

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
August 11, 2013

Finding God

Read Nehemiah 9:1-3, 6-10, 29-36

Key verses: “Many years you were patient with them, and warned them by your spirit through your prophets; yet they would not listen. Therefore you handed them over to the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God” (Nehemiah 9:30-31).

Nehemiah 9 contains one of the beautiful *prayers* of the Bible, Ezra’s prayer. It recalls Israel’s history in terms of God’s judgment and mercy: as Creator (v. 6); in making and keeping covenant with Abraham (vv. 7-8); in delivering Israel from the slavery of Egypt (vv. 9-11); through 40 years of wilderness wandering (vv. 12-21); during the conquest of Canaan (vv. 22-25); through the period of the judges (vv. 26-28); through the times of the prophets (vv. 29-31); and in their present situation under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah (vv. 32-37).

Throughout this prayed history, we see Israel’s story of sin and rebellion; reaping the consequences of sin; repentance and returning to God; followed by the blessings of God’s mercy, forgiveness, and grace. Israel’s story is, of course, humanity’s story, our story.

It reminds me of something author Peggy Noonan (a Roman Catholic) shared in her book, *John Paul the Great*. Noonan described a friend who asked the question, “How do you find God?” Noonan replied as follows:

Finding God is not hard, because he wants to be found. But keeping God can be hard. He wants to be kept, of course, but for most of us, finding him and keeping him is the difference between falling in love and staying in love. The latter involves a decision that is held to. Here is a path to finding and keeping God.

1. Let life make you miserable. This shouldn’t be hard. “A bad night in a bad inn,” Teresa of Avila is said to have described our earthly life; and every smart, happy, well-adjusted adult you know would probably admit that that’s just about right. So get low, gnash your teeth, cry aloud, rend your garments, refuse to get of bed. Be in crisis.... “Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity”....

2. Once you're so low you're actually on your knees, review the situation. You could start by admitting what you've long sensed and avoided knowing: that many of the joys and delights of the world are fleeting, and some are fraudulent, and that even though those who know you best would never think this, you happen to have noticed lately that you have a rather black heart. Don't let this be demoralizing; everyone has a black heart. As a brilliant (and agnostic) publisher recently remarked to me in a conversation about why war occurs, "Because there's something wrong with us." There is. It's inspiring how much good people actually do considering who and what we are.

3. You're miserable and convicted and still on your knees. Address the God whose existence you doubt. Ask for his help. Ask for his forgiveness. Ask for his mercy. Ask to know him....Evangelical Protestants sometimes use words like these: "Lord, this hasn't worked with my being in charge, so I give my life to you. I believe in you. I ask you to be in charge of my life." I think these are great words. They are not a prescription for passivity. They are an acknowledgment of reality and a pledge of obedience....

4. Pray. Prayer, in my experience is hard, easier to think about than do. In one way, I pray a lot, all day, in a continual conversation. But concentrated prayer is hard. People who know tell me to make time in the morning or evening, a half hour or so. To read the Bible and engage in sustained and concentrated prayer. I know they're right. I'll tell you something I started to do a few years ago that is connected to this and has made an enormous difference for me. I started reading the New Testament and asking God that I be allowed to know that what I was reading actually happened, that it was all true. During this time, the Acts of the Apostles came alive for me, and after that everything else did, too.

5. Get yourself some friends who will support you and help you. Go to church and find out if there's someone there...who helps converts, for if you are looking for God, you're having a conversion experience.... Find out what's available to believers at your church—daily prayer meetings, for instance—and go....

6. See if you can find and get into a Bible study group to learn more about what you believe in, or a prayer group.

7. Read—for knowledge and to enliven the spirit. Books that are important to me: Thomas Merton's memoir on his conversion, The Seven Storey Mountain; Saints for Sinners by Alban Goodier; To Know Christ Jesus by Frank Sheed; My Utmost for His Highest, the book of daily devotionals by Oswald Chambers....

8. If you never get very excited by your conversion but just plod through, good for you—you'll get your joys. If you start out with excitement and it

flattens or lessens—and it probably will—pray for ardor, ask for your old thirst, and keep plugging. It's the most important thing in your life. And remember, every time you fall or fall away, ask for help. You'll get it.

(Contact Michael at msigler@fumcfwb.com.)