

NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
PSALM 19
I CORINTHIANS 12:12-31a
LUKE 4:14-21

Third Sunday after Epiphany
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 23, 2022; Year C

Oops! Said Too Much!

Quit while you're ahead! Oh, how many times we have heard that timeless expression, more than subtly inferred, but strongly invoked as more than a mere suggestion toward those who tend to talk too much, who love the sound of their own voice, sharing way too much "yikyak." Sometimes a salient word of warning is in order to those who are prone to say way more than necessary, verbose souls who just do not know when to shut up and be quiet, to experience the sudden beauty of silence. Yes, sometimes I resemble that remark! Yes, if silence is golden, there are times in our lives when we all need to get rich! I will never forget my wicked fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Kuchler, who once upon a time made my life temporarily miserable by making me stay after school because my artistic abilities failed to measure up to her exacting standards, most inferior, pathetic and pitiful, lacking in excellence and artsy grace, poorly performed in every conceivable way, perfection nowhere on the radar, not a remote possibility in the slightest, not even a pipedream. The problem was that I could not even conceive of how to make a bleeping snowflake, not having the foggiest idea how to cut the annoyingly elusive thing out of a piece of construction paper. Finding the secret cut was a mystery wrapped in enigma! I confess that I do not have an artistic bone in my body, nor do I care! I do not do scissors and paste! I have other gifts! But I digress; I often do! Well, if **Broom Hilda, along with fellow classmates charged with taking names, AKA the gestapo, caught any of us talking out of turn, i.e., inappropriately, she would make us scribble for what seemed an infinitesimal "thousandish" number of**

times, **“excessive verbosity is an incorrigible trait which I will endeavor to eradicate!”** If I believed in a literal hell. . . . Frankly, I have always had the gift of gab, making me well-suited to become either a preacher or a politician, the risk of sleaziness an inherent hazard oft accompanying both highly public occupations! Me thinks me chose the better option! Yes, you get to decide for yourself each and every Sunday, if not every other day of the week as I carry out my pastoral duties! Long before I chose to become a pastor, I had always had a propensity to talk too much, to enjoy my own blather! Drove my mother nuts! You may have noticed! Too many adjectives, too many synonyms! Life is described and often defined by our linguistic imagination! Words are far better than grunts! I guess you could say it is both a gift and a curse! **I bring up Heir Kuchler’s obsessive, compulsive character because her myopic concern over excess verbiage sets the stage for today’s sermonic offering. By the way, she did have one outstanding redeeming quality. She was quite the environmentalist, a concern with which I have always resonated! Actually, we had a good relationship!**

Scholars assume that Jesus was about thirty years old when he began what is traditionally called his “public ministry,” as opposed to what would have been a strangely unidentifiable private ministry! And today we get to read about his coming out party, his debut, a veritable rabbinical debutante! Jesus grew up like any good Jew in Palestine, yes, a product of Nazareth of Galilee, the place where he was most likely born, attending synagogue regularly, learning from those larger-than-life religious authority figures, even attending Temple on the rare occasions he and the family made the long trek to Jerusalem. Of course, all these musings are mere conjecture because we know almost nothing of Jesus’ childhood, much less his young adult years. We ain’t privy to much! The late John Prine, folk singer extraordinaire and unfortunate COVID victim, once wrote a song titled “Jesus, the Missing Years,” a tribute to the thirty years of Jesus’ life of

