

A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 19, 2007, dedicated to Elias Emerson Ewing on his baptismal day, in memory of Ransom Whitney and always to the glory of God!

“Trusting the Holy Spirit to Lead Us While Building a Broad Base of Support”

Part III of V in the Summer Sermon Series:

“The Nehemiah Project: Ten Keys to Rebuilding the Future”

+++++

Using four of the ten principles drawn from the Book of Nehemiah, I proposed that we needed to:

- 1) Listen to beloved friends who speak the truth about us and the places we love
- 2) Pray continuously for God’s Strength and Leadership
- 3) Risk Being Honest
- 4) Believe God’s plans are simple, specific, and impossible.

Today’s keys are:

- 5) We Trust in the Holy Spirit to lead the visionary leadership of the church (Nehemiah 2:18ff); and
- 6) We build a broad base upon a solid foundation (Nehemiah 3:28-4:9).

+++++

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

+++++

“Let us start building!” With these words in Nehemiah 2:18, the walls and the gates of the city began to rise under the leadership of Nehemiah and the labor of the people! And (the passage

continues) “they committed themselves to the common good” (2:18). All people of **good** faith, working together for **the common good** began to rebuild the burned out and fallen walls of Jerusalem.

Following the leadership of the high priests (3:1), the Sheep Gate went up, meanwhile down the wall the sons of Hassenaah raised the Fish Gate; others joined in from the Old Gate to the Valley Gate, from the Valley Gate to the Dung Gate; from Dung Gate to Fountain Gate; from Fountain Gate to East Water Gate; from East Water Gate to Horse Gate; from Horse Gate to East Gate; from East Gate to Muster Gate; and from Muster Gate back to the Sheep Gate the Great Walls and Gates went up!

Many worked on the walls closest to their homes and occupational workplaces - which made sense. Each seeking to protect his or her own place in the city and building where the future was clear - right before their eyes.

Goldsmiths, temple servants, merchants, priests, farmers, tradesmen, nobles, widows, orphans, and common men, women, and children throughout the city all put their hands and backs to work on the walls. And the walls and gates are raised from ashes of destruction to wondrous sights to behold. It was a truly amazing process of construction.

Along the walls there were multiple challenges. Everyone did not get along all the time. Nor did everyone agree on the project’s goals. Not everyone got behind the visionary leadership as they garnered resources to rebuild the city. (That’s next week’s topic . . . We will delve into the voices of challenge and dissonance and their role in the project). Nevertheless, working together for the common good, the walls and the gates went up! Trusting in the Holy Spirit to lead the visionary leadership and building a broad

base of support on a solid foundation the Nehemiah Project succeeded!

The Fifth Key to rebuild the future is:

We Trust in the Holy Spirit to lead the visionary leadership of the church (Nehemiah 2:18ff). I want to look at trust and the Holy Spirit - and how this effects our view of the visionary leaders.

Trust is a precious gift. To trust another in relationship is both daring and necessary for the growth of both parties. But trust denied, trust defied, trust broken or trust availed brings setbacks in relationships that take time and immensity of forgiveness and grace to heal. In essence, to be trusted is a greater compliment and achievement in life than to be loved. In his book, *Jesus, Liberation and Love*, Father Mark Gibbard writes, “*when we trust as far as we can, we often find ourselves able to trust at least a little bit further.*”

Now . . . to “**Trust**” in the Holy Spirit - that is to trust in the **power of God!** Who is this Holy Spirit to whom we are giving our trust? In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is the primary source of power for the early church. In fact, the book should be called “the Gospel of The Holy Spirit.” Apart from Paul, only three apostles are mentioned in the book - Peter, James, and John. While Peter and Paul could be called the main “human figures,” the stories of the Holy Spirit’s activity and leadership in the church occur 46 times in 28 chapters. (By the way Jesus is referred to 19 times as our Lord or Savior in Acts). When our Lord, said, “I leave you the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, he was serious!”

As you know, in four weeks, we will start a Bible Study on Acts. In a short book I wrote 13 years ago - *Acts Comes Alive* - I lifted up six characteristics of the Holy Spirit. I will briefly name them now.

First, the Holy Spirit is Communion - with God, Christ, and one another. The Holy Spirit is the “In-Between-ness” of God or the “Go-Between” God. Communion comes from the root of communication and the Spirit is the Divine Spark, which communicates both the Grace of Christ and the Love of God.

