

BUILDING WITH RUBBLE
Stewardship Sunday

(11/17/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Nehemiah 4:1-8
Ephesians 2:19-22
Matthew 7:24-27

“What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish—and burned ones at that?” (Sanballat, quoted in Nehemiah 4:2)

As I have mentioned, in this church our stewardship season coincides with the Thanksgiving season. We celebrate these seasons in conjunction with each other because we believe they are connected. Our stewardship arises out of our gratitude for the blessings that God has bestowed on us, and out of our desire to give back to both our Creator and the creation.

Throughout the Stewardship season, pastors are supposed to preach a fiery sermon about the importance of giving. We are supposed to encourage you to make your annual pledge of financial support to this church. We are supposed to remind you that a pledge is different from a donation. A donation is given when you attend worship on some Sunday mornings and put something in the collection plate. A pledge is the expression of a commitment to support this church throughout the year, to provide us with the resources we need to meet our operating expenses. Without your pledge of financial support throughout the coming year, we are unable to put together a realistic budget, and we are unable to meet our operating expenses without drawing down our invested funds.

I will not be preaching a fiery sermon on the importance of giving this morning. You all know that, as Jesus told us, where our treasure is, there will our heart be also (and vice versa—where our heart is, there will our treasure be also). The core members of this church know that. They not only pledge; they pledge generously! This past year, our 17 pledged units contributed \$31,280 to the General Fund. This means that the average pledge this past year, the *average* pledge was \$1840 for the year, which comes out to \$35.38 per week. This is higher than the average pledge in any church I know! However, even at this high level of commitment, our pledges cover only 40% of our proposed budget. The rest has to be drawn from our endowment, our invested funds.

So, it doesn't make sense to ask you to give because you are already giving. I also can't in good conscience, ask you to give more—though I hope you do! You are extremely generous in your support of this church, not only financially but, as Cheryl mentioned last week, in many other ways as well!

This morning, I would like us to think about a different dimension of stewardship. I would like us to consider the metaphor of building as it applies to the building of our future as a church. I would also like us to consider the metaphor of building as it applies to the building of your own individual life, your own future, the unfolding of your own potentialities, your God-given gifts.

I have heard not only people in middle age and beyond, but also college-age young people express discouragement about what they are doing with their life. They feel that they are not doing anything special with their life; they are just sort of living it out. They have a vague feeling that God expects more of them, that God wants more of them, that God is calling them to something special. But they don't feel they have anything special to offer the world.

The Buddhists tell us that we have to live in the present. As Mimi, in the musical *Rent* tells us, "There is no future; there is no past; I live this moment as my last." And that is true! If we are not living in the present we are missing out on the only reality in life. Everything we need to live a deep and fulfilling life as individuals and also as a church is right here and now!

But we also need a vision. We need this vision to come from God, not from our secular society. If you recall, two weeks ago we sang the beautiful hymn, "Be Thou My Vision." This is true of us both as individuals and as a church; we need God to be our vision! We need to remember that in our own lives and with our church we are building something. We are building something special! We are actually building something sacred!

I know that it's sort of like asking if the Boston Red Sox already have what they need in their starting pitchers to rise above this past year's .500 season; whether the New England Patriots have what they need in an offensive line or in their receiving corps to give Drake Maye the support he needs to take on Buffalo in the AFC East; whether the Revolution, with their current coach, has what it takes to become a competitor. We are asking whether we have what we need to build something special, something sacred in this church? We are asking whether you have what you need to build something special, something sacred in your life?

Like the Red Sox, Patriots, and Revolution, you would think that you would need special materials, special people to build something special, but it is not so! When it comes to building something special, you have everything you need in your own life, and we have everything we need as a church! No offence, but Nehemiah assures us that we

can build something special even out of rubble, out of rubbish. As I said, “No offence.” You know this isn’t how I think of you and how I think of this church.

