

Just Jesus and Me? 2-12-12 – Beech Mennonite Church

Scriptures: Nehemiah 4:6-20 Romans 15:1-6

Charles Schulz, creator of the Peanuts cartoon, has the following scene in his joke book, *I Take My Religion Seriously*. A teenage boy comes into the living room, takes off his jacket, and says to his dad sitting on the couch, “*Choir practice ended early tonight, Dad. The pianist and the choir director got into an argument during the singing of “Love Divine.”*” (1)

Before we get into today’s message, a little review might be helpful. Our theme for 2012 is “*Come grow with us*”. On the first Sunday of the year we looked at 10 “baby steps” to spiritual growth. Then we went on from a milk diet to meat. 1) How we respond to suffering. 2) How to grow in wisdom/discernment. And last Sun – learning to handle our sexuality in healthy ways. Today, as you have gathered by now, it’s about living and working together with others in Christ’s Body.

There is an old gospel song from my childhood that some of you may know. I’ll spare you the singing and just give you a few of the lyrics: “*Now it is Jesus and me for each tomorrow, for every heartache and every sorrow. I know that I can depend upon my newfound friend, and so til the end, it’s Jesus and me.*” Step back for a moment and you realize there is something missing. Certainly Jesus is a personal friend. If everyone else deserts us, he never will. And each of us walks our own particular journey. But a key element of our faith and of spiritual growth is glaringly absent in the song: my relationship with other followers of Jesus.

Let’s see now what insights we can find on this topic in the story of Nehemiah. After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, the Jews are allowed to return to their homeland when King Cyrus comes to power. The return of the exiles occurs in three stages. The first group, about 50,000, returns with Zerubbabel. They find nothing in Jerusalem except the charred remains of their homes and their beloved Temple, and the city wall in piles of rubble. They began rebuilding their homes first and eventually the Temple. Eighty years later a smaller group, less than 2,000, returns, led by Ezra the priest. Then 13 years later, Nehemiah is granted a leave of absence from his boss, the king, to return to his homeland with a small group of fellow Jews. When he arrives in Jerusalem he sees the unprotected condition of his people, with the city’s walls still in ruins. He inspects the walls at night, while his keen administrative mind hatches a plan. The next day he gathers the people together and says, “*Come, let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and we will no longer be in disgrace.*” (2:17)

There is great excitement as the people get to work. Some opposition from the neighbors is experienced from the get-go. But things really heat up, as we heard in our text, when the wall reaches half its height. Several neighboring countries unite to put a stop to the work. Note the Jew’s reaction (v.9) “*But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.*” We see their discouragement and fatigue in v. 10 – not only because of their enemies, but because they were staring at a huge pile of rubble and focusing on the half

of the wall that wasn't done. We see in v. 12 another problem: naysayers among their own people – fellow Jews on the sidelines who come to those who are working 10 times with “gloom and despair” news: *“wherever you turn, our enemies are going to attack us.”* Makes me think of that familiar saying about three kinds of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who ask *“What happened?”* Here, more specifically, it is those who make things happen, those who oppose things happening, and those who would rather stand back with folded arms and complain.

Notice how Nehemiah responds. (v. 13,14) He stations people at the lowest points on the wall, grouping them together by families, along with their weapons. He stands and says to all, *“Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons/daughters, wives and homes.”* They get back to work, with tools in one hand and weapons in the other. And there's one more step in the plan: (v.19,20) Nehemiah says, *“This work is extensive and we are spread out, widely separated from each other along the wall. So wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, head quickly in that direction. It's a sign of danger and the urgent need for reinforcements.”* Once again, enthusiasm and confidence is restored and the people get busy again. It's interesting to note that we read of no record of any actual skirmish, no indication that the enemy ever attacked. Perhaps it was because they knew God's people were prepared and united. The story has a happy ending: The wall around Jerusalem was finished in an unbelievable 52 days! We read this a little later: *“When all our enemies heard about this and all the surrounding nations saw it, our enemies lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.”* (Neh.6:16)

