a greater purpose to all that they do as part of God's mission to love our community and our world in Jesus Christ. The core returns to center and priorities take shape.

I don't know every way in which your life is off-center but I do know that as sinners for every time we hit the mark, there are many more times we don't. Remember the greatest truth of all around which our lives are organized – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He forgives us, embraces us and loves us. When we succeed, He strengthens us and encourages us. When we fail, He picks us up. His promise is that He will stay at the center of our lives, even when we behave, act or think differently. In Jesus' name, Amen.