

# The People Had a Mind to Work

## 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sermon

April 23, 2023

### Nehemiah 4:6

6 So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

### Nehemiah 8:10

<sup>10</sup>Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

I like our church. You might expect me to “love” our church but I’m using “like” in the sense of an old John Wayne cowboy movie.

Wayne’s gruff character is approached by a young cowboy who wants to marry John Wayne’s daughter.

“Well, do you LIKE her?” Wayne asks.

The young man is perplexed: “Sir, I love her.”

In that slow, legendary drawl, Wayne responds, “I know you love her. I want to know if you like her!?”

It’s a good distinction at a time when we toss “love” around so freely it has lost its clout. But to LIKE someone, or LIKE something, takes some thought, some perspective, it really is a feeling with meaning.

In that way, I like our church. I like how you think, and act, and do. I like what you stand for and how you go about it. I like the “Christlikeness” that comes from your willingness to delve into Christ, to look and think hard about Christ’s life, Christ teachings and apply them to each day.

I like how you understand the world around you, how you treat it, how you treat others.

I like the priorities you choose, the decisions you make, the values you uphold, the questions you ask.

I like the people you aim to be.

Yes, I like our church, a lot.

I'm able to be absolute about that and still think that our little old building is a bit weary, a bit worn at the edges and could use some fixing up.

Just last Sunday Alida and I were in Rome touring the magnificent Borghese Gallery, which began with an explanation of the Borghese Family AND the great marble-palace that became the museum. It was built in the early 1600's, and 150 years later, the historian told us, the palace had become a bit worn at the edges. So, they did some fixing up.

My ears perked up. If a Marble Palace in Rome built by the 2<sup>nd</sup> richest family in Europe needed some TLC after 150 years, it shouldn't surprise us that a simple wood structure built by New England farmers on a spare dime might need a fresh look or two.

A friend asked if this renovation project is meant as my legacy. When people reach the end of line, they start thinking of the "legacy" they'll leave behind, a sort of maudlin self-aggrandizement project. Well, we just got back from Rome, and as decrepit as I am I survived 9 days of Roman public transportation, buses, subways, trolley, plus pedestrian mayhem. So, I'm thinking I'm immortal. No legacy needed. The only legacy I'm leaving behind is you, in a church where Christlikeness shines through everything we say or do.

Not "churchiness."

Not religiosity.

Not dogma.

Just the simple, straightforward teachings of a simple, straightforward faith.

The Bible is the gathered wisdom of 3000 years, two ancient religions, Christianity and Judaism. We quote it. We use it. We try to apply it.

And so, the Bible says, “We built it - for the people had a mind to work.”

And the Bible says, “People without a vision, perish.”

And the Bible says, “No one who puts their hand to the plough and looks back is worthy of the kingdom of God.”

In other words, part of being a church, part of being a Christian is knowing we have work to do. We always have work to do!

In our scripture lesson the Israelites were facing a daunting rebuild, a renovation/fixing up of all their spaces, holy and secular. The prophet Nehemiah tells us they got it done “because...the people had a mind to work.” There was a job to be done and they did it.

The next few verses Nehemiah reminds us to have fun doing it. The work God needs us to do is not meant to be a pain in the neck. He actually says to the people of Israel, “party hearty!!” The people were getting all distressed, divided, caught up in detail and worry.

“Stop it,” Nehemiah declared, “get out on the dance floor, head to the dessert table, break open a bottle of Saratoga Sparkling Water!””

I don’t know if the Jews of 2500 years ago would have donuts, a bouncy house, and a Celtic band like we are having today, but they would have agreed with the idea. God’s work may be necessary, but it should be fun, joyful, rewarding.

OK. Let's state the obvious. Today's worship is a thinly veiled plug for our church's 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Capitol Campaign to fund our future by improving our sanctuary, strengthen our barn and deepening our endowment.

The reasoning is fairly simple. Recently, 4500 churches closed in America, and we don't want to be one of them, ever. Within the confines of history and tradition, we want to place ourselves as healthy and as effective as we can. We want our sanctuary to reflect the spirit of our church. We want our barn to equal the vitality of our young people. We want our endowment to be a strong masthead, no matter how economic winds are blowing.

I'm not going to talk about the endowment because nobody looks to me for economic thoughts. I'm not going to talk about the barn, because our youth ministry is so legendary everybody loves it. And if Alida wanted the barn layered in chocolate, we'd all vote to do it.

But the church? This sacred building? Sixteen years ago, we did a massive renovation of our education/office/fellowship building across the street. That was easy. By the time we tackled it, it was downright ugly and unsafe. Our own Sunday School teachers stopped bringing their own kids. Nursery school families complained and withdrew. Classrooms and offices were an embarrassment. Same with the Barn. To get it done without uproar I said upfront, our sanctuary was off the table, the 3<sup>rd</sup> rail we would not touch. Now it needs to be touched.