which we know next to nothing. There is just something about this blank, mostly empty, period of his life that raises the greatest curiosity, which intrigues countless inquisitive individuals. This complete and utter absence of knowledge raises numerous unanswerable questions leading to a host of bizarre theories about his mysterious whereabouts, running the gamut from the proverbial ridiculous to the sublime, covering all kinds of possible, even clandestine perhaps, scenarios. Hey, it's how we got Mormonism! Aside from his circumcision and dedication occurring eight days after his birth, followed by a trip twelve years later to observe the Passover festival at the Temple in Jerusalem, all that think we know is the equivalent of the sum total of what all combined constitutes a big fat zero. Prine's song is full of imaginative imagery about the adventures of this soon-to-be rabbi who one day would not-so-surprisingly, perhaps appropriately so, be accused of leading a peasant revolt. Historically speaking, this theory offers the likeliest scenario, guilty as charged, probable cause almost a given as Jesus was eventually implicated in orchestrating an insurrection that would get him convicted of sedition and executed for said criminal act, an indication of his subversive side, except for those who embrace and continue to hold to a namby-pamby, wimpy, Jesus "meek and mild," at best a positively awkward if not awful stereotype describing, even defining, his passive character. No shock there! But Prine, a contemporary, was not the only wordsmith who mused about Jesus' adventurous escapades as a young man. The apocryphal Gospels are full of fanciful tales describing a child, a childish, petulant, Jesus who often used his magical and miraculous abilities in the not-so-best of ways, even bringing curses on those who made him mad. He is often naughty, not nice! I wonder what he was like as a toddler, those challenging "terrible twos" as they are called! After all, when you think you are God incarnate, you can literally do whatever you want! In the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, not to be confused with the Gospel of Thomas, though both are apocryphal, noncanonical, books, the precocious child curses and kills other children when they upset him,

the parents of one child even struck blind for complaining about the little brat, this egocentric tike. You cannot make up this stuff! Supposedly, these children were supposedly his closest friends, his playmates. Jesus also performs other strange miracles such as bringing clay birds to life and bringing to life a dried fish. In a strange way he is portrayed in much the same manner as Tabatha, Daren and Samantha's witchcraft worthy prodigy on the old SitCom Bewitched, as the parents struggle to teach the child, instructing her in appropriate uses for her unlimited and obviously unbridled, unbound, powers. Strange stuff indeed! No wonder those men in authority who voted on the various books that became the Bible, creating the Canon of scripture, outright rejected many of these subversively bizarre Gospel narratives. Interestingly enough, however, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, as with the Gospel of Luke, does record Jesus' visit to Jerusalem and the Temple at twelve years of age. Hmmm!

And so, with all that fresh in our minds this morning, today we read Luke's account of Jesus' reading from Torah at the synagogue, local boy makes good! Ain't we proud! No doubt reading from the lectionary texts for the day, Jesus either waited for the day this scripture would be the cyclical reading for the day or he manipulated his turn in the rotation as liturgist, making sure he would be the lector chosen to read from this pivotal prophecy of Isaiah in one of the specific narratives that call attention to the messianic hope of the ages, describing the character of the one who was to come, the great Jewish hope, indeed the long-awaited Messiah. Picking up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus began to read, as was his custom, so says Luke—this was not his first rodeo—as all eyes were fixed and transfixed upon their local, hometown, hero, a brilliant prodigy in the making. The lection declares and affirms, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Holy One has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim

the year of the Lord' favor!" The young man Jesus, an apparently accidental, incidental, novitiate in waiting, carefully rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. I am assuming that once again Mary and Joseph's boy wonder completely astonished the assembled congregation, dazzling every attendee, mesmerizing them in every way imaginable, all of them bursting at the seams with joy, celebrating his success, beaming with pride as they thought to themselves, while whispering in hushed tones to their seatmates, exclaiming, perhaps somewhat surprised, at what a talented and gifted strapping young man he was turning out to be. And handsome too with his blond hair and blue eyes! NOT! And this was prior to them experiencing his oratorical, homiletical brilliance, this one and only, true Sermonator! All us preacher types gladly yielding the floor, uh pulpit! Yes, the neighbors no doubt were probably already talking, but oh how things were about to get interesting. Little did anyone know! Nobody had a clue! Nobody saw what was coming next in a moment that forever changed the faith and forever changed the world, all going down in the twinkling of an eye! Don't blink!