Second, the Holy Spirit is the “Eye-Opener.” In his classic, The Go-Between God, John V. Taylor writes:

The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware, and minds that shrink from too much reality. If one is open toward God, one is open also to the beauty of the world, the truth of ideas, and the pain of disappointment and deformity. If one is closed up against being hurt, or blind toward one’s fellow human beings, one is invisibly shut off from God also. One cannot choose to be open in one direction and closed in another. Vision and vulnerability go together. Insensitivity is an all-rounder. If for one reason or another, we refuse really to see another person, we become incapable of sensing the presence of God! (John V. Taylor, The Go-Between God, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1972, p. 19).

Third, the Holy Spirit is the Director of the Church’s Mission! Throughout Acts, no mission is engaged or attempted unless the followers of Jesus pray and call upon the Holy Spirit. Whether our Mission Commission, Education Commission or any other leadership in the church, we need to pray before we act. The Holy Spirit is the GPS Navigational System for the church. It sets our direction and we move toward our goals.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit is the Source of all Guidance. The Spirit guides all the activity of the church whether for conversion to or transformation in Christ as in the stories of Peter and Cornelius.

Fifth, the Holy Spirit is the Source of Daily Courage and Power (The Latin word for Spirit is “courage.”) As in the Serenity prayer,

the spirit is our source of courage and the power to act justly and rightly for God.

Finally, the Holy Spirit is the Source of Spiritual Gifts - the gift to heal, the gift of evangelism, the gift of community, the gift of religious experience, the gift of rejoicing, the gift of calling others to Christ, the gift of speaking in tongues, the gift of sharing everything in common, the gift for ministry in the church - all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. While Jesus Christ is the vehicle for Salvation, Life, Hope, the Holy Spirit is the fuel that moves everything forward!

But, it is not enough to JUST trust in the Holy Spirit. As we learn from Nehemiah's story, we need to trust the Holy Spirit to guide the visionary leaders of the church. We need to trust and believe that God has anointed, appointed and guided the direction of the church's visionary leadership. That seems scary sometimes - but, you need to know that you are among those chosen and anointed by God to lead!

As a pastor, I know it sometimes takes a long time to build trust because of past hurts. In my first church in Cleveland, Ohio, I had been there almost four years when the time came for our family to move to Columbus. When I announced my departure, Eddie Masek stopped coming to church. Eddie was in his 70s at the time - a weekly regular in a small church. As I was saying my goodbyes, I stopped to see Eddie. We had visited for an hour and he had dodged several questions about his lack of presence in worship. He seemed tense and distant during our whole visit. Finally, as I was ready to leave, we said a prayer and I headed for the door. Eddie stopped me and said, "*Wait, Rev. Tim, I have something I need to show you.*" He left the room and within a minute returned holding an old pair of ice skates. The skates had

belonged to his brother, who as a paratrooper had died in the European theater of World War II.

He said, “*When I got the news as a young boy that my brother had been killed, something inside of me died. I took these skates in my arms and held them for dear life and cried like a baby. The day you announced you were leaving, I cried the same way. I hadn’t cried like that in 43 years.*” The pain of losing his pastor had touched off a deeper pain - that of losing his older brother.

It takes time to build trust. Time **AND THE HOLY SPIRIT** will be our friend as we walk together and build trusting and trustworthy relationships.

At the same time we are building trust with one another, two things must happen in our dance of faith.

First, each of us must continue to trust God as God heals the broken places within us and between us.

Second, you must believe and TRUST that God’s Grace - that we have come to know in Jesus Christ our Lord - which was present at the creation of the universe, and present at the creation of each one of our tiny, little universes - the same God, the same Grace is already at work forgiving, sustaining, and renewing you now and forevermore.

The truth is, none of us can trust each other without first trusting God! This is as true as it is simple. In *Mother Teresa of Calcutta: A Biography*, by Edward Lejoy, the author quotes the Mother Teresa. She says, “*We are able to go through the most terrible places fearlessly, because Jesus will never deceive us. Jesus in us is our love, our strength, our joy, our compassion.*” (MTC, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1983, p. 160). Trust God. Trust in God’s call, God’s inspiration in your life. For God will not let you down.

God has given you great leadership in your life, in your work, in your church. We need to trust that the future that God is forming for us and with us is as bright as or brighter than the past. We need to believe in one another and trust our growing relationships. Let's get to know the gifts of our leadership and move into the future, trusting and hoping for the days ahead. Interestingly, "trust" in German means "comfort" and the Greek for Holy Spirit interprets as "comforter." So, when we find comfort in the comforter, we can turn in confident expectation of hope as we trust in God and in one another to lead and be led.

