

Homily

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Nehemiah 4:1–5

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We never learn, do we? We just heard how Israel is in the midst of restoration after the six-decade Babylonian exile. The scribe Ezra is concerned with religious reforms, reminding the people to keep the commandments, statutes, and ordinances that would fulfill their covenant with God and bring them protection and prosperity. However, this people was already tempted to stray from God. They were again being threatened by their enemies, always a consequence of forgetting about the requirements of the covenantal relationship with God, forgetting about God's love and fidelity, forgetting about how to worship by being drawn to respond to God's marvelous deeds on their behalf. We never learn, do we?

Then enters Nehemiah, a man of action who is concerned about rebuilding the destroyed walls of Jerusalem, for once again Israel's enemies were at hand. These enemies mock Israel for their weakness, for attempting to use stones and mortar to keep them away, for once again desiring to offer fitting sacrifice even when threatened. Nehemiah and the people prayed to God. At the same time they continued to build the wall, with building materials in one hand and weapons to use against their enemies in the other. Weapons truly effective against enemies? We never learn, do we?

Yes, Jerusalem's walls were restored. The Temple was rebuilt. But we know Israel later was conquered again, the Temple destroyed again. No matter how hard we try to build walls by our own might, no matter how strong the materials we use, no matter how many weapons of destruction we think we have, we can never be safe when we don't keep God and the divine commandments at the center of our very beings and lives. We never learn, do we?

Oh, not only ancient Israel builds walls! In the early 1980s, during the Cold War, I was in West Berlin doing workshops and retreats for US Army chaplains. They took me on an excursion to East Berlin, through Checkpoint Charlie at the Berlin Wall. This wall separated families and neighbors. It kept some from religious freedom. It allowed some on one side to live in comfort while others on the other side subsisted in stifling oppression and abject poverty. The stark difference between West and East Berlin—indeed, between West and East Germany—shook me to the core. Walls can harm people. We never learn, do we? Even today we are talking about building other walls to keep people out, to separate, to divide. We never learn, do we?

We can shake our heads in revulsion at these concrete, oppressive, destructive walls. We can shrug off responsibility: Those aren't my walls; I'm not building them. We never learn, do we? We all build walls, but ones that are much more subtle. We build walls of prejudice against those who are different from us. We build walls of conceit when we shut out others by not giving them the dignity they deserve simply because they are alive. We build walls of self-importance when we refuse to listen to others, especially when they have ideas unlike our own. We build walls of self-grandiosity when we think we have all the answers and know what's best for others. We build walls of self-promotion when we think we are the only ones who can get things right. Oh, yes, we never learn, do we?

There is good reason why our worship generally is to include a time of confession. Before we can fully give ourselves over to praise and thanksgiving of God, to offering self-sacrifice to the God who is always faithful, who always loves and cares, who always forgives our human weaknesses and foibles, we must acknowledge who we are before our God. We must open ourselves, empty ourselves, surrender ourselves to the God who is always present to us, but to whom we ourselves are not always present. We can become so enamored with our own performance of worship that we forget, like Israel of old, that it is God who saves, not we.

There are many personal, destructive, and bedeviling walls that we must be willing to

chip away, to tear down, to destroy once and for all. Nevertheless, there are other walls that we must build. We must build walls to keep out anything that distracts us from having God at the center of our worship and God at the center of our lives. If we do not have God at our center, we cannot worship. In fact, we really aren't living very fully, either.

We must build walls around a proclivity to use so many of our own words at worship that we never take the time in silence to listen with full hearts to God's word spoken to each of us. We must build walls around the enthusiasm of great music that moves us to question whether our worship is music driven or God driven. We must build walls around turning our back to those who criticize what we are doing, because maybe—just maybe—they are showing us a better way. We must build walls around the unfruitful busyness that commands so many of us so that we do not have time to prepare worship well. We must build walls around the lack of interest that keeps us from delving more deeply into what worship truly is and discovering new ways to lead others to praise and worship God.