All was well! All was well as long as Jesus kept status quo, stayed on point, stuck to the script! But Jesus never could simply follow the rules and keep to the script! He had a bad habit of going off script! C'mon man, just stick to the old, old story, the stale, blandly mind-numbing story, retelling these timebound tales exactly the way you have always heard them, the way these ancient narratives have always been told, as if frozen in time rather than timeless, the way they have always been presented, routinely interpreted. Same old, same old! Blah, blah, blah! How boring! Nothing new here or under the sun to see or hear! And while we are on a bit of a rant, just what was it that made this day of all days different, special, unique, this ordinary day on the calendar when Jesus chose to come out, to come out swinging, to declare himself, to reveal his person, his true to self? Either embarking on or furthering the fulfillment of his life's purpose

as he believed God's calling on his life to be, yes, God's imprimatur, believing he was specially anointed, the hand of God firmly imprinted upon him, poised on the precipice of his unique mission and ministry as he continued in those most meaningful moments the process of beginning his public preaching and teaching. Yes, Jesus had the audacity, the nerves of steel, the cohunes, the intestinal fortitude, the sheer guts it took to proclaim, to declare, without a hint of reservation or equivocation, that he was the man, the man indeed, the man for all time! Just quit while you are ahead Jesus! You've got 'em right where you want 'em! They are eating out of the palm of your hand. Just continue to be an eloquent reader, all systems go. Just settle! Be satisfied with your lucky lot in life because you are such an intelligent, articulate, man. Don't worry! Be happy! Just keep on doing what you have been doing, what you are doing! Leave well enough alone! Just go with the flow, blend in with the masses. Be the equivalent of, another manifestation of a rabbinical chameleon, a lemming stamped in the usual mode, just like everybody else who had chosen to do the religious schtick! Hey, it's a living! And Pharisees make a very good living! All the money! All the respect! All the deferential bowing and scraping, everyone bending over and you-know-what kissing! All those casserole dinners! Jesus, you've got a great shot, despite having no pedigree! We know your momma and daddy! At least they thought they did! You might pass muster! You might make it big someday! You got a shot! You got a real chance, at least a shooter's chance! Who knows? At the least you could certainly quit this laborious moonlighting carpentry nonsense! You don't owe your daddy, at least your earthly one! No, not a thing! You have done your time! Don't stand up, sit down, rock the boat! Don't do it! But, and, he did it! He simply could not help himself! **But something, something profound within his being, deep within his spirit, was crying out to be set free as he longed to set his people free, the people he loved, according to Matthew, like a mother hen. Some image! A chicken! Cluck, cluck! Cockle doodle do!**

Jesus could no longer contain himself, no longer remain silent. This was his Kairos time, God's timing, and Kairos time always conveniently, intentionally, ignores the clock and calendar that by design seeks to enslave all of us clock watchers, all of us held captive to the timepieces of our lives. Kairos time refuses to bend or bow to any perfunctory, pedestrian, pragmatic Chronos master, ignoring those who are held hostage by its inflexible regiment. Tick! Toc! Jesus simply could not leave well enough alone and so he added some commentary to the lection, "giving the sense" as he saw it, this phrase an ancient biblical idea, willingly offering his most distinct, interesting perspective, his uniquely twisted interpretation! He preached! Yes, he preached a one sentence, one line, sermon and it literally all went downhill from that very moment as you will soon see! You wish! Be nice now! "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!" Surely, if my name isn't Shirley, there was an audible gasp exhaled in the room, everyone aghast at what they just heard. Surely, they did a double take! After all, in essence, Jesus was saying to one and all, and I do mean all, to hear, not just those present, this verbal feu pax going viral as soon as it was out of the mouth of this now proven immature babe, "Tag, I'm it! I am the big cheese—that is not cheese head, I wrote this line early in the week, I am very sorry Packers' fans, I feel your pain this morning—the big cohune!" In the immortal words of the late sports commentator, Dick Enberg, "Oh my!" And let's throw in Keith Jackson for good measure, "Woe Nellie!" Like the song goes, Whoomp! There it is! Once again, a valuable lesson looms in the offing. As we have painfully, poignantly learned the hard way, words matter! And they matter a lot! Open wide and insert foot! Bad case of foot in mouth disease! Jesus had just opened the floodgates, not to mention a can of worms, the proverbial Genie never to go back into the bottle, things never to again be the same, status quo dying a quick and much needed death, none too soon. Jesus had just dared, dared to not only suggest, but to audaciously declare, to boldly, naively, or stupidly,

