

“Rebuilding”
Nehemiah 2:1-5
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Ezra and Nehemiah are two Old Testament books that describe the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Jerusalem needed to be rebuilt because in 587 BCE, the city and the entire southern kingdom of Israel fell to the Babylonians. The fall of Jerusalem led to what we know as the exile, the carrying away into captivity of many Israelites. Some 50 years after the fall of Jerusalem and the captivity known as the exile, a miracle occurred.

Ezra begins with these words. “In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia...the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put in writing: ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them.’” (Ezra 1:1-3) This amazing proclamation of Cyrus, king of Persia, sets in motion the events we find in Ezra and Nehemiah. The people of God who had been in exile return to Jerusalem, and with their return they begin to rebuild, both the city, the walls, and the temple of the Lord.

As I describe some of the ways the rebuilding took place, consider your own experience of rebuilding. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we encounter numerous examples of rebuilding that lift our spirits, inspire us, and give us hope. Oh, so the story of rebuilding is all good news? Not exactly. When you read Ezra and Nehemiah you find a brutally honest depiction of how difficult it is to rebuild. The days were long, the progress slow, the obstacles and opposition were ever present. As the wall is rebuilt, they measured progress not in miles, not in yards, not even in feet. How did they measure progress? Inch by inch.

I saw a fascinating sight this week. I was working on this sermon about rebuilding. It was Wednesday. Rain kept me from taking my run

in the morning, so when the clouds broke around noon I hustled home, put on my jogging shorts, and bolted from the house. Running down Noyes Neck, which leads right to the ocean, is a house that over the past weeks we have watched with interest as the builders laid a foundation. On Wednesday, I turned onto Noyes Neck and down the road I saw a crane that looked just about as tall as the Empire State Building. It was huge. When I got to where the crane was, I realized it was at the exact spot of the new foundation. The crane had hoisted onto that foundation the entire first floor of a house. A guy was watching from the road. I said, "Wow." He said, "I know. And they are about to put the second floor on." What? In the space of a few hours, an entire first and second story of a house are going to be installed?

Let me just say, that is not how it happened back in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Not that God couldn't have done it that way. Every single day of the Creation in Genesis one, all God does is speak...and whole worlds come into being. Just a one syllable whisper from the Almighty One in heaven and Jerusalem could have been completely restored. But that's not how it happened. The walls of Jericho fell with a shout. Imagine how easily God could have shouted and moved the rubble and ruins back into the shape of a magnificent temple and fortress. But that is not how it happened. With the foundation of the temple, with the structure of that temple, and with the walls of the city, you get the sense that it was rebuilt brick by brick. It is the very fact that the work was difficult, that progress was slow, that obstacles were faced and overcome, and that perseverance prevailed, it is these very challenges that inspire and give us hope, for the rebuilding we face in life rarely gets dropped down like a prefabricated house or like walls that miraculously rise to complete construction in a few short hours or days.

Brick by brick. What were those bricks? The contributions were many and varied as the community began to rebuild.

- **BRICK:** A willingness to be involved. No one was forced to return from exile. Each one chose to be part of the solution. Step up. That brick is vitally important. Step up! Stand up! Be counted! Say, "Here I am Lord. Send me."

- **BRICK:** Offer the best of yourself. Ezra tells us when the exiles arrived in Jerusalem, they took a freewill offering toward rebuilding. How did they give? All the same amount? No. Did everyone give the same thing? No. According to their ability they gave. When you offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice, that in itself is holy and acceptable to God. But to be part of rebuilding you do have to offer yourself. That is all you have to give.
- **BRICK(S):** As the rebuilding took shape, the opportunities to place a brick were everywhere and there was something for everyone. The priests who returned rebuilt the altar and then began offering the daily sacrifices. Masons did masonry, carpenters did carpentry, support people were ready with food and drink and olive oil. The musicians made music. The singers sang songs.
- **BRICK BY BRICK BY BRICK:** The spiritual life returned. Prayers were prayed. Ezra stood up and read the Word of the Lord. Everyone, the whole community sang that song of the faithful. “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his love endures forever.” The physical rebuilding was fortified by the spiritual strength of a people who knew who their God was, and who were determined to honor and glorify their God.
- **BRICK BY BRICK:** They returned to their roots. When the first month rolled around, and it was time to remember the mighty hand of God that set them free from slavery, they celebrated the Passover. When the seventh month rolled around, and Israel remembered their wanderings in the wilderness by celebrating the Feast of Booths, they all pitched a tent and camped out together for a week. Rebuilding is not all work and no play. Sometimes you have to set down the bricks and have a huge tailgate party. God gives strength through worship, and the scriptures says the joy of the Lord is our strength. Pitch a tent! Have a party! Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.
- **BRICK BY BRICK:** Sometimes it was literally brick by brick. Nehemiah asked King Artaxerxes if he could take a leave of absence and return to Jerusalem to help rebuild the wall. Nehemiah

