

EpC3 - '07: **“Spiritual Anatomy 101 – Parts, Purpose, and Passion”**
A Sermon by Dan Stern based on 1 Corinthians 12, Luke 4, Nehemiah 8

It is my hope that each one of us will leave worship today conscious of three key things that are essential to the vitality of this church and the wellness of this spiritual body. 1) parts, 2) purpose, and 3) passion. Actually, I'll refer to them in reverse order: first, passion, then purpose, and last, parts.

The verses we read from book of Nehemiah speak well to us of passion. The scene takes place in an outdoor, inter-generational worship setting. Being together in worship there mattered intensely to everyone. The people in their exile, had for generations been isolated, their faith community splintered. Now they were finally back together, readying themselves for worship. Their eagerness was palpable. How they had longed for a unified Jewish identity in exile – finally a solid sense of common purpose was starting to reemerge. But they'd have to learn from scratch that which could be taught them from the remnant bits and pieces of their ancient traditions. Although the old priest Ezra knew Hebrew, and could read from the book of the law, the language of their forebears had all but been forgotten during the exile. So interpreters were presents restating the read Hebrew passages in the more commonly-known Aramaic language. Other kinds of interpreters were also present who, as verse 8 puts it, gave the people the sense of it, put the law into context so they could apply it for their own day. All who were deemed capable of understanding it and putting it into practice, including women and older children as well as the men, were encouraged to hear it. As they did, a kind of group epiphany started to emerge. And the people began to weep openly.

Are you familiar with the phrase, “an embarrassment of riches”? It describes well what I feel about God's grace – so many undeserved spiritual riches! But it took me years to see life fully like that. For years, especially in church life seemed less an embarrassment of riches, and more a richness of embarrassment, given that Sunday morning worship seemed inevitably to be the time and the place in which tears would well up in me. Like those returning exiles of Nehemiah's day, I've wept openly in worship. Some of you have too. We don't plan for it, we may not want it to happen. It just does. That's how it is too when guffaws of laughter well up inside us. Or when loudly and totally atonally, we make a joyful noise to the Lord. We just can't help ourselves sometimes. We needn't help ourselves. We needn't explain ourselves, except from time to time to assure those who aren't used to laughter, tears or loud atonal singing that they needn't be alarmed, that it's spontaneous and real, and that we believe these to be indicators of God's Spirit moving among us.

I've told stories from this pulpit, and you've likely noticed such times yourself, when laughter seemed to well up at a funeral, or tears started to flow at a wedding party. Out of place, embarrassing? Perhaps. But what is genuine, I think, is good, and what is good is appropriate. Suddenly and without prior warning, Spirit-led human beings sometimes break into song, well up with laughter, or burst into tears. It may require a few awkward trial runs singing atonally, using the mike to state our prayer concerns, and both laughing and crying out loud, but eventually, we tend to feel more free here to express ourselves honestly. In time we learn here that those around us are a rather trustworthy forgiving bunch. Some of us may never tear up; and that's certainly okay too; for some, they don't flow easily. But in one way or another and with practice, we all find we have the capacity to do what is required of Christians – which is, of course, first and foremost to make fools of ourselves for Christ. We are called to be passionate about our faith. Our collective passion says to the world that fulfilling our purpose as a church matters to us. We are moved here, because being the kind of church we are matters to us. Which brings us to the second key thing: What is the purpose that matters so to us, that makes us the kind of church we are at our

best? Can we put our purpose into words? Do we know how to faithfully, coherently express it?

