

**March 13, 2016**

**TITLE: Revisiting the Wall**

I want to give thanks and praise to God for the opportunity to be here with you this morning. The Lord God, your Pastor and I have worked hard over the past couple of years to make this opportunity possible. Our schedules finally came together to agree on this date. I must admit that the Lord is still at work with me. It was necessary for me to revisit the intended sermon for this morning. Unfortunately, I will not be preaching from the texts or the topic listed in the Order of Worship. Let me apologize in advance. In view of the Spirit and recent events in this country both my text and sermon have changed as you might have suspected in the reading of our scriptures for the morning.

Some of you may be familiar with the rebuilding and restoration of the Jerusalem Wall described in the Old Testament Book of Nehemiah. The Book focuses on Nehemiah's extraordinary sacrifice to pull persons together to restore the Jerusalem Wall after its destruction by outside invasions. Nehemiah was a taster (usually of wine) for the King. This role known as a "cupbearer" was a trusted position in the King's cabinet. It was Nehemiah's job to make sure that the King was not being poisoned. His position was one of influence in that he was both a trusted employee with the King's life. Nehemiah was also a confidant to both personal and governmental affairs engaged by the King. In addition to being trustworthy, he was called to be industrious, courageous and humble in his role. I contend that these characteristics are essential even today for both public and personal servants of any noble cause in our society and world. Nehemiah, a devout Jew, upon hearing of the destruction of the Jerusalem Wall, prayed while negotiating a leave of absence from his government position to lead the rebuilding project of the Jerusalem Wall.

I contend that the most familiar part of this biblical story is the extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice on the part of Nehemiah and others to rebuild the Jerusalem Wall when they heard that it had been destroyed. The Jerusalem wall provided a fortress to shield this community from outside evasions. Protection was important for this highly populated Holy City. However, of even greater importance were the historic communal inscriptions etched into the Wall that described God's pilgrimage with these people through exile, trials, tragedies and triumph. The communal teachings passed down from generations, many of which we read in the Old Testament and are still read in our worship services, Church School and Bible studies today. Children learned their history at the Wall. The Wall was a place where community elders reflected on their hardships, healing and deliverance. The Wall represented the power of God to do abundantly more than any human community could do for itself. It was their reminder of having been guided on life's journey by the only eternal help they

knew while being delivered through the storms of life's tragedies by the triumphs discovered through sustenance found in God's eternal grace.

We are in need of revisiting the Wall of Remembrance in the United States today. The racial, gender, and economic oppression that has and continues to occur in in the United States must be addressed. The Church must come out of hiding as we are witnessing the killing of African American women and men by White police officers who are called to protect and serve. Children of Color in this nation are struggling to graduate from high school with a diploma. School districts across the country from Detroit, Michigan to Richmond County, Georgia, to Clark County, Nevada graduate less than 30 percent of African American males[1]. This is all mounting evidence of the racial apartheid in the United States, compounded by the fact that we build more prisons to accommodate the failure of public education and lack of job training and placement in our nation. This targeted disparity is crippling whole communities where children of these incarcerated men and women of color are often robbed of examples of working and responsible men and women at home.

The vitriolic rhetoric of our political campaigns in this nation, which targets complex problems with simple answers and "attack dog" styles, is not the remedy. As a matter of faith these *so call political debates* are not speaking into the realities of solving our nation's communal struggles. Instead, we are witnessing a greater polarization among people, the resurgence of deep racial divides, and the continued increase in the wealth gap. While politicians seek offices in high places, our congregations must be engaged in providing both spiritual and practical deliverance with the help of the Lord to people trampled by the disastrous political storms we are facing. We must also challenge powers and principalities to restore government "of the people for the people and by the people" rather than "of the corporation, by the rich and wealthy and for the one percent."

We need another people's movement etched on the Wall of this nation's history. This movement must become a global phenomenon that is intended to bind people together beyond the spatial, racial and ideological boundaries that we have erected throughout the globe. As the writer of Ephesians speaks to us this morning in our Epistle lesson "For Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." (Ephesians 2:14) This scripture lays claim to the fact that Jesus is our peace in these unclear hostile moments.

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[1] "Black Lives Matter: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males". The Schott Foundation, February 2015.

I speak of the need for a global movement because it is extraordinary how closely related we are in the world today. I am witnessing younger generations of all nations, races, and cultures celebrating common heroes and she-roes; foods; attending the same universities; celebrating the same celebrities and even communicating across the seas instantly with global technology. I just left the Philippines a few months ago and the same wealth gap that exists in our own country is present there. A year ago, I witnessed the damage caused by the killing of hundreds of thousands of people; and displacement, poverty and pain to people caused by the tribal fighting caused by two opposing leaders who desire all of the wealth in the Sudan and South Sudan. It is imperative that we engage the beginnings of a global justice and human rights movement that focuses on the clear recognition that God seeks to use us for the emancipation of all human beings in this world who find themselves bound by the abuses to human dignity.

