

Homily for January 24, 2010 (3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, C)
Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21

You wouldn't have wanted to be Nate Kaeding last Monday morning. Kaeding, the kicker for the San Diego Chargers, missed three field goals in his team's 17-14 loss to the New York Jets. Coming after a stellar regular season, it was a heartbreaking playoff loss for the Chargers in front of a home field crowd of over 70,000.

What made the loss sting even more was that Kaeding had previously missed just three kicks in the entire sixteen-game regular season! In fact, he had just been selected to the AFC Pro Bowl team. Had he made just one of those three kicks, the game would have at least gone into overtime. Instead, it was just over.

While no victory or loss in a team sport like football ever rests entirely on one player's shoulders, it's fair to say that Nate Kaeding had a bad day and that it contributed no small part to a sad end for his team. I thought of him when I heard St. Paul tell the church in our second reading: "If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it." Had he gone three-for-three in the game, Kaeding would have been a hero and we would also be talking about the second part of Paul's observation: "If one part is honored, all the parts share its joy."

In a sense we, the church, are the world's biggest team. But the contest in which we are involved is not a game, and the stakes are far more precious than the Lombardi Trophy or a Super Bowl ring. We are engaged in a struggle between good and evil, a matter of life and death, not just here and now but for eternity. How can we be a winning team? Our readings suggest several dimensions:

First, we need *a clear and solid game plan*. Today's gospel reading has two distinct parts. The first is what we might call the Foreword to the Gospel of Luke. In it, the author lays out his purpose for writing not only this book but also its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles. Writing forty to fifty years after Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension, St. Luke wanted to provide an eyewitness account of those events for a new generation of Christians in order to assure them of "the certainty of the teachings" that they had received.

Our reading then skipped from the first to the fourth chapter of Luke. After being baptized in the Jordan by John (Lk 3:21-22) and spending forty days in the desert in fasting, prayer, and contending with the temptations of Satan (Lk 4:1-13), Jesus returned to his home town of Nazareth. Echoing the image in our first reading of Ezra reading from the book of the law, Jesus came to the synagogue and proclaimed the word. It's important to note that while he was handed a scroll from the prophet Isaiah, he unrolled it "*and found the place where it is written*, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me....'"

Jesus chose this passage as his personal “mission statement.” It presented to everyone listening then and now essential elements of his public ministry: to bring the Good News, freedom and healing to others. As his disciples today, we share that mission. Over the past couple of weeks we have had a very concrete opportunity to fulfill it as people in parishes and schools throughout the nation have raised tens of millions of dollars to help our brothers and sisters in Haiti recovering from the devastating earthquake and aftershocks.

Many of us have been transfixed and deeply moved by the sights and sounds of so much suffering there. Some have even wanted to go to Port au Prince to lend a hand in the rescue and recovery efforts. But the reality is that, in Haiti as in other situations, sometimes too many hands and bodies—even those offered with the best intentions—serve only to complicate matters and make them worse.

That’s why it’s important for us to remember a second lesson from today’s scriptures: *to fulfill our mission, the church should be a team in which everyone has a role and their contributions are valued and utilized.* This is as true on the parish level as it is in a more national or global effort. One of the greatest services that any of us can provide is to discern our particular vocations and then pursue them with a passion. As St. Paul notes so well in his description of the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12, *none of us is called to be or do everything; but all of us can be or do something.*

Once we have honored God, those who have formed us and ourselves by realizing our callings, we then have the opportunity and the obligation to fulfill them for his greater glory and the building of the body. That’s where our third principle of team building comes in: *Practice, practice, practice!* We see this exemplified on our first reading from the Book of Nehemiah. The return of people of Israel from decades of exile required not only the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple but also the rebuilding of their community and character through the proclamation and reflection on God’s word.

What we witnessed Ezra and the people doing over 2500 years ago is the model for the Liturgy of the Word in our Eucharist today:

- God’s word is proclaimed, not only in the readings but also in the psalms.
- We listen attentively and reverently to it.
- We allow ourselves to be “convicted by the word,” that is, we allow it to transform and renew our hearts and minds.
- We affirm what we have heard. When Ezra read God’s word, the people responded, “Amen! Amen!” Today we respond, “Thanks be to God” and “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.”

The greatest affirmation, however, will not be what we say but rather what we do. In Christ Jesus and the cross, the victory is already ours. May we realize and live it, here and now, whether in Detroit or in Port au Prince. +