In Luke 4, Jesus sums up his own purpose beautifully, declaring that "Today, scripture is being fulfilled in your hearing it." That's still true. And his is still a great summation of Godly purposefulness, one for the church to make its own today. The Spirit anoints both Jesus and all of us 'to preach good news to poor people, to announce parole to prisoners, to give sight to the blind, insight to the confused and misguided, and to declare the time and place of Jubilee, which implies the radical redistribution of economic resources for the equal well-being of all. It's never enough merely that we feel comforted as a church community in each other's presence. We have a mission beyond ourselves. We have an exterior reason for existing, for building up this community. Too bad so few of us always feel able to state it clearly and succinctly to others! Our literature and website have for some time now at least taken a good stab at stating our purpose, utilizing several succinct bullet points – Our purpose is to an encompassing church whose 'compass' is Jesus. To be justice-seeking, peace-loving, earth-friendly. To journey together, simply, peacefully. To extend an extravagant welcome to all; to become reconciled with God, with others and with our own best selves. And so on. However we most often put it into words, we need to know, our purpose by heart, in the deepest reaches of our core being. Then we'll be empowered to state it clearly to others. We need to do that precisely because we are here for more than ourselves alone. God, grant us an increasingly clear sense of purpose – one we can state succinctly to the world.

Now having alluded to both passion and purpose, I call our attention to the various parts that contribute jointly to the expression of our passion and the fulfillment of our purpose.

I can't say it better than 1 Corinthians 12 says it: The body has many parts. The body is One. Each part, of great significance in the body. No part of any significance by itself, apart from the body.

I can offer two brief illustrations in story. One emphasizes our go-it-solo perpetual inadequacy. The other, our go-it-together indispensable significance.

Story #1, and this one is historically factual: Did you know that Albert Einstein lived with profound feelings of inadequacy? Yes, that Albert Einstein, the genius Nobel-prize winning scientist and mathematician. In 1948, Einstein was offered the first presidency of the new nation of Israel, and he refused it. "I know little about the nature of people," he wrote, "And I am ashamed to say that I cannot accept it. I lack the natural aptitude to deal properly with people." He knew plenty about the nature of the universe; he also took strong stands against war and brave stands on behalf of peace. And yet that wise, sensitive man knew too that he lacked the necessary everyday practical skill to be an effective national leader.

We have to ask ourselves though: is there really any shame in knowing our limitations? Of course there isn't, or need not be. Albert Einstein continued to focus on those things he knew well, and the world is better for it.

Story #2: Once upon a time in ancient India, there was a faithful water-bearer, who each day, bore to his master two large ceramic pots, each of the same size, which he had filled with fresh, clean water. Or perhaps one should say that he bore one and a half pots, because although one of the pots had no discernible flaws, the other was cracked and leaked water. By the time the cracked one arrived each day at the home of the water bearer's master, it was only half full. The cracked pot felt ashamed. It felt it was not doing its part for the master. But the water bearer, both kind and wise, told the cracked pot not to

feel ashamed. The water bearer, having noticed the cracked pot's flaw long ago, had scattered seeds along that side of the trail upon which he always carried the cracked pot. "Notice all these beautiful flowers," he told the pot. "For two years now, I've picked these flowers to decorate my master's table. I could not have done so had you not watered these flowers daily. Beauty to grace my master's house has depended upon you. Your flaw itself has been the indispensable gift that you have given the master."

All by ourselves, we are never adequate. Even Albert Einstein felt inadequate. But knowing ourselves to be part of a larger whole, our individual inadequacy matters to us less and less. Ironically, even our cracked pot flaws, especially our cracked pot flaws, become beautiful gifts, become the flowers we give the master.

Here at Broadview Church too, to the extent that we really do go it together, each one of us in an indispensable part of a unifying whole, one link in the fulfillment of a much larger sense of purpose. How beautiful it is when that clear sense of purpose comes together here, when we're working in harmony, not at cross-purposes, when we're eagerly putting into practice the very things we love to do most, those talents which are our greatest strengths and most satisfying joys? I'll continue to encourage you, with the help of our Gifts Discernment and Nominations Team, to prayerfully consider your own roll in this community. Where you fit, the part you play, is crucial. Finding where you fit best, not a chore, but a delight. As individuals going it solo, we will always be, we will always feel partial, piecemeal, apart from the body as a whole. And yet our individual significance is greater, not less, when linked to our Oneness in Christ. How can we not feel passionate about that? Scripture is being fulfilled in our hearing and our doing and our being together, the church's purpose, clear, all parts functioning. So "do not be grieved, for it is the joy of the Lord that is our strength." Amen.