The hymn we sang as we began worship this morning, “We Would Be Building,” is one of my favorite hymns. I selected this hymn for inclusion into my ordination service fifty-five years ago. The message of this hymn is especially applicable to our church as we celebrate the 159 years that we have been in existence, and as we look ahead to what we will need to continue our ministry, to fulfill our sacred call into the unknown future.

Our opening hymn, you recall, is a call to action. It begins by witnessing to God’s presence in our lives as individuals and as a church. It calls us to carry on God’s work, to be co-creators with God of our lives, of the church, and of the world.

*We would be building; temples still undone
O’er crumbling walls their crosses scarcely lift,
Waiting till love can raise the broken stone,
And hearts creative bridge the human rift.
We would be building; Master, let thy plan
Reveal the life that God would give to man*

What are we building? We are building something in our individual lives. We are building something in our families. We are building something in our church. We are building something in our nation, and we are building something in the world. The hymn reminds us that no matter what we have already done, how much we have already done, our task is not completed! Although our church has been a presence in Southborough for 159 years, a presence for healing and wholeness, our task is not completed! The temple is still undone! It is not yet finished!

There is little doubt that the power and influence of the church in people’s lives is diminishing. Attendance is down in every denomination as our secular society encroaches not only on Sunday, but also on our lives and on our loyalties. The walls of churches are crumbling. Many churches have had to close their doors.

Earlier this past year, Darlene and I attended the final worship service, a service that celebrated the history and mission of the First Congregational Church in Gardner, a church that was closing after 250 years. It was a very moving experience, witnessing the sense of celebration for what this church had meant to the community over 2 ½ centuries, and also the sense of loss. I had a sense that the cross, the symbol of Jesus’ sacrifice and also our sacrifice, the sacrifice of our egocentric life to live a more Christ-centered life, lies in the rubble.

I believe that the churches that will survive are not necessarily the biggest and wealthiest churches. It will be the churches that know who they are, churches whose members are true to God's calling. I would like our church to be one of the churches that not only survives but also thrives!

What are we seeking? What do we need to take the rubble that is our church, our nation, our world, and sometimes also our individual lives and build a temple of them, a temple of the Holy Spirit? Especially our nation following the recent election that has left so many of us, including me, sad, depressed, anxious, and disillusioned about our nation and its future.

Our opening hymn reminds us that *only love can raise the broken stone!* Only love can drive out the demonic spirits that possess us as individuals and as a nation, as a world! But it will take not only hard work but also creativity to make something special, to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. When it comes to nations, to ethnic groups, to warring political and religious factions, we need to be, as our opening hymn tells us, "the creative hearts that bridge the human rift."

We need to be the creative hearts that bridge the human rift. The last line of the first verse reminds us that we need not so much to create, but to receive a vision of what we are building, whether it is in our own life or in our church. It tells us, "Master, let thy plan reveal the life that God would give to man."

I think you are beginning to see why I like this hymn so much, why I chose it as one of the hymns that I chose to include in my ordination service fifty-five years ago, why it has remained with me as my metaphor for ministry. The second verse is as follows:

*Teach us to build; upon the solid rock
We set the dream that hardens into deed,
Ribbed with the steel that time and change doth mock,
The unfailing purpose of our noblest creed.
Teach us to build; O Master, lend us sight
To see the towers gleaming in the light.*

Jesus tells us a parable of two men who set out to build their houses. He may have been referencing two men who built actual houses made of wood and bricks, though I don't think this is what Jesus had in mind when he told us this parable. I think he was talking about the "house" that is our life. I think the house is our values, our meaning in life, the center out of which we live. In any event, one person builds his/her house upon the sand. The other builds his/her house upon the rock.

When the storm hits, the house that was built on sand is swept away. The house that was built on rock stands firm. In this parable Jesus tells us something about ourselves and about life. He tells us that there will be storms in this life. There will be tempests. The ground may shift under our feet. Things in our nation and in our own lives may not go as we would like them to go. If we have built upon the rock, we will be able to stand firm when we are buffeted by the storms of life. If we build our life around the wrong things, if we do not center our life in our relationship with God, we will fall apart. We will crumble and be destroyed!

