

## Lift Every Voice

Nehemiah 8:1–12; 1 Corinthians 12:12–31a

I wish to explain the historical context of reading from Nehemiah with observations from the idea of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians, before shifting to our present time. Let us pray:

*Though things fall apart  
Though the center may not hold  
Birds still sing from trees*

Roughly 50 years after the Babylonians decimated Jerusalem, including burning down the temple, and carried the survivors into exile, the Israelites were finally allowed to return home. Once they arrived, various leaders, both political and religious, promised a return to the former days of glory, yet they could not keep this promise. Morale was low among the people.

Finally, Nehemiah and Ezra led an effort to point the people toward a new day, which culminated in the rebuilding of much of the city, including the Temple. To mark this new beginning, the people asked Ezra to read the Torah—the law that had been given to Moses from God.

The Apostle Paul compares the church and its people to a body with many members. There are different roles to perform, yet no one is better than another. The goal is the common good. So, while the priests read and interpret the law, note that the people are active. Not only do they stand and kneel, but they listen attentively and with open minds. Once the law is read and explained, their hearts are opened, and they mourn and weep.

I'm reminded of Isaiah, who upon being lifted to the throne room of God, declares, "Woe is me! For I am a sinful man from a sinful people!" (see Isaiah 6). Some 350 years later, the people are lifted into God's presence by their comprehension of the law, and they also lament their sins and shortcomings. This is to their credit. They had open minds and open hearts.

What about those with hard hearts? It's true that, when confronted with the inconvenient truth of our sins, we may dig deeper into denial or seek to point the finger elsewhere. Here's the truth: no sermon or liturgy, no lecture or presentation, no number of statistics or volume of stories will be able to evoke repentance in a

person who is unwilling. Now, that doesn't mean we don't try. We should also applaud brave preachers, who speak truth to power.

We must also pray for the softening of hearts. In humility, we confess that we, too, are sinners and have a tendency to point out the sins of others while ignoring our own.

Yet, we must also remain vigilant. We must resist cynicism and apathy. Stevie Wonder helps! Preachers, keep on preaching! Lovers, keep on loving! Believers, keep on believing! 'Til we reach the higher ground!" Just as the body contains many members and the church contains people with different gifts, so there are many voices and ways of convicting, teaching, and helping others.

I thought about this when reading a review of a memoir.<sup>1</sup> Angela Harrelson is a Minneapolis mental health nurse whose nephew Perry was murdered by a police officer in 2020. (You likely know Perry by his legal name, George Floyd. To his family, though, he was always Perry because George was his dad.) Part of the appeal of this book is its personal touch. Auntie Angela, as she is known, talks about her nephew as well as her own life. She came from a sharecropper's family, served in the military, then eventually earned her nursing degree. She is clear-eyed about racism in this country, and it is also hard not to like her humble, honest storytelling nature. Her memoir is not about social theory or theology. It contains a disarming truth in its gentleness. Perhaps this book will be able to reach more people who might resist the truth of ongoing racism in this country.

Auntie' Angela's memoir is called *Lift Your Voice*, which is an allusion to the Black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." This hymn echoes Paul's theology of the diverse and unified body of Christ, which was an experience that I had last Monday during the Dr. King remembrance at Mitchell's Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church. Black and white, young and young at heart stood to sing this hymn; we lifted every voice. And the, a children's choir sang Stevie Wonder! It was a higher ground. There was strength in community.

Long ago, though they, too, faced a difficult time, the priests gave the Israelites an assurance: this was the day that the Lord had made. They were to go and feast, sharing their food and drink with the less fortunate, for "the joy of the Lord is your strength."

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Palmer's review at *Christian Century*

A striking turn of phrase; this verse was not, as Paul wrote, “rejoice in the Lord” (Phil 4:4); rather, it was about the joy of the Lord! And what brings God joy? When we lift every voice! Yes, this is a difficult, often tragic and fearful time. But when those with hard hearts go low, we go high! Reach for higher ground. I believe God rejoices when the body of Christ acts like the body of Christ—a diverse expression of gifts and talents that come together for the good of all, including the least of those among us.

A story, then, for the road: one of my sons is playing basketball. Yesterday’s game was in Silk Hope. Painted on the wall of the elementary school were the initials “SH” for Silk Hope, but my daughter asked why we were being told to “Shhh!” Before I could explain, she declared, “Well, I’m not going to do it!” And she cheered on her brother with gusto!

Lift every voice. Reach for higher ground. For the joy of the Lord is your strength.  
Amen.

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