When we move to Chapter 8 of Nehemiah, we discover what took place after the rebuilding of the wall. The people of Jerusalem gathered facing the square in front of the Water Gate from early morning to midday. It was there that the scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform and read God's Word found in the Torah. They were looking up at him as he expounded on the Word of God for what is believed to be more than three hours. Isn't that amazing. They heard the Word of the Lord God for more than three hours. I know that it is difficult for some of you to hear the Word of the Lord for one hour on Sunday morning. As a matter of faith, I have seen some of you look at your watches already. A story is told of a preacher who was being criticized for his long sermons. One of trustees of the Church received authorization to put a clock on the wall facing the pulpit so that the Pastor would have no excuses about getting carried away in a spiritual moment and losing sight of time. On the first Sunday after the clock was installed, the Pastor had gone in the night before and took the clock down and replaced it with a picture of himself. The trustee board and congregation was not aware of the Pastor's move to take the clock down and replace it with the his own picture. After the Pastor preached for more forty minutes members of the congregation looked back and saw his picture on the wall. One woman who had been a long time member of the church when she saw the picture commented out loud "O' Lord, that preacher done took down time and put up eternity."

The scripture records, "And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up." (Neh. 8:5) Seeking justice sometimes seems like an eternity, but the Word of the Lord ought to make us stand up! The problems we face oftentimes are overwhelming, but the Word of the Lord ought to make us stand up! Like Nehemiah, we must remember that our work for the Lord does not belong to us, but to the Lord. An everlasting arm sustains us! The Word of the Lord and not

our own words guide us! This new global revolution requires us to begin with our own block. If there is a Presbyterian Church on the block, then no failing school or child should be in the community. You have two Presbyterian churches and a seminary only a stone's throw away from one another. John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian Church was instrumental in advocating for public education in Geneva, Switzerland. The Church must stand above the people and point them to the hills from which comes our help. Our help comes from the Lord who made the heavens and the earth. (Psalm 121:1-2)

Now, here is what we must do.

- Strengthen the internal core of our congregations by determining the places where we can be effective in community and global transformation. Each congregation can make a difference, but it is important that we know where our strengths lie within the context of our work.
- Ensure that representatives from this congregation attend both community and civic meetings to represent the interest of the congregation and the community. (School boards, city councils, and County Commissions ought to hear the voice of the Church as a community and receive us as prophetic partners in the on-going work to shape diverse living and opportunities for all.
- Become a place where healthy community conversations can take place (forums, lectures, healing services, community meetings, etc). The Church ought to be a place where civil dialogue can occur and people can express their views respectfully. No one should be shouted down, punched in the face, or fought with as we saw this past week at a Presidential campaign rally. The Church ought to be a place where controversial issues can be discussed with mutual respect, because the very nature of our calling demands it. The Holy Spirit guides it! And, people of faith exemplify it. We must once again claim the space as being at the center of the moral, spiritual and ethical compass of the community.
- The Church should be a place that is centered in a "love ethic" while reflecting the diversity of its community and people. Everyone ought to be welcomed. The barriers of exclusion should be taken down when they exist. Perfect love for all human beings is our instrument, because it cast out fear. ( I John 4:18)
- We must not live in fear, but rebuild the proverbial walls of hope in our community to liberate, educate and provide a context of openness to that which we are calling the world to become. We should not accept the world as it is! No, we must live lives that make a difference for the sake of God in the world! We are not perfect and will fall sometimes. The challenge is learning to get back up with the help of the Lord and continue

to witness to the Lord God's ability to take out imperfection and make all things well.

It must be remembered that the greatest power in the world is guiding our footsteps. No one should engage those of us who know the love of Jesus without being exposed, infected and or covered by Jesus's love. We must stop trying to make Jesus affirm our values and declare a revolution of the world's values through the love of Jesus Christ in the world.

East Liberty, the struggle is hard to build and maintain an inclusive community. However, as I look across this congregation today, you represent God's vision for a diverse world that is both engaging and transformative. A community of varying racial, gender, sexuality, and age groups with an intention to build Jesus's beloved community. Despite sometimes being complex, you struggle for unity beyond any complications. Only the Spirit of the living God can sustain that kind of power! Hold on to the hand of Jesus!

Keep leading the way although the path may be difficult at times! Keep reminding a sometimes-cynical world that all things are possible through our Lord Jesus Christ. Oh, I am so happy that the Lord blessed me to stop by here this weekend. You have reminded me again "My Hope is built on nothing less than Jesus's blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus name. On Christ! On Christ! On Christ! The solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand!"[2]

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[2] Mote, Edward. Hymn, "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less". 1837.