

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, The 19th Sunday of Ordinary Time, August 12, 2007, dedicated to the memory of Randy Yontz and Tim Johnson, to their families and always to the glory of God!

“Risking Honesty in Simple, Specific and Impossible Ways”

Part II of V in the Series:

The Nehemiah Project: Ten Keys for Rebuilding the Future

Two weeks ago, I preached on the first two keys:

1. We listen to beloved friends who speak the truth about the place we love and
2. We confess our brokenness and pray continuously for God’s strength and leadership.

Today, we examine the third and fourth keys:

3. We Risk Being Honest and live with the consequences (Nehemiah 2:1-10).

4: We Believe God’s plans are simple, specific, and impossible (Nehemiah 2:17).

As a recap - on July 29, we learned that in the year 445 B.C., a group of exiles escaped captivity in Jerusalem and came to Persia seeking the leadership of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was the Cupbearer for King Artaxerxes, the man who tasted all the foods and drinks for the king to see if they were either poisoned or poorly prepared. The exiles pleaded with Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem for the purpose of rebuilding the city gates and walls. After four months of continuous prayer, Nehemiah approached King Artaxerxes and requested release from his

position as Cupbearer so that he might return to lead the project of rebuilding.

But, before Nehemiah had spoken, the King asked him what was wrong, why he looked so sad. In a careful and prayerful response, Nehemiah risked being honest with the King and told him about the destruction of Jerusalem. The King then asked Nehemiah what he could do. The answer - provide a letter of release for safe passage and timber needed for rebuilding the walls. The king provides not only the best timber and a letter of release, but also an escort for safe passage.

Today, things get tougher for Nehemiah as he arrives back in Jerusalem under the cover of night. But with God on his side, this cupbearer for the King will finish God's project of rebuilding in 52 days!

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

The third key is:

“Risk Being Honest and live with the consequences.” (Nehemiah 2:1-10).

Nehemiah risked being honest. He had “Holy Boldness.” Holy Boldness is the ability to speak honestly and forthrightly out of one's faith in God and to live with the consequences. Moses had holy boldness when he spoke to Pharaoh and declared, “Let my people go.” Young David had holy boldness when he confronted Goliath in their now famous (and quick) fight. The prophet Nathan had holy boldness when he later confronted King David and tricked him into facing the truth of his own sinfulness, adultery and murderous ways. Jesus had holy boldness when he answered

Pilate's questions about the Messianic prophecies with the simple answer, "These are your words." Sojourner Truth had holy boldness when she gave her powerful speech before thousands of white women and declared, "Ain't I a woman?" In fact, American history is replete with **holy bold prophets** in the civil rights and women's rights struggles. In Montgomery, Alabama, outside the Southern Poverty Law Center, those who lost their lives in the struggle for civil rights and human rights in this country are remembered by a fountain of flowing water. The water runs over their names as the prophet Amos' words declare - "*Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*"

Nehemiah had holy boldness when he spoke to King Artaxerxes. He was honest and forthright and spoke in the spirit of the Living God! But remember, he was prepared through the power of prayer. By the time he went before the King, Nehemiah was centered in God and prepared to live (or die) with the results of their conversation.

Do you possess Holy Boldness? To put it another way, have you risked being honest in your life? How many times have you seen a situation with family or friends in which you have spoken the truth honestly and with love? How many of you at work, in church, or in your job or community have been honest about feelings you were having or insights you had, but did not speak in fear of repercussions if you spoke the truth with love? I know I have found myself in such situations many times. And many times, I have found speaking the truth with love is a compelling way to live. It is a Christ-like way to live.

Let me share two stories today of holy boldness . . . one personal and one church-based.

A personal story of holy boldness . . . In the summer of 1985, I was finished in seminary, was ordained, announced my engagement

and soon-to-be marriage to Susan Sitler. Then before I went to my first church in Cleveland, I headed to the west coast to spent time with my best friend. When I arrived in Los Angeles, I found him struggling with issues of addiction. I felt that if I spoke out and spoke up, I might risk losing our relationship. But I also felt, if I remained silent, I risked losing him through death to his addiction.

After much thought and prayer, I finally spoke up. I did so when we were alone and I did so with the heart full of love. Within a year, I returned to LA as the best man in my now clean and sober friend's wedding. He has been happily married to a wonderful woman ever since and they have two beautiful daughters. Now, I am not saying that our conversation saved a life. Only God can do that! But, change came out of what had been the despairing depths of self-destruction. Risking honesty was well worth the effort!

I am also aware that in the battle with addiction, this story is over simplified - in that some people never make it back. For those who are battling with addiction or the effect of addicts in their families, I hold you in prayer . . .

A church story of holy boldness . . . When I arrived at The First Congregational Church, UCC Columbus, Ohio in January, 2000, I found a congregation struggling within itself. While the building looked great, our relationships were hurting. Church fights, disagreements about how to be the church and who should lead the church had caused palpable pain. Our church fights were so big they had been written up in *The Columbus Monthly Magazine*. We set to work on the “walls” in the relationships of our congregation.

We set to work listening to one another. Over the next five months, we had more than 500 “one-to-one” conversations. I asked people to speak honestly about their church and the community, which they loved. I heard people talk about selling the church to the Art

Museum as an annex (what a beautiful annex it would be!). One woman I listened to recalled the glory days when there was standing-room- only for 11am worship (which would be more than 700!). At the point I arrived it was down around 150 in worship. She said, "We have become a small church." Now, I have never thought of First Church as a small church. So those words caught me off guard. But, we had shrunk to a dangerously low level for a downtown church in the capital city of Ohio.

