

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, The 21st Sunday of Ordinary Time, August 26, 2007, dedicated to the memory of Don Capelle and always to the glory of God!

“Preparing for Life’s Lags and Celebrating Your Victories”

Part IV of V in the Summer Sermon Series:

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

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Today we come to the seventh key. **The seventh key is: We confront injustice when we meet it as leaders and as congregations, thus dealing with disheartening lags in the building process (5:1-19).**

The eighth key is: We Celebrate our Victories with Great Joy while living faithfully in God’s Word (7:73b-8:18).

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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.

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Many of you are becoming familiar with the Staples “Easy” Button. You press the red button and it responds, *“That was easy.”* In our office, Sharon Leidheiser has one on her door. Let me tell you the truth about The Nehemiah Project. It was never easy.

From its conception, Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem faced judgment, peril, threats and impending violence. To change structures or the status quo is a direct threat to those who hold power and control of what has been. From the beginning of his

project, Nehemiah bore the faithful sophistication of one who was a “change agent.” He guided the wall workers. He encouraged them in their efforts. He prayed for them continuously. He faced their opposition and spoke the truth in love to those who would mumble and mutter the walls into ruin. Those on the outside hurled insults and threats. But in the fifth chapter of this chronicle, Nehemiah faces his greatest opposition - his own people!

The fifth chapter of Nehemiah begins with the reports of an acute socioeconomic crisis faced by the farmers during the wall building process (5:1-13). Although it’s reported as if this is a single episode, it’s believed this was a long-term problem that was reported as a single episode. Some members of the Jewish upper class were usurious toward those who took out loans. They deprived them of their land and forced their children to work as slave laborers through a ruthless application of the rules of borrowing. The normal marginal financial status of many people in the farming community had deteriorated further because of their work on the wall, drought and taxes. No matter what, they were forced to pay taxes to Persia from the surplus they produced in their fields.

Since Nehemiah had required all workers to stay in Jerusalem for all 52 days it took to complete the wall project, the lack of harvesting laborers had caused low production in the fields and thus lost revenues. (Paraphrased/quoted from The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. III, Abington Press, Nashville, TN, 1999, p. 779).

In the face of this low production, the Jewish ruling class brought additional suffering and hardship on the farmers by exacting the price of this loss on their heads. The result was whole families were starving and becoming indentured slaves at the hands of fellow Jews to complete a project, which most benefited the citizens

of Jerusalem (where the wealthy lived!) Now the farmers - who lived and worked outside the walls - were suffering from this exploitation.

Nehemiah heard the cry of his people and he was outraged! (5:6). Chiselers, Scroungers, Unjust Profiteers - call them what you will. They exist today. They exist in society and they exist in faith communities. In fact, people like this destroy trust and create justifiable judgment on church, mosque, synagogue and temple communities throughout the world today.

We need to learn from the steps Nehemiah took to respond to these injustices. First, Nehemiah was forthright and direct. He went to these offending brethren in private and in public (5:7). He used appeals not only to their better nature (5:9a) but also to their patriotic pride (5:9b). Second, since Nehemiah was unconvinced of their promises to mend their ways, Nehemiah put them on a public oath (5:12). And he even went so far as to invoke a judgmental prayer - sounding very much like a curse - upon those who did not keep their promises (5:13).

Finally, feeling that injustice was unaddressed by his personal appeal to fellow Jews, in chapter 5:7, Nehemiah gathered a great assembly of the people to speak out against these injustices. Because this confrontation and the threat of God's own curse, the people overcame the injustice. And when the crisis was averted, the work on the walls continued.

The seventh key is: We confront injustice when we meet it as leaders and as congregations, thus dealing with disheartening lags in the building process (5:1-19). In one sense, nothing can prepare a community of faith for the kind of injustices and

disheartening lag Nehemiah faced in this story. It is a story of betrayal and abuse from within a faith community. As a brother in faith, he goes directly to the offending parties in his community - but in the end he needs a great assembly of the people to bring pressure to bear on those who are unjust. It is the Great Assembly that finally turns the tide.