proclaim, that he was the Messiah, the Christ, an acclamation never to be lightly made, not even in jest, in any joking manner! But this was no joke! This was no drill, no rehearsal! Duck and cover! Stop, drop, and roll! This was the real thing! This was not just misinformation! No, this was disinformation of the highest caliber, of the worst kind. This was pure and unadulterated heresy, apostasy, and just flat out wrong. This was Jesus! Going to be a tough day at Blackrock! I wonder how long it took for Jesus' words to sink into the subconscious of the pious parishioners. My hunch is that initially there was at least a modicum, if not a tangible, exponential element of disbelief, that surely Jesus had really said something else, something similar, an audible facsimile, or that he had misspoken, to use an all too convenient excuse these days. Perhaps they thought to themselves that they had not heard whatever it was they thought they had just heard. Like the Christmas song, "Do You Hear What I Hear?" But the more they thought about it, the more they realized that he had meant what he had said and said what he had meant, all the gossipy buzz around this sleepy town caused by the stir he caused elsewhere, in neighboring villages, the aura, the rumors about him now coming home to roost, his words slowly sinking into every fiber of their being. **Yes, it all suddenly made sense. Despite all the goodwill Jesus had amassed, getting the benefit of the doubt as a young up and comer, this eager beaver, this young whipper-snapper, sacrificing all he had gained in his developmental years, was blown up in a nanosecond with his bold proclamation, this erstwhile prediction. For this was no mistake, no mistaking this! On that fateful, bellwether, day, the people of Nazareth would immediately galvanize as one upon their hearing this religious version of sedition and rally to their cause upon hearing Jesus' outrageous claim and would quickly drive Jesus to the edge of town, attempting to throw him off a cliff, to kill this rabblouser on the spot, before his story took hold. But as if miraculously, somehow, as luck or divine fiat would have it, he managed to escape by using the crowd as cover, ducking amongst the angry mob, obviously blending as best he could. Yes, he could have**

died right there on that very day. It was all a sign, a foretaste or foreshadowing, of things to come! And as we all know and history continues to affirm, things would never be the same again!

Ironically this news, delivered by and interpreted by, as seen through the theological lens of Jesus, should have been received as good news, yes, gospel news, but this message went over like a lead balloon, a bucket of warm spit. Not so much! Now it really is not my prerogative to compare myself to Jesus in any way whatsoever, despite his desire for us and all of us desiring to emulate, to copy or mimic this incredible human being. Go and do likewise! But I do want to briefly share a little bit of my personal story because it does provide an entry, serving as an inflection point, a place of intersection or cross pollination. While a certain other member of my very large extended family had chosen to go into music ministry and had attended seminary, I became the chosen one, special, the anointed one, because I had decided to go into pastoral ministry, the pastorate carrying with it a certain mystique, an aura, in the South that still holds mystical sway with many people. I was the pride of the larger family, treated with deference, a peculiar decorum, even blessed with the sacred invitation to offer the blessing at family gatherings and reunions, indeed the height of honor and privilege. And so, I became a pastor, and for better or worse, even a Baptist pastor. And then I threw it all away because I came to accept what I now call radical hospitality, specifically believing that the LGBTQQIA+ community were created the way they are, created in the image of God, and that sexuality is all about biology and has nothing to do with theology. Simply put, these archaic and nonscientific views are based in abusive applications inherent in conservative biblical hermeneutics and interpretations! It is not complicated! It really is that simple! I did not hide my views under a bushel, to use another biblical image, but boldly proclaimed from the pulpit the revelation I had come to believe, drawing wanted and unwanted attention. In 1998, my church, along with the Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia was

