

Wednesday, December 20, 2017 - Day 353 – Zechariah 7-8, Psalm 137, Mark 15

As always in these reflections, I just naturally relate the readings to my ministry in the City of Chester and I usually find some verses that jump out at me. Not so this time, nothing specific really jumped out at me. What I did was come away with, especially from the Psalm and the Zechariah readings was an overall judgement of a longing for the old life with blaming the new life on either other people or the situation they find themselves in.

Chester in its heyday was the place to go to shop and be entertained with five movie theaters, an ice skating rink and roller skating rink, dances on the roof of the YWCA on Saturday night, clubs with many of the great pop singers and jazz musicians and four department stores plus a large Sears. Now it is considered the most economically depressed city of its size in America and having the highest homicide rate per 100,000 residents of any city in America.

There is no question that the judgements of blame and wanting to return to the old conditions as related to in the readings are true for many of the residents in Chester today. These judgements in Chester as to why the city is the way it is are usually ethnic in nature and includes both white, black and Hispanic residents. I even hear similar assessments of the situation in Chester by people who live in the surrounding wealthier communities when the subject of Chester comes up in conversation.

I was in my middle 50's when Strawbridge and Clothier, where I had been a buyer for my entire career, was sold to May Company and I lost my job. My wife said, "Do not worry about a big salary, but go do something you want to do." When Gene, an old friend, offered me a job to restart a defunct non-profit, I jumped at it until I was told that most of my work would be in Chester. My response was there was no way I was going into that city to which Gene replied that if I wanted the job, that is where I would be going. Yes, I wanted that job. The first place Gene took me was Chester Eastside Ministries where I was involved with both adults and children living in extreme poverty.

Within three months, I had learned two powerful truths. First is that – and I will word it here as I always share it with Widener University students as I guest lecture for many classes and service oriented groups at Widener: "You get your education from your professors, but you get your formation from having relationships with people who are having a different life experience. It is through those relationships that we find our common humanity, which determines who you become and what you will do with your education. This is the only way we will change the isms of the world." My experience also shows that this works both ways where all the lives involved are changed and preconceptions are abandoned. I also recognized at this time that I was being called to ordination as a deacon.

And my final reflection of this is that this is true for the church. You learn about the love of Jesus from attending church and the reading The Bible, but knowledge comes alive when we are having close relationships with people who are having a different life experience,

which is not the same thing as merely painting a wall somewhere. Maybe parishes should think about this as they are looking for ways to do mission. Why not make it a living two-way street? It truly changes all the lives involved.

By The Rev. Dr. James Ley