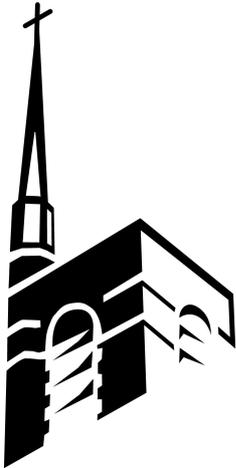


January 20, 2013
Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday



“WALLS TO BUILD, WALLS TO BREAK”

Dr. John E. Harnish
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Nehemiah 1 and 2, Ephesians 2:11-22

A lone stray dog makes its way through empty lots filled with patches of weeds and strewn with litter—food wrappings, rags of cloth, assorted junk, bits of life left behind by others who have fled like refugees leaving behind their homes and lives and leftovers. Amid all the trash and clutter, a bent-over figure with a worn-out backpack and ragged clothes follows the dog on the path, poking through the garbage to see what he can find. Only his scraggly, dirty beard lets you know it's a he—he could just have easily been a she. Under the bulky and badly worn clothing and head scarf, it's hard to tell.

Beyond the immediate vacant lot, you can see the skeletons of abandoned buildings, broken down homes, burned out hulks of a once-great city, now home to little more than vagrants, vermin and varmints. The potholed streets carry little traffic, and for the most part, the people who do make their way amid the ruins are made up of the hopeless, homeless and helpless. Oh, there have been attempts at renewal. A few new buildings rise amid the remains of the old, but they stand out so starkly against the desolation that they seem to add to the dismay.

Look familiar? No, it's not Detroit, although it could be. The date is about 450 BC. The city is Jerusalem, following the exile and the return of the people to the destroyed city. The reporter is a civil servant from the court of Artaxerxes named Nehemiah. His name actually means “The Lord Comforts” and his report begins with his own dismay, his own agony over the plight of his people and his city as he weeps over what he sees before him—not unlike another who would come generations later. Looking out over the same city on a day we will call Palm Sunday, Jesus would weep, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.” And as he looks out over his forsaken city, Nehemiah, a civil servant, a menial cup-bearer for the king, hears the word of the Lord. Listen:

Read Nehemiah 1:1-14

1. First, Nehemiah prayed.

His soul was touched. His heart was broken over the brokenness of the city, the disillusionment of his people, and it drove him to his knees in prayer.

Now I have to admit, I am a recovering workaholic, sometimes showing little success in my recovery. I love my work, love to be active, to be busy. All too often my tendency is to jump in to try to get something done. Pausing to pray, taking time to reflect and meditate does not come naturally to me. Last week, Jim Noseworthy talked about Martha and Mary, and I have to admit that I am more of a Martha than a Mary.

But I have learned over the years that if we are to find our way in the world, if we are to make a real difference, if our lives are going to have depth and meaning, if our work is going to have lasting impact, it begins here. It begins when our hearts are broken by the things that break the heart of God and we turn to him in prayer.

Transitions in appointments make you reflect on your own. I remember the winter Judy and I moved to Dexter. Our first Sunday there was the first Sunday of Advent, so we literally jumped on a moving train, heading into one of the busiest times of the year, only to be followed by the rush into Lent and preparing for Easter, all within our first four months. I had been in two small churches that didn't even have a secretary, so I was used to doing it all myself, which fit my activist personality. And besides, I was trying to make a good first impression, so I was running like crazy to get things done.

I hadn't been in Dexter very long when one of our wonderful lay leaders came to me with a little poster she had sketched out. It showed a pastor with a mustache, bangs and sideburns (that's what we all looked like back then!) spinning in a circle like Snoopy the dog with his robes swirling, and the caption read: *Don't just do something, stand there.*

I don't know what has become of the poster, but the message is one I have needed to hear over and over again.

The first thing Nehemiah did was pray.

To allow his heart to be broken by the brokenness of the city, to allow his heart to be broken by the things that break the heart of God, and to pray.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is, I believe mistakenly, referred to as a "civil rights leader." He was, of course, and he will always be remembered for his activism, his marching feet, his eloquent preaching, his powerful witness for justice. But he was first of all a preacher of the Gospel and a disciple of Jesus Christ. His courage and vision came from a deep spiritual well, a grounding in the faith, a life of prayer.

