

“Persevering Together”
Nehemiah 3:1-5
I Corinthians 12:4-7

This week we find Nehemiah on the job. As you recall, it all begins when he becomes aware of the problem in Jerusalem. Then he goes to God and asks how he might respond. Hearing God’s call to get involved he asks specifically what God wants him to do. The result is to request a leave of absence from his position with the king and gather the supplies necessary to get on with the ministry of rebuilding the walls in Jerusalem.

Chapter three allows us to peer into the amazing organization and division of labor required to rebuild the walls. The work is organized around the ten gates, each named after the main item related to the gate. There is the Sheep Gate where the priests are involved; the Fish Gate where we see in verse 5 the nobles of Tekoa refused to be part of the work force; the Old Gate, the gate to the old city, the Valley Gate; the Dung Gate, where the garbage was moved en route to the city; the Fountain Gate where a number of landmarks are located; the Water Gate, the entrance to transport water into the city; the Horse Gate, near the temple where horses entered; the East Gate, the gate into the temple area; and the Master Gate, located between the Horse Gate and Sheep Gate. Businesses are located here.

Assigned to the building of the walls at each gate are those persons with a specific responsibility who are involved with the activities surrounding that particular gate. The organization and teamwork is something to behold.

I remember the Go and Serve Trip to Maryland that I was on three years ago. One of our outings, we took a raft trip down the rapids of a local river. Each raft had a team of about five or six people. Since we were to negotiate a rather difficult piece of the river, instruction was given on how to work together so that our raft would not hit the huge boulder and tip, sending us all into the rapids one by one. The key to survival and successful negotiation would be teamwork, each of us playing our part, no more, no less.

Our turn came and off we went. However, as we approached the huge rock, chaos ensued. We lost our composure in the water’s current. Nobody knew what their role was. We started telling each other what to do. In reality, nobody knew what to do except instruct someone else. The result? We hit that big rock and over we went into the rapids. The guides began throwing ropes out for us to grab and pull ourselves in. Submerged, wondering if I was ever going to come up, I saw the yellow rope on the surface and reached out my hand to grasp it. Finally I made it to the shore exhausted, wondering what happened to the others.

John Carter, a river guide said that “Every river, every raft, every person is different. Your unique strengths are the very things your team needs to run the rapids successfully.” (Trent, Leading from your Strengths, p.14) Our problem was that we ended up leading from our weakness not our strengths.

The building of the Jerusalem Wall is an incredible team effort. Chapter three is a colorless list of assignments and co-operating groups. Here we witness efficient co-operation and a careful division of labor which makes possible the completion of the task. The human element is there as well. Note in verse 5 the dissatisfaction of the Tekoan aristocrats. "Their nobles did not put their necks to the work of their Lord."

However, Nehemiah knew how to enlist diverse loyalties in a common goal. That is what made him a great leader. After all, look at any great social enterprise. The success of taking on healthcare, the economy, immigration issues, global warming, or the economic crisis will in the end be our leaders' ability to inspire, enlist and place the right people for the task in the right place. In doing so they transcend personal interests to serve the common good through a common goal.

Archbishop William Temple once observed that "The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members." (*Homiletics*, March-April, '09, p.6) The key word is cooperative, a word Paul understands in his point that "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member, but of many." (I Cor. 11:14). A functioning body needs an eye, an ear, a hand, a foot and so on. No one part is excluded from another. All belong. And when all work together, amazing things can happen. Behind it all is God.

Harvey McKay, an author, tells about a pulling contest at a state fair. The first place horse won the pulling contest by pulling a sled with 4,500 pounds. The second place horse could manage 4,000 pounds. The two owners decided to see what both horses could do pulling together. They pulled 12,000 pounds! The synergy of teamwork added 3,500 pounds.

Phil Jackson, coach of the L.A. Lakers just won his tenth NBA championship. He is big on teamwork, challenging individuals to submit for the common goal of winning. Frequently he reads poems to inspire his players. On teamwork, he recently read a Rudyard Kipling poem from 1895, "The Law of the Jungle:"

Now this is the law of the jungle
As old and as true as the sky.
And the wolf that shall keep it may prosper
But the wolf that shall break it must die.
As the creeper that girdles the tree trunk
The law runneth forward and back
But the strength of the pack is the wolf,
And the strength of the wolf is the pack.

Nehemiah opens our eyes to the power and beauty of teamwork. It is a choice we make. No leader alone can make it happen. As we focus upon our unifying vision, to connect with God, with each other and be sent into our homes, business, communities and world, the vision becomes real through each person listening to God's call to do their part. The component ministry parts such as worship, evangelism, stewardship, small groups, the Deacons, Session, PW, and the like are part of the orchestration. All of us

participate in rebuilding the walls of our church and culture, each facilitating the achievement of the corporate vision.

We're in it together. Such teamwork goes beyond any one individual who might need control, personal significance, or believe that she or he could do it better, thus bottlenecking the flow of God's spirit upon the people.

Teamwork is a choice, a way that we become truly servants of the Spirit of God serving not our interests but our Lord's. Such an attitude is bound up in our baptismal vows. Charles King is right; "We must remember that we are called by our baptism to community, not individualism. It is not just about me and my calling, but about us and our ministry." (*Homiletics*, January-February, 09, p.12)

The key lies in our willingness to follow where God leads, regardless of the cost. But we never go alone. Jesus intended it that way. Nor does God call perfect people. All of us have a limp in our souls. We don't do things perfectly. We don't always fly straight. We witness this in the Nehemiah story as things progress. Temptations to self-interest always crop up. An exaggerated fear of others may stop us. Overwhelming doubt might flow over us stifling faith. Daily we make choices to keep building and working with others in building the walls of our lives and church.

I like what Jerald Kreisman and Hal Straus said in a book with a provocative title, I hate you – Don't Leave Me. They write; "Just as in climbing a mountain, the fullest experience comes when the climber can appreciate all the vistas: to look up and keep his or her goal firmly in view; to look down and recognize his or her progress as it proceeds. And finally, to rest, look around and admire the view from right there where the climber is at the moment. Part of the experience is recognizing that no one ever reaches the pinnacle; life is a continuous climb up the mountain. A good deal of mental health is being able to appreciate the journey..." (*Homiletics*, January – February, p. 56)

And so we persist and persevere in following our Lord, submitting to him in building our part of the wall. As we work together, playing our role on the team, God grants us the occasional vista that we might look out and see where He has led us, reminding us that the destiny is His and we His servants on the way.