First lesson for us: Our journey of faith was not mean to be traveled alone. In terms of the wall-building analogy, we cannot build walls of protection around those things we hold dear all by ourselves. We need the encouragement and assistance of others. I'm reminded of the volleyball jerseys that Central Christian's girls used to have. On the back was the word TEAM - *Together Each Achieves More*. A pastor Adrian Warnock says this on his website: *“Solitary Christianity is deeply unsatisfying.”* I would add, there really is no such thing as solitary Christianity. He gives a long list of *“one another”* verses (like forgive one another, love one another, serve one another...someone has said there are over 60 of them in the NT). Then he writes, *“We cannot do those unless we are in a real community that allows us to interact with each other.”* (2) In addition to getting more done, it's also just more fun when you do things together with others! Imagine hosting a Super Bowl party and nobody shows up. It's just little ole' you. How much noise is one clapper going to make when your team scores a touchdown? (show) But how much more fun it is when you have a gang, all using their clappers. (show)

When we notice how Nehemiah groups the people by families along the more vulnerable spots in the wall, we see a second lesson. Emotions and commitment run deep in families. Regardless of how dysfunctional they may be, we usually stick up for our families when they are in trouble. The more this church, then, is seen as my family, the more I will stand up for

her and defend her against attack. Many people have had negative experiences with church and have decided to exit, dropping the song “*We are one in the Spirit*” and taking up the song “*Just Jesus and Me*.” But there aren’t any viable choices other than life in God’s family. Like a pastor once said, “*The church is like Noah’s (family in the) ark. It’s a stinky mess inside, but if you get out, you’ll drown.*” (3)

The third lesson jumped out at me when I read about Nehemiah’s trumpet plan. Word for word, verse 19 describes many of us today: “*widely separated from each other along the wall.*” Smart phones, Skype, Facebook, and other technologies have made real progress in bringing us closer together across many physical boundaries. But, ironically, there is still a great deal of loneliness around us. There are still those times of struggle and discouragement when we need a flesh-and-blood person, a physical touch, a hug, a comforting hand on the shoulder. We have in place here at Beech a variety of “trumpets” to sound the alarm when someone is in need. The phone and computer, as already mentioned. There is “sharing time” on Sunday morning. There are smaller, less intimidating groups like Sunday School and Wed eve classes, and several other small groups that meet in homes. We simply need to make better use of these opportunities to let someone else know when we need assistance. All it takes are the three little words, “*I need help*” and people will rally to the trumpet call. That’s the mandate we heard in our Romans passage, “*We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*”

The fourth and final lesson for us today might be missed if we focus only on the details. What is the big picture in Nehemiah’s story? The rebuilding of a collapsed wall. The people are united by a compelling vision. I have said often, “*The best solution to bickering and discord in the church is to have a clear mission – goals that will engage the creative energy of everyone.*” Last week we had two staff from Ohio Conference meet with eight Beech leaders in what was called a “Listening Project.” Unfortunately I missed the meeting because of my uncle’s funeral. But I read the minutes afterward, paying particular attention to the question about our congregation’s vision for the next 3-5 years. I had written some of my own thoughts in the latest Newsletter before I read the minutes; it was encouraging to see some overlap. Numerical growth. Personal growth. An increase in the number of small groups where a deeper sense of community can develop. As I mentioned in that article, there is nothing in that list that is not achievable. Particularly in light of today’s story, showing us what can be accomplished when God’s people make a commitment to work together in unity. And when something out of the ordinary is done, we are careful to give God credit, “(We did this) *with the help of our God.*”

No, it’s not “*Just Jesus and Me*”. It’s “*Jesus and Us.*” Let’s not forget that, in both the good times and the bad. Let us commit ourselves anew, this morning, to roll up our sleeves and work together in oneness of spirit for the advance of God’s Kingdom.

Sources:

- (1) *I Take My Religion Seriously* – Charles Schulz – p. 83
- (2) <http://adrianwarnock.com/2005/05/team-work-as-defined...>
- (3) *Common Prayer – A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, Claiborne, etc, p. 221