As we noted in our opening hymn a couple of weeks ago, we need a dream; we need a vision. Proverbs 29 tells us, “Without a dream the people perish.” This vision should be our master plan both as a church and as individual Christians. We need a guiding vision for our nation and the world. We need the dream that will become a reality, the dream that will “harden into deed.”

Our “house” needs to be built on a solid foundation. Our closing hymn reminds us that “The Church’s One Foundation is Jesus Christ, Her Lord.” We also need to build with the steel that mocks time and change. This we find in our noblest creeds. Finally, in the third verse of this morning’s hymn, we read,

*O keep us building, Master; may our hands
Ne'er falter when the dream is in our hearts.
When to our ears there come divine commands
And all the pride of sinful will departs.
We build with thee, O grant enduring worth
Until the heavenly kingdom comes on earth.*

We are not only the inheritors of this church; we are commissioned to build it, to make it stronger, and to ensure that it will be here for many generations to come. May our hands, our hearts, our commitment never falter when the dream is in our hearts! We will falter if we are building for ourselves, if we are building out of sinful pride. If we build because God calls us to build, not just this building but this community of faith, this community in which we live, in this nation, this world, our hands will not falter. We will not lose heart!

In our individual lives, in this church, in this nation and in the world, if we build with God, we build something of enduring worth. We build the heavenly kingdom here on earth!

What do we need to build a great church? I have heard people say that we do not have what it takes. They tell us that we need more people. We need younger people.

We need more wealthy people. We need a bigger building. We need a better pastor, a better music program, a rock band. We need more young families with children.

I believe that God has given us everything we need to succeed! This is true of us as individuals, and it is true of this church. When Nehemiah had the God-inspired vision to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, he realized he had a problem. There was no quarry nearby where he could get the stones he wanted, the stones he believed he needed to rebuild the walls. How can you undertake such a major building project when you do not have a quarry to supply the building blocks that you need?

What did Nehemiah do? Nehemiah decided that what he already had was enough. In fact, it was more than enough! Nehemiah decided to use what was already available. He built the wall with the materials that had been set in place by previous generations, the stones that were buried in the rubble.

So, Nehemiah dug into the rubbish pile. He rebuilt the walls with the rubble of the old walls in only fifty-two days.

This can be true of you and me, and it can be true of our church. God has given us the building blocks of a great life. Even if the trajectory of our life has not been marked by secular success, this is not what is important. If we draw on the skills, talents, gifts and creativity that we already possess, we can make something special of our life! If we focus on our so-called inadequacies, on our past hurts and setbacks, we will not be able to move forward. If we know that we have been given everything we need, then with God's vision, like Nehemiah, we will be able to move forward!

God has given our little church so much! We came into being 159 years ago this past January. Throughout the past 159 years the lay people and clergy who helped to create and sustain this church built with what they had. When something needed to be done, someone in the congregation stepped forward to do it. And that's the way it still is today!

Throughout our history, we have built using the materials that were at our disposal. And we have had a lot! We owe a debt of gratitude to our ancestors, not only for their hard work and their stewardship but also for their vision. We are also deeply thankful for our present members. We would not have the beautiful little church we have, this beautiful sanctuary, our warm vestry, a space where we experience community, without the gifts of time, labor, talent, and funding of so many of our members and friends.

Let us continue to unfold our dream! We can do this if we focus on the dream that God has placed within our heart. We can do this because we know we do not build alone. We can do this with the materials we have right now, because what we have is enough; in fact, it is more than enough! We can do this thanks to the members and friends of this church who support our church with their time, talent, and treasure.

And you can do this in your own life. Never forget that the beautiful person that you already are is a wonderful place to start!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website (hopefully) later this week.