was an administrator. Nehemiah was an organizer. He assigned each family a part of the wall, spread them all out, and set them all to work. From the Fish Gate to the Horse Gate, from the Fountain Gate to the Valley Gate, and all the way to the Dung Gate, everybody put their shoulder into it. No one could do it all. But everyone could do something. At one point a stinging criticism is leveled against the men of Tekoa. What was the stinging criticism? “They wouldn’t put their shoulders into the work.” Step up! Stand up! Be counted! And no matter what your job, no matter what your skills, your talents, your abilities, your age, height, weight, or wisdom, friends, when you are doing the work of rebuilding, put your shoulder into it. On behalf of anyone and everyone who has ever joined in the task of rebuilding, I say again, “Step up! Stand up! Be counted!”

Cyrus declared his edict, that wonderful and amazing declaration that the Jewish people could go back home, back to Jerusalem, back to their temple, Cyrus declared his edict in 537/536 BCE. Nehemiah was not in the first wave of refugees who returned. Decades passed from the time of the edict until Nehemiah made his trek back to the land of his ancestors. In that time the temple had been rebuilt as well as the city walls. They weren’t built back to what they had once been, but progress was made. And then things fell into disrepair...again. Rebuilding is not only hard work, but the work of building and rebuilding never ends. You not only put your shoulder into it, you keep putting your shoulder into it. By the time Nehemiah returned the walls were in disrepair and he oversaw the rebuilding of those walls.

You get the sense that Nehemiah made his rounds every day, inspecting each section of the wall, seeing the progress, hearing reports, giving suggestions, offering encouragement. He inspected more than just the actual physical wall. He inspected the whole rebuilding process. He listened in on the choirs. He was up to speed with how the orchestra and instrumentalists were doing. He made sure the priests and Levites had what they needed to do their work of spiritual care. He was a familiar figure to the carpenters and masons, he knew the ones preparing the food and bringing water, making sure the people had the sustenance for the

hard labor they were doing as they put their shoulders into it. It is almost as if Nehemiah kept track of each brick, of every single brick. It is almost as if each brick had a name on it, the name of the one putting their shoulder into it whatever the job happened to be, and Nehemiah knew the name that was on every single brick.

We have rehearsed and remembered the numerous bricks that were laid here at Dunn's Corners as we slowly rebuilt after COVID. The finished product did not drop down from the sky and there was no magical crane to do the heavy lifting. But brick by brick, we have regained much of what was lost. And there have been new beginnings during the rebuild. New sound. New video. Completed Meeting House. Air filtration. Heating units. Zoom meetings, so that we could carry on the work of the church virtually when we could not meet in person. People stepped up in a hundred different ways. I don't even pretend to know everything that everyone did, but I can tell you I never once found myself sneaking up on any group that was like the men of Tekoa and saying, "Hey, you're not putting your shoulder into it." No, I didn't have to say that. What I have tried to do, day in and day out, is to thank you, each one of you bricklayers, for putting your shoulder into it.

This morning I am inviting you to be Nehemiah, to survey and inspect the walls that are before us, the walls that are being built and rebuilt, the building and rebuilding that represents our life as a family of faith. When you see the bricks that are related to worship, from our ushers to the ones who prepare and serve and then clean up for our communion, from coffee fellowship to the money counters, from our choirs and organist and director to our bells and our worship assistants. Each one of those bricks has a name on it. If you know the name on a particular brick, take a moment to tell them thanks, to encourage them, to appreciate how they are putting their shoulder into it. And if you see a brick without a name, a job that needs to be done, a portion of the wall that has yet to be rebuilt, ask yourself if maybe your name is on that brick. Just as I suggested for worship, examine and explore the many other walls here at Dunn's Corners. Look at our physical structure, our Buildings and Grounds. We have a lot of dedicated, devoted, and hardworking bricklayers who care for the Buildings and Grounds. What

about committees, the Boards of the church, our Deacons, Trustees, and Elders. So many bricks with so many names doing the spiritual and organizational and administrative ministry of the church. Our office churns out bricks, day by day, bulletin by bulletin, Scribe by Scribe, giving statement by giving statement. I'm surprised Nancy and Rachel and Jennifer and all the volunteers in the office don't need a shoulder replacement. The people of this church, no matter what the task, no matter what the call, no matter what the need, no matter what the challenge, the people of this church know how to put their shoulder into it. When you see someone putting their shoulder into it, tell them thanks. And when you see a job just waiting for a willing shoulder, consider whether that is the place where you are being called to put your shoulder into it. Step up! Stand up! Be counted! Say, "Here I am, Lord."