called on the carpet by the mythical religious tribunal, a contemporary version of the Sanhedrin, in the doctrinally pure leadership of the Georgia Baptist Convention. We had three choices. We could renounce our heretical position on the subject, “recant” being the operative word from the time of the Protestant Reformation. Or we could face the music and be put away privately, the way that Joseph once thought he would deal with Mary his betrothed, or we could be put away publicly and made a shameful and humiliating example of what is at stake when you profane and pollute the faith of our Fathers and Mothers, what happens when you stray from the straight and narrow and violate the veracity of doctrinal and creedal orthodoxy and commit egregious and intentionally visible infidelity. To paraphrase in a plural form of the immortal words of the great reformer Martin Luther, “Here we stand! We can do no other!” In a public display that involved major media coverage, the Virginia-Highland Baptist Church, now proudly a part of the United Church of Christ, and Oakhurst Baptist were summarily disfellowshipped, kicked out, impolitely removed, the first two churches in the history of the Georgia Baptist Convention, but thankfully not the last, to be dismissed from membership. Yes, we made history. We also made a lot of people happy and proud, and a lot of people disgusted, saddened, and dismayed, angry on steroids. The irony was that those in our familial clan who were by and large conservative Christians were shockingly embarrassed, even humiliated, by my words and actions, a relative for God’s sake, the event in question happening way too close to home for them, transpiring at the Macon Coliseum in Macon, Georgia, the scene of the crime. Some all but disowned me as they clearly disavowed my liberal, secular, position. Yes, there were the usual whispers and murmurs, corridor talk, all in politely expressed hushed tones that are inherent in Southern speak. “Well, bless his heart!” Yes, disown, disavow, disregard, disgust, dismay, dismiss, disrespect! Talk about “dissed!” The family members, however, who were not religiously inclined in the least, certainly not at all church attenders, perhaps ironically, embraced

me wholeheartedly, supporting my views and applauding my resolve, cheering me on because of my stand on and for a principle they saw as brave, bold, and courageous. And these individuals were not exactly to be confused with being inclusive type people, on the whole! Go figure! Of course, I have no regrets and would do it all over again, especially and extremely proud of both congregations who made the decision to not go quietly into the dark night, but to make a loud, boisterous, public display and force the GBC to make utter and complete fools of themselves by making the egregious error of choosing to be on the wrong side of history and, more importantly, the wrong side of God's gospel revealed in Christ Jesus. All in a day's work!

The challenge to the Church and its churches today is to learn how to comfortably practice what it preaches, no matter what positions a local missional church may hold, covering the broad spectrum, the widest range, from liberal to fundamentalist, mainline to evangelical to nondenominational to Pentecostal. That is true, practicing what you preach old school stuff, mere child's play, but it seems that a far more difficult thing is also required, and it is indeed a harder if not the hardest thing to do, and that sacred task is to develop the innate ability to preach what they practice, something that must become routine, ordinary, normal or natural to the system, endemic to the local context and culture as if that were an inherent virtue. Cultural milieu sometimes is an excuse for cultural mildew, will do, can do! It takes communal practice to nurture an exercise that demands being comfortable as a church, functioning or operating with ease in its own ecclesial, its churchly skin. No matter a church's ecclesiology or theology, the only steeple worth its salt is the congregation that is boldly, figuratively speaking, willing to put its money where its mouth is and its mouth where its money is, courageously choosing to fly the flag that defines it and gives it its life-giving identity and purpose. Churches, local missional churches, churches like ours and including us, must diligently search the heart

and mind of their very DNA until they discover who they really and truly are along with exactly what they long to do. Authentically, genuinely they must discover their unique purpose, finding their voice in the process. It is a matter of ecclesial integrity and integrity matters! It takes stamina, resolve, risking the vulnerability that comes when compromise is not a viable alternative and making everyone happy is never an acceptable option. Every church says it welcomes everybody, but no church is a church for everybody! The sooner we realize and recognize that fact, the better off, the healthier all churches and their membership will be. Malan Nel, my PhD promoter in Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, states unequivocally,

. . . Building up a local church is about building a corporate sense of identity. It is this understanding that is so often missing even among people who may be enthusiastic about their personal and individual identity in Christ. It is almost ironic how biblical truths about corporate identity are so often interpreted in an individualistic way In finding identity it is all about this corporative self-image of the local church. It is this God-given self-image or understanding that should be rediscovered. This rediscovery will bring meaning to our being. In that sense, we are finding identity in becoming who we already are in Christ” (Nel, 2015:26-27).