Well, what, if anything, needs to be touched? Let's face it, whatever is decided, there will be something we like, something we don't – that's how life is.

The people like me, who want a lime-green carpet down the center aisle, we may lose out to those lobbying for a polka-dot carpet. My plan for a golden escalator up to the balcony got nowhere. I thought it was sort of celestial/Biblical! But I shouldn't be surprised at my defeat. I've lobbied for wrought iron handrails up to the altar for 20 years, no luck.

I launched our 300<sup>th</sup> five years ago with one of my legendary "White Papers." I laid out a call for us to be a thriving, dynamic church not just looking back at the good old days but living the present excitedly and just as excited for the future.

I looked at our theology, our property, our ministry, and mission.

In short, I anticipated a vibrant 300<sup>th</sup>, not a "ho-hum" anniversary. Our 275<sup>th</sup> was a more low-key affair. I dressed up in colonial garb with slicked back hair made to look like Timothy Dwight, even preached one of his sermons. The truth is, I looked like Eddie Munster, the kid from the Munster's Family, and no one has let me forget it.

I'm not doing that again. Our 300<sup>th</sup> deserves to be significant in fact, in memory and in foundation. By foundation, I mean, building toward something. What we have come up with is currently-helping, and forward-looking. But if the "current" needs no "helping" and the "forward" needs no "looking," then let's just pick a Sunday in 2025, sing the old Timothy Dwight hymn, "I love Your Church, O God," and leave it to the others 100 years from now to do something.

The truth is we don't have to do anything. The pews are capable of bearing our weight. Our concerns about the pulpit and altar area, the choir loft and staging area can easily be dismissed as "tough luck, deal with it."

Chipped wood, chipped paint, worn out parlor, can all be taken care of with duct tape and patch work. Our building, however iconic, is weary and maybe our collective response is "so be it, ...that's part of our charm."

My fear is that if we don't do something inspired for our 300<sup>th</sup>, we won't do something down the road. Nobody is going to say in 2032, "you know, this is our 307<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, we should give attention to our sanctuary." I have no doubt that we would respond to a crisis. If a kitchen fire in the Church House damaged our Memorial Room and we needed \$400,000 to fix it up, we'd get it. Our church is good with crises. But we're not inclined to think in generational terms here. We're not an old fashioned, small town, New England church in rural Maine with people thinking "we want our church to be strong for our great-grandchildren."

For lots of us our retirement plans are around the corner, timewise; AND many, many hundreds of miles away, distance wise. With rare exception, we're headed elsewhere. So, my argument for caring about the church are theological and historical. We have something here that should be preserved long after we've gone. We have a way of thinking and being and believing that is precious and special.

In our post-Easter visit to Rome, we visited church buildings from the 100's, 300's, 500's; we saw brilliant mosaics from the 400's and the 800's. And every church prominently featured crucifixes. Life-sized. Larger than life size, crucifixes. Jesus bleeding, in agony, dying or dead.

Gruesome. His chest bared and open, his “sacred heart” given to us as an offering. One side chapel literally had a mountain of crosses large and small, simple and ornate, wooden and golden. At most every cross I paused and knelt, and to my surprise found myself saying repeatedly, “thank you, God, for your gift of love.”

Frankly, I’ve been teaching that for years. And even more frankly you’ve been teaching that TO ME for years. God’s love has become the central theme of this little church on top of the hill. It’s what our children and young people grow up hearing at every stage of their development. It’s what every adult in our church family hears when they come to us at some point of crisis.

When we’ve messed up, or life has struck a blow against us, we tell one another about the breadth and depth of God’s love. We assure one another with that truth, we forgive the past and face the future with that truth. We’ve been with so many people at the point of death, theirs, or their loved one, and the conversation, even the final words, come ‘round to God’s love.

You’ve been hearing it so long you may not think how special our message is. But I guarantee, it is special. For 2500 years, right up to this morning, lots of people and churches and preachers have looked at the cross and thought only about guilt, horror, hell, threat, punishment, evil.



They've not seen the supreme gift of God's love and let that be the foundation of their faith. Instead, for too many and too long, the cross is a symbol of fear, morbid proof of our depravity, and often used as a sign of hate.

Even in our own little corner of Connecticut, we know what is said in some settings about hell and who goes there, and why. We know what is said about our church and churches like ours in general. We know the general lack of love in daily life, in society in general, in political and civil discourse.

And so, yes, we DO see something distinctive in this church with our message focused on God's love that needs to be kept alive and thrive.