The Sixth Key is:

"We Build a Broad Base Upon a Solid Foundation" (3:1-4:23).

Look at the list of folks who worked on the walls in Nehemiah's time (my translation): The power elite, the holy priests, small business people, goldsmiths (bankers), church staff, those who were widows and orphans, and a cast of thousands of men, women, and children of all backgrounds and socioeconomic standing in the community. From the richest to the poorest, from the youngest to the oldest, from the feeble to the strong, most of the people of Jerusalem went to work on the wall. In fact, the only people who didn't work on the wall and gates were those who held power and gained economically because the walls were crumbling. That's right. Some people prosper in the face of chaos. Such folks do not wish to rebuild because such a project will mean their loss of power and control. (Again - next week's topic!)

I see four major building blocks built upon a solid foundation for us as we move forward.

The **SOLID FOUNDATION** is: **God's Word and Will and Christ's Healing and Grace-filled Love.**

The **FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS** are: **Dynamic Worship, Transformational Mission, Invitational Evangelism; and Serious**

Stewardship - *Worship, Mission, Evangelism and Stewardship.*

Building on Jesus Christ the rock of our salvation, we must and communicate **Worship** which is alive and Spirit-filled; **Mission**, which transforms people's lives - our lives and the life of persons who are poor and forsaken in our city and in the world; **Evangelism** which invites family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors to come and experience the "good news" (the Ev-angel) of this faith community. Finally, our **Stewardship** of Time, Talent, and Treasure must grow out of a deep sense of compassion and gratitude for all God is doing in the midst of us!

With the solid foundation of God in Christ, with the building blocks of Worship, Mission, Evangelism and Stewardship, and with all hands working together to create our future vision, nothing can stop us! Let me explain "all hands." "All hands" means nothing short of ALL as our goal.

In our Long-Range Plan established two years ago, we set goals for mission, care of souls, youth and young adult ministry and worship. We then set to work on all these goals. All hands working together for God are rebuilding our church! Children, teens, young adults, and all ages and sages of people, poor and rich (and middle class), very actives, less actives, in-actives, craftspeople and professional trades people, single adults for whom we serve as extended family and extended families with children at home; all races and nationalities, the musical and music appreciators, varying orientations of persons, preachers and preached at - ALL must work together for the common good.

If you come to worship and do nothing else, you must learn to stand on the solid foundation and support the other three building blocks of Mission, Evangelism and Stewardship. If you consistently miss church because you are so active in missional groups, you

must learn to stand and support the other three building blocks of Worship, Evangelism and Stewardship. If you are a tither, but don't support the other three building blocks, fill out your vision. And if you are our leading trumpeter of "good news," or greatest evangelist, but don't participate in other ways (which I would find highly unlikely!), then fill out your vision!

You may like the singing, but not the preaching or you may like preaching but can't hold a note of music. You may be one who likes other people your age, but doesn't deal well with others; who haven't had your generational life experiences. You may feel there's not enough people your age. Then invite them to church - form small groups for missing pieces of the ministry here. Fill out your vision!

At Christ United Methodist Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, new members must join a small group ministry in order to join the church and if there is not a ministry to meet their needs, they form one! This small group commitment has caused Christ UMC to flourish.

Friends, this is our church - so let us dream, reach, build, create, share, invite, invest, inform, and believe! 155 years ago a handful of people had the courage, the vision, the wisdom and the faith to say "no" to a church that supported slavery and say "yes" to a newly forming community of faith which believed in the liberation of slaves and equality of all God's children. We now know this community of faith as The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus. 76 years ago, more than a thousand people had the courage, vision, wisdom, and faith to build our cathedral of grace on this holy ground.

Today is our time step forward. Truthfully, this plan has worked!

Building up your life or our congregation with a broad base upon a solid foundation in Christ and armed with the four building blocks of faithfulness, nothing is impossible!

Our only limitations are our own self-imposed limitations. But, I believe, with all our hands working together for the common good, and with the courage, vision, wisdom, and faithfulness already birthed and alive here, nothing will stop us from rebuilding the future.

With the words, “***Let us start building!***” Nehemiah led one of the most amazing campaigns of rebuilding the world has ever known. We are called up to build as well. Let us build upon the rock of our salvation and trust in the power and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Amen.