We are all faced with a challenge: to know when to tear down obstructive walls and when to build protective walls. Either kind of wall work is hard work! How do we meet this challenge? We can take our cue from Nehemiah: He prayed, he admonished the people not to be afraid, he instructed the people to remember their God who is "great and awesome." Indeed, we keep worship God-centered when ultimately we remember—that is, make present—God's mighty, saving deeds on our behalf. Worship is most satisfying not when we sing our favorite song or get a good laugh during the sermon or fill the sacred space to the point where people are hanging out the windows. No, worship is most satisfying when we have encountered God.

Encountering God takes hard work on our part. We have no tools in our worship repertoire to call down God in a command performance! But here is the twist: We don't have to call down God! God is always present to us. God is always concerned about us. God is always loving us. Encountering God at worship is a matter of opening ourselves to that ubiquitous divine

presence and saving power. The various elements we orchestrate into a praise-filled and gratitude-laden worship, the various elements we rehearse week after week so that they become part of the fabric of our being, the various elements we allow to come together into a mindful whole that transforms us into living, breathing presences of God for all we meet in the ordinary circumstances of our daily living—all these are the mighty weapons we use to defeat discouragement, fear, or resistance.

Those of us engaged in worship preparation, renewal, and practice would love to have a sure formula to make everything work always and everywhere perfectly. We never learn, do we? So much of worship we have no control over. We can't snap our fingers so the babies' crying that keeps some from hearing the sermon and prayers all of a sudden becomes happy, quiet gurgles. We can't snap our fingers so the musician who leaves after the first hymn too ill to continue is miraculously better, or snap our fingers so the electricity going out and leaving us in paralyzing darkness immediately comes back on. What we can do, no matter what happens at worship, is to surrender ourselves absolutely to the God who remains present to us. This surrender is the supreme act of praise and thanksgiving, for it emulates Jesus' own supreme act of surrender.

I pray those of you finishing your grants have gained some key insights about worship this past year. I pray those of you beginning your grant year have those marvelous moments when you know things have changed for the better, when the fruit of your efforts is palpable in a vibrant, worshiping congregation. I pray for all of us that we do learn, and that whatever inhibits us from embracing authentic, prayerful worship we may mindfully recognize, gently address, and diligently overcome.

We never learn, do we? Well, yes, we do. We learn if we remember that the God who is the center of our worship and lives is the same God who always acts on our behalf. This same God listens to our prayers, listens to our frustrations, listens to our pleading to do better. By

making God the center of our worship and lives, we get ourselves out of the way so others whom we serve can encounter God.

We will always have walls with which to contend. The destructive ones we must tear down with all diligence. To worship well we must eliminate the stones of prejudice, conceit, and exclusivity and destroy the mortar of an obsession with being right, of manipulating others so worship is done our way, or of subtly putting ourselves at the center instead of God.

The protective walls we must make even stronger. We must build them with stones of faith, hope, and endurance, and with the mortar of compassion, love, and empathy. These walls serve to protect what is essential for authentic worship. Worship is authentic when God is truly at the center. Living is genuinely Christian when the gospel is clearly at the very heart of all we are and do. Without gospel-centered living, we cannot worship. Without God-centered worship, we cannot live to the fullest as God's beloved daughters and sons.

Accepting the divine call to be involved with preparing, leading, and doing worship is an awesome privilege and a daunting challenge. But let's not be disheartened or discouraged. Just as God was with Israel when they kept his commandments, statutes, and ordinances, so will God be with us as we strive to the best of our ability to serve God's holy people. Just as God heard Nehemiah's prayer for protection and success in building a strong wall around the holy city, so will God hear our prayer for protection and success in building a strong wall around our holy worship and lives. True, some never learn. But many of us do learn and never forget the abiding presence and saving power of God. For this, may God be praised and thanked always and everywhere. Amen.