Rebuilding comes in all sorts of sizes and shapes. Sometimes people lose a loved one. They experience loss. They go through grief. No magic wall drops down from the sky that allows you to rebuild your whole life in an hour, a day, a week, or even many months. Rebuilding when you have lost a loved one is slow. One of the brick laying ministries of our church meets on Sundays after the second service. The ministry is called "Grief Share." Some people who have suffered the sadness and loss of loved ones, some people who have gone through and maybe are still going through the grieving process, are gathering with others who also want to grow through their grief, to have a place to share their grief. This is a new ministry for our church. Someone saw a portion of the wall that needed attention. An idea came forward. The Deacons offered their support. Some willing leaders grabbed hold and said, "This is my brick. This is one way I want to help rebuild the wall."

You probably know it, but Dunn's Corners is not the biggest church. We do not have the biggest budget. We do not have the biggest building. We do not have the biggest membership. It could be very tempting to say our building and rebuilding doesn't make that much of a difference. In a world with overwhelming needs and challenges, does it really matter what happens on one corner named Dunn's in a small town like Westerly in a state whose size isn't much to talk about. Does it really matter when the stakes seem so small?

Ezra and Nehemiah tell us yes, it does matter. What Ezra and Nehemiah were doing paled in comparison to the glory of the temple when Solomon was king, when the first temple was constructed with all of its majestic and magisterial magnificence, when the armies of Israel numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and they marched out with gleaming shields astride stomping stallions. At one point in I Kings chapter 10, we find this glorious description of Solomon's kingdom. "Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones." (I Kings 10:26,27) Now come on, how are you going to rebuild anything that will compare to what once was. I mean silver was as common as stones. Now, walls are falling down and your job is to rebuild all that is broken, and you do it one brick at a time. Brick by brick. Ezra and Nehemiah offer a great gift to churches like us, that aren't the biggest, whether you are talking buildings, budgets, or membership. Ezra and Nehemiah, as they recount the rebuilding literally brick by brick, each brick with a name of someone who put their shoulder into it, oh yes, people like you and me can read Ezra and Nehemiah and be assured what we do does matter. What we do is of great significance. What we do is of divine importance, for here in our small corner of the world we are doing the work of building and rebuilding for the kingdom of heaven, for the kingdom of God, and that type of work has eternal significance.

One of the most inspiring speeches of all time was a speech given to just a few soldiers whose backs were up against the wall. The struggle they were about to enter lives on in fame, not because of the size of the armies or the scope of the battlefield. Whereas World War I and World War II were acted out in a global setting with soldiers numbering sixty or seventy million in each of those epic wars, this battle was between two relatively small countries, England and France. Between both armies the troops barely numbered 20,000.

The battle is known as Agincourt. The recounting of the battle is found in Shakespeare's play Henry V. On the eve of the battle, the troops of England are vastly outnumbered. One of the king's

commanders shakes his head and says he wishes they had thousands of more troops to fortify their side in the battle. But Henry the King, he sees things differently. He looks around at all his closest comrades, comrades he knows by name, comrades who have time and time again put their shoulder into it, and Henry takes what could have been a small battle between two small armies on a small stage and he fills the day with meaning and significance. The battle was to take place on what was known as St. Crispian's Day, and now, hundreds of years later, just the mention of St. Crispian's Day can stir the spirit and warm the heart of any who know the words of King Henry the Fifth. Looking at his beleaguered comrades the king delivers words that stirred each and every heart.

*He that outlives this day and comes safe home
Will stand a-tiptoe when this day is nam'd
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall see this day and live old age
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors
And say 'Tomorrow is Saint Crispian.'
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
(And say, 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.')*
*Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,
As familiar in his mouth as household words-
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury Gloucester-
Be in their flowing cups freshly rememb'ed.
This story shall the good man teach his son,
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered-
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother. Be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition.*

*And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.*

(The Yale Shakespeare, pages 94,95.)

The work is slow. The challenges are great. Discouragement and despair want to creep in and capture our hope. But here at Dunn's Corners, we welcome the task of building and rebuilding. We are glad we have been called to this task, at this time, in this place. Working side by side, fulfilling our calling brick by brick, we simply put our shoulder into it, day by day, brick by brick. And we few, we happy few, we the members and friends of Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian, oh, we are indeed a band of brothers and a band of sisters, and with a steadfast spirit we offer our heart and our soul to the living God.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.