It is hard to say this - but unfortunately, the politics of faith communities too often become the politics of our worldly, fear-based culture brought to bear on God's faith-based culture.

While it is true that betrayal, ruthlessness, and exacting usury have absolutely no place in faith communities, these weed-like values find their way into faith communities because the God-given fruit-filled values of forgiveness, fairness, equality before God, civility and empathy have not taken root deep enough and long enough in people who call themselves chosen of God!

Like Nehemiah, I get very angry when I see this at work! I like to say I have always had a lover's quarrel with the church. While born, baptized, raised, confirmed and ordained in the church - my whole life long - I find the church to be both God's greatest hope and God's greatest disappointment. How often I have found myself asking when decisions are made, words are spoken and actions are taken - *"Is this what Jesus would do? Is this our faith or our fears speaking? Does this really reflect God's nature of love and justice?"*

Critics of the church (and there are many) will tell you that church people are hypocrites. I say, "Not exactly!" While the word is a derivative of the Latin, *"hupocrites," which means to play a part on a stage, it has grown to mean "insincerity."* We are "in sin," as

Christians, but I don't believe we are insincere. I say this because we pray each day and ask God to forgive the places in our lives where we have been insincere or mean-spirited. Living an examined life, we have a way out of hypocrisy. It's called confession and prayer.

In the secular world, I don't see any place where confession and honest evaluation of wrong-headedness happens. Does it happen in business? I see it often in small business operations and operations, "close to home." But, as we become more global and more impersonal in our corporate structures, I see less of it. Is government set on a path of confession and honesty? I don't see it. Most politicians honestly confess their wrongdoings only under extreme pressure and as a way to serve their political ends. As people of faith, our hypocrisy has a chance to be turned around through confession of sins and forgiveness by the God of love and justice.

Even if we want to walk away from the wrongdoings of our faith communities, it isn't possible. I can't tell you how many non-believers, atheists and good people of other faiths through the years have quoted to me - chapter and verse - the sins of the church through our 2,000-year history. I have often said, "It's worse than you think. Let me tell you more!" People always seemed shocked when I add to their list. But, I also say, "*Our sins are ever before us! How about you? Tell me about your sins. How about your faith? What are you doing to confess the sins you and your people have been a part of?*"

We have to go to the people and places where we have sinned and deal with them. A few years ago, Pope John Paul II went to Jerusalem and confessed the sins of the Roman Catholic Church

toward the Jews at the Wailing Wall. He admitted the wrongs the church had committed against the Jews - particularly during the Holocaust - the complicity of Christians in the pogroms and the Concentration Camps and silence - or worse - the assistance in the genocide of the six million. Protestant or Catholic - there is no escaping the role Christians actively played in the killing of the Jews during the WWII. When asked what the prayer was that he placed in the Wailing Wall on a small slip of paper, Pope John Paul II said, *“That is not your business. This confession is between God and me.”* Similarly, our UCC President John Thomas went to Hawaii several years ago and confessed to the indigenous people the sins we committed as Congregational Missionaries in the early 1800s. The Southern Baptist Convention confessed 10 years ago their sins against African-Americans and the way they had been wrong to own slaves and use people on plantations in the south. My prayer is that someday - soon I hope! - a multitude of denominations will confess their sins against women and against Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered persons.

You see, we are not done yet because God is not done with us yet. We have a long way to go to make reparations for all the sins of our forbearers and our own sins in faith - but as hypocrites and sinners, we have a Savior and we have a pathway to make things right!