Understanding its beliefs and practices is essential to a congregation’s success in articulating its vision and carrying out its inclusive mission with integrity.

Individually, and today I have said very little, not much at all about the demands placed on the individual as a follower of Jesus, each one of us, because I am taking the liberty of presuming that you all get that, that you understand totally that gospel imperative, a sacred requirement that really is a given, far more than implied, an inherent

expectation for you and me, the content and substance of which we are all acutely aware. We know the drill by heart! Love God, love others, love self! Today, however, I am speaking corporately about the call to the Christian life to all of us as beloved faith community, a collective sacrosanct call ordained on every believer, every person of faith, called to speak out on issues that affect not only local congregations and the wider Church, apostolic and universal, but the issues that affect society, both locally, nationally, and globally, for we are all residents of this tiny spaceship called planet earth. Our calling in Christ Jesus is not only the call to follow him as we live our individual lives but is a mandate to speak as a church, speaking as one voice a salient word not only for, but with, the down and out and the up and out, the disenfranchised, marginalized, all those who live on the fringes of society, whatever that looks like for them. The call to live the gospel as revealed in the Gospels is not necessarily a personal journey, but is a universal call to social justice, yes to be active, and that does mean, that does include being an activist. Passivity never gets the job done when it comes to initiating, actuating, change, the kind of radical transformation that is so desperately needed in a selfishly narcissistic world, a habitation that seems driven by hubris and the desire to see who can accumulate the most wealth while we still have breath and the ability to labor for the goods that never seem to satisfy. Jesus was a pacifist except when he was not! As John Mitrosky notes, commenting on the Good Samaritan parable, but a good word for us today, nonetheless, paraphrasing just a bit, it takes guts and determination to be “courageous enough to initiate imagining a new world” order. “It is precisely this poetic, shock and awe aspect” of Jesus’ life, along with his “over-the-top exaggeration that” makes us stand up and take notice, paying careful attention to what we are being tasked with doing, “doing” being the operative word. **In today’s Witness from the Gospels in Luke we see early on in Jesus’ mission and ministry an individual who was not afraid of controversy, to dive into the troubled waters while stirring them even more, to enter the whirlwind, the vortex of**

life's complexities and complications, to disturb status quo, or as theologian Paul Tillich called it to embrace, to be a part of, a participant in "the shaking of the foundations." That is our calling in Christ! Jesus led by his actions, but he also led with his voice, a voice that he refused to silence never allowing anyone else to attempt to do so regarding his message. His walk always matched his talk and therein is our standard as we are guided by his way. These attributes were always in unison, these characteristics always in a cooperative, in a holy and harmonious relationship. No, when it comes to the needs of this world we can never say enough, like with many of my sermons there are never enough words. As the scripture declares, until the rocks cry out, communally speaking with one clear voice, we must be the latter-day prophets who proclaim! Yes, I stole part of a Mormon title! **We have no other choice! We are given no other choice! There is only one option before us! As the late John Lewis, Representative from Atlanta, Georgia once proclaimed, we must be up to "good trouble!" Never have more fitting words for our time been spoken! After all, the squeaky wheel gets the grease!** Biblically speaking, the annoying, pestering, pesky, Gentile, Canaanite or Syrophenician woman got what she came for, whoever and whichever she was, as an exasperated Jesus healed her daughter so that she would go away and leave him be, showing her grace and mercy so that he could have some peace! Whatever it takes! Oops, said too much! No, that is never an option, never a mistake, never the wrong thing to do. **Better to ask forgiveness than permission! Better to commit sins of commission than omission! Better to say too much than too little. We all have the gift of gab to one degree or another. And God knows I have been given more than my fair share! We all have a voice! Let's make sure we do not waste it! Yes, let's use it wisely!**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and who has given us a mouth, a piehole for something other than eating! We all have a mouthpiece, a voice to use so let's use it! Amen and amen!

