

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Sunday, September 21, 2008

“Rebuilding Together”

Nehemiah 2:17-3:2

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You cannot build a strong faith on a weak foundation.

God gave Nehemiah the vision to return to the holy city of Jerusalem and rebuild its walls so that the rest of the world would respect God and His people.

In that day and age, the reputation of a people and the God or gods they worshipped was directly identified by how much military power and amount of cities and lands they controlled. The condition of the walls and gates of the cities was symbolic of their status.

Years earlier, the Persians had conquered Jerusalem, taken many of its inhabitants as slaves to Susa and left the city walls and gates in ruins. Nehemiah had been in captivity in Persia for twenty years when he heard God calling him to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city walls and gates. The time of shame was over. It was time to rebuild with God’s help.

Brave as well as faithful, Nehemiah went to the Persian King and because of his personal friendship and reputation in Susa, the King was open and willing to grant Nehemiah’s requests.

Upon his return to Judah, Nehemiah called all the Hebrew people who had not been taken into captivity together. He told them of his direction from God and challenged them saying, “Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” (Nehemiah 2:17b) He also told them that he had grants from the King for all the timber they would need to complete the awesome task.

The first key to rebuilding was not to try to do the project alone. Nehemiah shared God’s call with the Jewish citizens and enlisted their help.

The second key was the people hearing and agreeing that reconstruction was God’s call, and they would do it. Discerning that Nehemiah was not just making up his own agenda or telling them some abstract dream was vital to the success of the entire project. Without strong support from those who heard the rebuilding as God’s call, very little would ever have been rebuilt and the shame even would have deepened. Therefore, the people came together and agreed to rebuild the walls of the Holy City.

Even today, when you walk into a church, and it is clean and well cared for, you immediately feel that the people respect God and take good care of the church buildings.

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Well-maintained church property gives a safe and welcoming environment in which to worship. That condition tells much about how members respect God.

The third key was the people's willingness to work together to get the job done. Landowners repaired the wall or gate in front of their own property, and some went beyond and did extra work to fill in gaps where no one lived.

Nehemiah had the master plan and was the master recruiter of workers. Materials were provided through the grant from the King of Persia. With the consecration of the first new gate and repair of the wall around it, immediate progress could be seen.

The fourth and final key was the determination to see the project through to completion. When opposition arose, the workers did not retreat. At one point, those against the project came at night and tore down what the faithful workers built during the day. Nehemiah assigned nearly half the faithful workers to guard duty at night to protect the project. The work continued until it was finally completed.

I wonder if sometime early in our lives, we accept certain understandings about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Church and then build a wall around those early beliefs. Studies show that the average protestant church attendee's understanding of the Bible is close to that of a third grade Sunday School education. Rarely does someone volunteer to teach the Bible to a class. Most adults seem to have a wall around whatever they have already learned and use it both to keep what is inside undisturbed and to keep out any new information and any new ideas or concepts or beliefs that are different than those they already have accepted.

Yet, there are few of us whose early understandings of God and Christ have not been tested by circumstances in our lives. I expect many of you share with me some fundamental questions: Why is one family wiped out by Hurricane Ike and another not touched? If God is all loving and powerful, then why does God permit violent actions against innocent persons?

There are broken places in that wall around what I believe through which I look out at other ways of looking at what God is doing in the world and why things are as they appear to be. Sometimes that wall does not seem as high as I thought it was, and a new way of understanding God's love in action in the world peeps over the top. That new perspective presents the opportunity to reconsider my limited view of only expecting God to act in certain preconceived ways.

Nehemiah had a clear call and goal and was not distracted from achieving his objective. Nevertheless, he also was wise enough not to expect to complete the project without the assistance of other faithful people. Even though the world glamorizes the person who wins only first place in a race, God, on the other hand, rewards positive thinking and earnest effort.

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Michael Yaconelli tells the story of Lisa (not her real name) who decided to try out for the high school track team. Her rural school had so few students that anyone who tried out for a sport made the team. Aspiration rather than ability determined who would make the roster.

Through mere desire, Lisa became the anchor runner on the girls' 1500 meter relay team. Because her school boasted the only girls' 1500 relay team in its small league, Lisa and her running mates received an invitation to represent their league in the section finals. Everyone knew the team had no chance to beat the more talented, experienced teams, yet before the race, Lisa continually flashed a brilliant smile as if she were relaxed and enjoying herself.

Puzzled, a friend asked Lisa why she was so calm. "I love the relay!" she said, "We're not very fast. I'm always the last one to finish, so when I come down the stretch, the people in the stands cheer for me."

Sure enough, by the final lap, Lisa's team lagged far behind. As Lisa rounded the last turn, running hard for the finish line, everyone else had already left the track, but her smile and effort lit up the course. The crowd came to its feet, cheering as Lisa crossed the finish line.

"See," Lisa later told her friend, "we always get a standing ovation, and we're last. I love it."

Lisa is a hero.

She has rejected the glory of a culture that worships winning. She refuses to listen to those who say, "Second is the first to lose."

Lisa has decided that last can be just as good as first. In her unknown corner of the world, she triumphs over those who would call her a loser."

Yaconelli concludes, "I am reminded of a small group of disciples who stood by the cross while Jesus died. Just a few days earlier, thousands had cheered him. Next thing you know, he is dying and alone, just a few of his friends decide they will stick with him when he dies."¹

Messiah is not a large church. Our value to God is in our faithfulness—not our size or our glamour. The Christian church has survived over 2,000 years to provide faithful people in local churches in every generation and country a way to help one another to strengthen their faith in Jesus Christ.

¹ Yaconelli, Mike. *Messy Spirituality*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, page 113-114.

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Not many became rich, powerful or famous. However, thousands upon thousands of ordinary people like you and me lived out of the peace and joy, which Christ gives. Their actions changed the direction of the world for the better. Their faith was what this great dream of America was founded on.

Together we can deepen and expand our faith in God and our witness to His powerful love for all.

Of course, no one else can live your faith for you. Your beliefs are your own. But Messiah exists today to help each of us deepen, expand and extend our understanding of God so our lives become filled and guided by God's Holy Spirit. Day by day, our trust in God can become more a part of the life we live.

If Messiah is already your church home, I encourage you to participate in the challenging adult education that is currently offered on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings, the various gatherings around books or writings, or day trips to nearby places of beauty and interest. There may be "something more" to life than what you currently have within the walls surrounding your beliefs.

If you do not currently have a church home, why not consider joining this fellowship of believers? Next Sunday, following our Worship Service and Coffee Cup Fellowship you are invited to gather in the library to learn more about this church and what membership means. We will be welcoming new members into our fellowship the second Sunday in October.

Let us continue the unending process of rebuilding and extending our relationship with almighty God.

Amen.