We know that knives in the back are the stuff of Shakespearean dramas. We also know that all verbal and economic knives are to be left outside this theater called Christian. In fact, the values which I have named, are among those, which form and thus transform a life. And perhaps these values are not met in your sphere of influence with much acceptance. If that is the case, I

encourage you to live into these values anyway. In a poem given to me more than 20 years ago by a Ugandan Christian pastor faced with persecution at the hands of Idi Amin's ruthless regime, we are all empowered to "Do it Anyway."

He writes:

"Do It Anyway"

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered;

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will find some false friends and some true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight.

Build anyway.

If you find serenity and joy, some may be jealous.

Be joyful anyway.

The good you do today, people will forget tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough;

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;

It was never between you and them anyway.

Nehemiah knew what we would be wise to learn. Values that come from the heart of God are stronger than walls. Even when faced with a disheartening lag and unjust actions against his own people - and worse - by his own people, Nehemiah never lost heart. He

never reacted outside of his relationship with a loving, living, and just God.

In the days that followed this incident, Nehemiah also shared his personal fortune (5:14-19) with his people. Daily he brought food and supplies to them giving out of his own pocket. To use a phrase from 12-step materials and Alcoholics Anonymous - "He walked the talk." And he did it in the face of tremendous challenge to give in to the status quo.

If Nehemiah is not enough of a model of faithfulness for you - than better yet - fashion your response to disheartening lags and behaviors within this or any faith community on the model of Jesus Christ, of whom the Apostle Paul writes to the Church at Philippi as if he was writing to First Church, today:

"If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing of the Spirit, any compassion, any sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not on your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:1-8).

What more can be said?!

The eighth key is this: We celebrate our victories with Great Joy while living faithfully in God's word (7:73b-8:18). I don't know about you, but I was raised in such a way to not over-celebrate victories. We needed to show reserve and thus respect for the vanquished whenever victory came our way. However, in this story, when the people win a victory for justice in their great assembly, they celebrate. Later, they celebrate their victory of understanding living into the law of Torah (8:8) and in the joy in the Lord (8:12). They celebrate the law of Moses, which has called them to faithfully rebuild the wall and gates of Jerusalem. Their joy in the Lord reflects dedication to God and commitment to God's Holy way. They celebrate their faith and trust in God.

In Nehemiah 8, the people celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. They erect their booths and hold the festival. Although there are some disagreements about how this should be, the people reconcile differences and celebrate their return to the land - which has resulted in God's kindness!

How do you celebrate the victories in your life? How do we celebrate our church's victories? We need to be able to dance and sing when we have victories over injustice - when we build temples and churches to the glory of God and as stewards of God's creation. We need to be like "Happy Feet!" - the fleet-footed penguin, who danced his way to rejoicing - and in so doing saved the other penguins. We need to rejoice and celebrate more in the church. Joy is a gift of the spirit and victory is ours in Christ Jesus - so why do we look so serious and sad so much of the time?

Harvey Cox tells the story of being at an interfaith conference. One night he was out with his Buddhist friends. One asked, "Harvey, why do all the Christian theologians look so serious and

so sad all the time? You have THE most joyous and delightful savior in Jesus and how could they not dance for joy at the mention of his name?”

Yes, we have a great faith! We experience victories in our communities and in our churches! We have to keep the vision for justice and righteousness in front of people. We need to make it clear and celebrate it well.

I need to add one more thing today. Each night before I go to sleep I pray for you. I pray that God is watching over you. I thank God for you. With joy, I thank God that you are part of my life. I am so aware that in this past year, so many of you have lost loved ones. We, as a community of faith, have lost so many of our loved ones, too. In spite of this pain, you seek joy. In spite of sadness, you rise with new life – with healing in your hearts. You are my heroes. You are my hope.

I pray that in your daily living, you celebrate your victories. They may be small victories about which only you and God know. But, celebrate them anyway. In the final analysis, it is between you and God anyway. And remember that God calls us each day to a place of joy and celebration - in God's Word, in Christ's Way and always in the power of the Holy Spirit. No matter what you face - live your faith in God – anyway!