The 300<sup>th</sup> Campaign is designed to give us a better structure literally, a more effective and helpful platform, literally, a clearer framework, literally – to teach and preach what we teach and preach. So that from the moment a person walks up the walkway and enters through our doors, till the last sentence of the morning prayer is prayed and the last phrasing of the choir anthem is phrased, and the last word of the preacher is preached, and the last note of the last hymn is sung, it is God's love touching every person in every pew.

Certainly, one of the highlights of my career was preaching at Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama – the church Dr. Martin Luther King pastored when he and Rosa Parks led the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The church was planning a renovation, and a capital campaign to fund it, so I was brought in to motivate the giving. It was quite a weekend.

I stayed in the parsonage where the King Family lived. I worked on my sermon out on the front porch, where the rocking chair kept slipping into a huge rut in the cement floor.

“How did that hole in the cement get here?” I asked naively.

“Oh, that’s when they tossed dynamite at the parsonage, trying to kill the family,” my host replied.

I tried imagining having the kind of ministry that would lead people to try and kill my family. Well, I finished my sermon and preached it the next day.

Back in my Habitat for Humanity days, I crisscrossed America and much of the world convincing people to build, to renovate, to fix, to improve. Especially in the early days, we did a lot of renovation. In New Haven, Worcester, Dorchester, we’d get a triple decker, gut it, redo it, and house three working families.

In Jersey City, and Manhattan, Florida and elsewhere, we renovated historic buildings. We took history and reshaped it, took out what had served its purpose and gave new life with new purpose for a new day. Sure, people were skeptical, suspicious, opposed. So, I met with union officials, neighborhood groups, church leaders, mayors, trying to convince people I wasn’t a communist. Even if I wasn’t actually preaching at these meetings, I was actually preaching, often using the same Bible story I used at Dr. King’s Church in Montgomery.

Because the need was the same,

The purpose was the same.

The motivation was the same.

The Spiritual, Faith connection was the same.

Something was in disrepair.

Something needed to be built, or fixed or improved. For God's sake. Literally. For God's sake.

The back story to our scripture is this: Israel had been conquered by Babylon. The nation lay in ruins, like the pictures we see of Ukraine today. The Jewish people had been dragged off to slavery. Many years went by until, finally, the Jews were allowed to return to Israel. Rebuilding Israel was a Herculean task, daunting, depressing, urgent. Well, folks did the obvious.

What was reusable, they used.

What needed fixing was fixed.

What was still standing got reinforced.

What needed to be tossed out was tossed out.

What was no longer usable went in the dumpster.

As far as the order of things, you can imagine it. Shelter first. Some place to live. Then businesses. Shops, market stalls. Get back to work. And, of course, defense. Walls had to be repaired, reinforced, rebuilt.

At some point, God sort of clears his throat, and says to the people, in effect: "What about my house? What about the Temple in Jerusalem? It's a mess, in total disrepair. That's where we meet, you and me. That's the heartbeat of our faith. That's where my love for you

and your love for me are exchanged, and understood, sometimes by teaching, sometimes by offerings, sometimes by ritual and worship and symbols, sometimes just by being here. When are you going to fix the church?”, God wanted to know.

Well, the people of Israel took notice. They rebuilt the altar, the spiritual heart of the Temple. They rebuilt the Temple, the spiritual heart of the nation. Then they got back to rebuilding their houses, AND their businesses, AND their defenses, AND their lives. But first, they put their beloved church in good order.

The Israelites succeeded because “they had a mind to build.” As we’ll sing in a moment, in the words of Timothy Dwight, they “loved their church.”

You know when I started writing this sermon? It was Super Bowl Sunday, during our Annual Meeting. I sat right down there in the second row, listening to folks talk about our church, one after another, with such love, such affection, such faith in the essential goodness of our people and the religion we put into practice. I took notes!

“This church cares and delivers,” said one.

“We’re active, visible, an example to the whole community,” said another.

“...always aware, alive, productive, not stagnant, not insular.”

“There’s a beauty and spirit here,” and what we are aiming for is to be “brighter, more welcoming...” so that our “faith shines even brighter.”

Any of you remember Geza Bodner? He owned the Mercedes dealership downtown and was one of those 1956 Hungarian refugees who fled Russia's tanks and the horror of communism to find freedom in America. He came to America with \$2, he told me, and began by polishing wood floors. One Christmas Eve, he walked up Bronson Road in the dark until he saw our church, shining bright, and inside, people believing in the miracle of God's love shining through Christ.

From that moment on, he knew he was home, he knew he'd be alright, he knew God's love was here.

We're just trying to brighten up for the next 300 years.