

It's often said we are our own worst enemies. Most of us are harder on ourselves than we are with other people. But the fact is, all of us make mistakes in life, some mistakes are more serious than others, but no one in this room is perfect. In my work and ministry, I spend a great deal of time encouraging people to let go of the past and to move forward. I know from personal experience that letting go is not easy. We cannot back up the clock and change history, but we can certainly move forward and shape our future.

In our first reading, the people of Israel had just returned from 50 years of exile in Babylon and they were stuck in the past. Nehemiah and Ezra encouraged people to let go, to stop living in the past, and to embrace the here and now. What great advice for us today – stop living in the past and embrace the here and now. New beginnings are gifts from God, no matter how we got to where we find ourselves right now, each day is a new opportunity for us to begin again, to renew our faith and to continue our journey as a disciple of Jesus.

In our gospel reading today, we encounter Jesus as he begins his public ministry. He stands in the midst of the synagogue and reads the following passage from chapter 61 of Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year of favor to the Lord.

By selecting this passage, Jesus made it clear that he had come to bring good news to the poor – not only to those who have nothing, but also to those who have a hunger for a relationship with God. Jesus came to remind us that we too are called to act with justice, to love tenderly, and to serve one another and in so doing, living the love that we can only find in God.

However, it is important to note that Jesus left out a section from the passage which made it clear that he came to change the status quo. He omitted the words which announced "...a day of vengeance for our God." In other words, Jesus dispelled the common belief that unfortunately still lingers with some today, that hardships or life's challenges are a punishment from God – that is utter nonsense. With Jesus, God does not come to punish or destroy, but rather God comes offering freedom, healing, and love.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was consistent in both word and deed. He challenged the status quo and encouraged people to be more loving, to be more forgiving, and to open their eyes and their hearts, and their hands to all whom they encounter, especially those who suffer.

Jesus taught us the path that leads to God will require us to get our hands dirty, to risk rejection, to speak the truth, even when it is difficult. Sometimes we have to stand up and speak out, and other times we have to know when to remain silent and offer love and compassion. We need to have the humility to forgive, as well as to seek forgiveness for our misdeeds.

Despite all that Jesus taught us, how often have we allowed differences or past mistakes to become walls that separate us from one another? Sin really can become a self-imposed exile in our relationship with God and one another when we hold on to shame, anger, jealousy, or when we let pride prevent us from admitting to our mistakes and weaknesses or truly offering forgiveness and reconciliation. The example that Jesus left for us helps us to celebrate life and come to understand that each and every person has value and dignity.

St. Paul, in our second reading today used the image of the body to bring his divided community in Corinth together. He reminds us that as the people of God, the Body of Christ, we are interdependent upon one another. Each person, whether great or small in the eyes of society, has a role to play in God's kingdom. Each of us is part of the beautiful tapestry of life and if we remove one person, the tapestry falls apart and fails to reflect God's love and creation.

As a body, we have to work together, to overcome our differences and not try to restrict the grace of God to one group or one religious tradition. We are called to do what Christ did – to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to announce a year of favor from our God. It's time for us to get busy, and the first step begins with ourselves, embracing our brokenness and celebrating the love we have from God. When we truly love God, we will love one another and ourselves. That is the gift of freedom that Jesus came to bring to humanity.