And note, Nehemiah's prayer was not just any prayer. It was a prayer of repentance on behalf of the nation:

O Lord God of heaven, let your ears be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I pray day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

His prayer was not first a prayer for blessing, not a prayer of arrogance or the assumption that somehow the nation deserved God's goodness, but rather a prayer of confession, acknowledging the brokenness and the sin of the people.

All too often, our prayers tend to assume that God will bless America, that somehow we deserve it, rather than beginning with our humble confession:

- confessing our continuing struggles with racial inequality, battles over immigration and inclusivity
- confessing our love affair with weapons, our fascination with violence as entertainment, our bitter rhetoric, our divisive politics
- confessing the part we have played in abandoning our cities, neglecting our schools, and abusing the creation

The oft-quoted promise from the books of Chronicles begins in the same place Nehemiah begins:

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways and pray, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land. (II Chronicles 7:14)

When Nehemiah saw the brokenness of the city, his own heart was broken and it drove him to prayer.

2. Then he went to work rebuilding the walls.

The story continues in Nehemiah 2:11-22. Here comes the activist. It's not enough to be touched by the brokenness of the shattered and shuttered city. The crumbling walls of Jerusalem called for a response and Nehemiah went to work rebuilding the walls.

This should come as no surprise for Methodist Christians, because in our tradition the two have always gone hand in hand:

- personal faith and social action
- prayer and service
- worship and witness
- love for God and love for others
- spiritual holiness and social holiness

Our Book of Discipline says:

We see God's grace and human activity working together in the relationship of faith and good works. Both faith and good works belong within an all-encompassing theology of grace. We insist that personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world.

By joining heart and hand, we assert that personal religion and Christian social action go together. Love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world.

(2008 *Book of Discipline*, paragraph 101, page 46)

As the early Methodists moved across the American frontier and around the world, everywhere they went they built schools and colleges, hospitals and children's homes and food pantries, *doing* the work of God as well as *being* the people of God. So this spring we will build our twelfth Habitat house, rebuilding the walls for a family and rebuilding a neighborhood. In Haiti, we built a wall for the Methodist compound and are in the business of rebuilding lives in that broken nation. In Costa Rica, we built a church and children's home. In Detroit, we are helping Cass build new apartments for transitional housing. Like Nehemiah, we are literally rebuilding the walls.

3. *Because, you see, there are always walls to build...and there are walls to break.*

The contrasting Bible reading comes from Ephesians. Instead of building walls, it is the image of breaking down the walls. Listen:

Read Ephesians 2:11-22

I love that verse: "...breaking down the dividing wall of hospitality. Creating in himself one new humanity in place of two, thus making peace. So you are no longer strangers or aliens, but one with all the saints."

For St. Paul, Robert Frost was right when he said, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

Before I built a wall (Frost said), I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.

(Poems of Robert Frost, "The Mending Wall")

Dividing walls of hostility:

- walls of race and language, class and clan
- walls of prejudice and pride
- walls painted red and blue, dividing a nation
- walls of religious hatred dividing the world

Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down.

This week, twenty of us will be traveling in Israel. I haven't been there since the 1980's, so I haven't yet seen the wall that now divides Israel from the West Bank, Jews from Palestinians. Whatever justification there might be for it, you have to say, "Something there is that doesn't

love a wall.” You have to say that the vision of the Gospel is a world where the dividing walls of hostility are broken down and a new humanity can come to life.

It’s amazing that I should quote the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* twice in one sermon when I hardly ever quote from it, but listen to this paragraph on inclusivity:

We recognize that God made all creation and saw that it was good. As a diverse people of God, we are called to be faithful to the example of Jesus’ ministry to all persons.

The mark of an inclusive society is one in which all persons are open, welcoming, fully accepting and supporting of all other persons, enabling them to participate fully in the life of the church, the community and the world. Therefore, inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination. The services of worship of every local United Methodist Church shall be open to all persons.

We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God and in need of the ministry of the church.

We are called to be about the business of building walls. We are called to be about the business of breaking down the walls.

Walls to build. Walls to break.

God help us to know the difference.