Now, we have grown to more than 1,200 adults, youth and children. Our largest percentage of members - 24% - is between the ages of 19-34. We have doubled our size in these past 7 1/2 years. Our worship attendance has grown to an average of 425. As we have grown, we have had to be holy and bold in these two ways.

First, we have had to multiply leaders, not add them.

Second, we have become a welcoming community to all people. I believe, we as a church have lived into holy boldness for Christ!

With Nehemiah, as he returned to Jerusalem, we experienced a true homecoming. When we discover the places in our lives that are more than locations on the map, we discover where and how we will become holy and bold for God.

Let me share another story of one who discovered who he was as God's special agent in a time closer to ours. Wolf Krotke is one of the most prominent theologians to emerge from the formerly Communist East Germany. Because of a short poem poking fun at his class and the teacher during a particularly boring lecture in 1958, he was arrested and imprisoned for 21 months. He was released October 5, 1959, his 21st birthday. He was denied further education because of his imprisonment, but Krotke continued his theological studies at church seminaries in Naumburg and East Berlin. He went on to become a leading theologian in reunified Germany after 1990.

In a radio address given last year in Germany, Krotke looked back on his arrest and imprisonment and how it shaped his life and theology. He said something that has relevance for each of our lives:

There are places in our lives that are more than just places on a map. They come along with us . . . If you really want to know who someone is, then you must ask where someone is . . . Our lives become our particular lives insofar as we in all our insignificance nevertheless inhabit particular places within the wider spaces of the world. A person unable to identify any place that has shaped his or her life would be a ghost-like creature.

Dr. Krotke goes on to speak especially of those places in which we have experienced God. Referring to his tiny prison cell, he continues:

Those places in which we experience God may be anything but holy. Nevertheless, they have completely shaped our lives of faith and, for that reason, they are holy to us (Christian Century, "Captive and Free" by Wolf Krotke, July 24, 2007, pp.27-30).

Where is the place for you where you experience God? For Nehemiah, Jerusalem was that place that was more than a place on the map. It was his heart and soul. It was his spiritual home. When he returned to Jerusalem, he was devastated by what he saw. In Nehemiah 2, Nehemiah makes a secret nocturnal inspection of the walls. Taking only those people needed on the mission and keeping his plan secret, Nehemiah views all nine gates and all the city walls. Some places along the wall are impassable (sort of like the highways around Columbus!). Finally, he returns as dawn is breaking and shares his vision with the priests, the nobles and city officials. It is at dawn that we discover the fourth key.

As we approach rebuilding our lives and the world around us, **we turn to the fourth key:**

We must believe God's plans are simple, specific and impossible (Nehemiah 2:17).

These simple and specific and (seemingly) impossible words guide the vision in the 17th verse, "*Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace.*" With that, the project begins.

Needless to say, not everyone is in favor of this rebuilding project. As with every project, someone has something to gain by things staying just the way they are. And others, simply don't like change. (This reminds me of the church in which one lay leader stood and declared when the building was to be expanded, "I'll die and be buried here before I change!" When the project was finished, a plaque was placed on that spot which read, "He died and was buried here before he changed").

At First Church, we have expanded our original goals from 2000 to continue our growth as a leading church downtown. We believed that God could do great things through us. As such, we now count more than 1,000 active members. We believed we would become open and affirming of all men and women, youth and children. For five years we have lived into this covenant together. We believed our doors would be open to business people, artists, families, students, children and adults in new ways. Today, as I look out on LKS, Letting Kids Succeed and Linda Slocum's amazing success, I am delighted that her belief and our beliefs have aligned - like the stars of heaven!

We have stood firm on the principle and faith conviction that "all members have the right of individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith" and we "respect them in their honest convictions" as stated in our faith and covenant - we believed everyone was TRULY welcome in our church. We need to be known as the

church which stands on the Principle of Protestantism that the convictions and beliefs of Christian faith as interpreted by individuals must be held sacred. We live in a time when people in too many churches are compelled to believe one way or they are shown the highway. We need to be known as the church that welcomes all through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We have set out eight simple, specific, and seemingly impossible goals. Then, as sisters and brothers in Christ, we began to become a Cathedral of Grace in Columbus that I believe God intended us to be. We have become the church with a heart for this city at the heart of this city. This has caused our doubling in membership during the same time two other downtown churches have closed (First Baptist is now the fanciest bar and dance hall in Columbus!).

We have come to know the place in our lives known as holy in wholly new ways. We have begun the challenging and often difficult work of trusting God and one another. While Nehemiah rebuilt walls of Jerusalem in 52 days, he discovered the walls were the easy part. Making the city home again - that was the hard part. Similarly, we have worked to rebuild our congregation and our relationships for more than seven years!

Through holy boldness we have moved forward in faith. But, God is not finished with us yet! Through risking honesty we will continue to grow. Through our becoming the leaders in this place we have the full potential to become, we will grow. Through laying out in simple, specific, and (seemingly) impossible ways our mission vision and trusting God to give us courage to live that vision, we will grow.

Next week, we will look at the **fifth and sixth keys:** We trust in the Holy Spirit to lead visionary leadership of the church and we build a broad base upon a solid foundation.

I will see you next Sunday! Bring your friends and family. Amen.

