

Sunday, October 8, 2017 – Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Scripture: Nehemiah 4: 1-9 and 2 Corinthians 4:7-10

Sermon title: “Knocked Down, but Not Knocked Out”

Note: On September 10, I began a sermon series based on the Book of Nehemiah, with guidance and insight provided by the “minor classic” *Hand Me Another Brick*, a book by the American pastor Charles R. Swindoll. The readings from Nehemiah will be the focus of the sermon, with the second reading providing further illumination or insight. In this case, the NT reading does indeed provide illumination. In 2 Corinthians Paul speaks more personally and more compellingly about his own life than anywhere else (perhaps you can think of another place, but I can't). So, let's begin there, in 2 Corinthians 4, before moving on to Nehemiah.

1. Read 2 Corinthians 4:7-10 – Paul not only refers to his own struggles and to the opposition he faced (and he faced a great deal, often from fellow Jews), but he also provides a theological context for thinking about his struggles. So, first note vs. 7 where Paul refers to “earthen vessels” and how God's power becomes visible *precisely because* of our weakness. In other words, we struggle, but our struggling has a way of pointing to God's power (and doesn't detract from it). Imperfect people display the glory of God.

And then, Paul's next argument is even more interesting. He writes (vs. 8-10) that being a leader means “always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus.” Did you get that? The life of Jesus is made manifest in the life of an imperfect, struggling leader. Afflicted, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not despairing. Struck down, but not destroyed. Or, as the title to Swindoll's chapter puts it, “Knocked Down, but Not Knocked Out.”

2. As you might have noticed, I left out all of chapter 3, following Swindoll's outline. As he puts it, chapter 3 is almost entirely about the process of building the wall – Nehemiah appointed people to various parts of the job, and everyone it seems had a role to play. So, the criticism that Nehemiah hears at the end of chapter 2 returns in chapter 4 ... vs. 1: “Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious.” You might think that a small group of people determined to rebuild the wall of their city would provoke admiration, not criticism. But one of the awful facts of life – almost too terrible to admit – is that opposition and criticism and resistance will occur in response to any new idea or initiative. Why? Simply because it's a new idea, perhaps. Simply because it meant a change from the status quo. Can you think of times in your life when you faced criticism simply because you changed something about your life? (An interesting example of this is what happens when an alcoholic quits drinking. The change, which should be celebrated, often prompts criticism, precisely because everyone around the alcoholic is also forced to change, adapt, make new patterns. Can you think of similar examples?)

3. I like Swindoll's observation that critics almost always find allies. See vs. 2-3, where we read that Tobiah the Ammonite was near Sanballat. Have you also found it be true that "critics run with critics" (Swindoll's words)?
4. What is Nehemiah's response? Well, you guessed it. First he prayed...his first response to everything. But note a few of the results of prayer...
 - As Swindoll points out, often there is "spiritual warfare" which is "best fought from a kneeling position."
 - Think of the so-called "imprecatory Psalms" in the Old Testament. These are prayers where the writer vents about his enemies and sometimes calls down God's wrath on them. Note these psalms are more than uncontrolled emotion. By praying the writer is showing genuine emotion, but also giving the anger/frustration to God.
 - It's possible that Nehemiah listened, considered the criticism, and then ... what did he do? He decided to keep going. He did not return fire with fire, or attempt to out-shout the critics. Vs. 6 states that "we built the wall...."
 - Final point (from Swindoll) ... critics demoralize, leaders encourage. In the end, Nehemiah seems to have demonstrated his gifts for leadership by encouraging the workers to stay at their jobs.
5. Three practical truths (again from Swindoll):
 - It is impossible to lead anyone without facing opposition.
 - It is essential to face opposition in prayer.
 - Prayer is not all that is necessary if opposition grows. (Note that in vs. 9 Nehemiah appointed guards to protect the workers "day and night.")