

Nehemiah 4:7-23

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work. From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me. Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!" So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. At that time I also said to the people, "Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and workmen by day." Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

Today's passage of Scripture is striking in its similarity to that which so often transpires in many of today's churches. How many ministers and/or members have been taken to task by individuals and/or groups within the church for stepping out into the unknown with thoughts of new and/or different ministries? So often a minister can be called on the carpet to explain some new direction or some new ministry he/she deems necessary to a particular church. The minister then faces the challenge of communicating, and as bad as it sounds the selling of that which he/she perceives to be God's **VISION** for the church. The human factor is such in churches today that God's vision or direction may threaten the current comfort level and/or power structure of a church. Old attitudes, likes and dislikes, and/or old stereotypes prevent churches from genuinely being open to the not so gentle nudgings of the Holy Spirit.

In this morning's passage, Nehemiah is faced with a desperate situation; he is heading up a building project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in spite of nothing but opposition from the local people and the current power structure.

Nehemiah must not only hold off the constant pressure from all those who did not want the change, but at the same time he had to continue to encourage those who were doing the work by getting them to realize this was God's vision and not just his alone.

I knew a young minister who was called to a church in a small town. The church membership had been in decline for several years. The PPRC had expressed a desire that the people were eager to experience growth in its membership and its programs. They also expressed a desire to reach young families and their children. This particular church had not been effective in ministry to young families for many years. The young minister brought in a new energy and new ideas. Within six months worship attendance had grown forty percent! People began re-turning to the church. A new Sunday School class was started; a new choir was started, which brought with it an offering of more contemporary music for worship. People were excited about the growth and especially all of the new young families that were now attending. But then a concern was raised. What could the concern be? One of the elder, more influential members of the church, honestly and

in all seriousness, said, “I’m concerned. All of a sudden, we have so many younger people attending and/or joining our church. Actually, I personally believe we have too many young people joining the church.”

Is it any wonder why churches struggle to reflect vitality? In so many ways people seek to guard the status quo. When people seek to do nothing but maintain the status quo, they in essence limit the work of the Holy Spirit and impair their ability to be effective witnesses within the community. The good news about all of this is that, in spite of our fears and our lack of faith, we cannot completely restrict the Holy Spirit’s work in the church. In spite of the human factor, in spite of our selfishness, pettiness, or arrogance there is also the divine factor at work in the church. The criticism expressed to Nehemiah certainly did not keep him or those committed from accomplishing their mission.

The same is true for us. God will have God’s way with the church. Despite any of our personal agendas, it is God’s purpose that will be fulfilled in the life of God’s church. This morning’s Scripture passage can lead us to the right objectives. We are to seek a vision from God. Everyone who attends church has his or her own idea of

what the church should be or what they believe the church should be.

The challenge then is to derive unity within the church with people who have such divergent views regarding the church's mission.

That unity stems from our relationship with Christ and our desire to please God. If each one of us genuinely seeks **God's purpose** for the church, our vision of what the church should be will become God's vision, and by allowing God's Spirit to work in our lives to shape our understanding of what God wants to accomplish through **His** church, we can work together to develop one vision for His church, a vision which comes from God. Nehemiah had a vision from God. His vision had new walls being rebuilt around Jerusalem, which he set out to do.

We have the ability to fulfill God's vision of the Church; a vision which draws all people together in unity. All we need is the proper motivation. It will require that every one of us set aside personal agendas and seek God's agenda for His Church. If we can work together to determine God's vision for the Church, there is no limit to what we can accomplish for the good of God's kingdom; there is no limit to what we can accomplish through Landrum UMC.

In this morning's passage we read of people working diligently towards a primary goal and all the while they are under constant attack from those who disagree with what they are doing. These people worked together for one purpose; some worked while others stood guard and vice versa. We too should do the same. While people are working together to accomplish the vision of God's church the rest should be standing guard and defending what is being done not seeking to disrupt, tear down, and/or stop what is being done. We should all respond to God's direction through the Holy Spirit.

Despite the criticisms and oppositions Nehemiah received and any misgivings he might have had of his own, he followed God's leading. As a result of his faithfulness, Nehemiah witnessed and experienced things he would otherwise have missed.

Who are we to stand in the way of God and God's desire for **His** church? So often our biases prevent us from opening our hearts and our lives to the renewing presence of God and **His** Spirit. Many are fearful of any changes that might be required of us so we close our hearts off to anything and everything.

Out of fear of the unknown or a stubborn refusal to grow in new directions, we refuse to risk the vulnerability that is required if we are to be truly open to God. We tend to step only on solid ground; ground we can see and have walked before, instead of stepping out in faith and into the unknown with and for God.

I wonder how many blessings we miss out on because we stubbornly refuse to hear the messages God sends our way. Instead of seeking to determine God's will for our lives, many do what they want and **then** seek God's approval for what they have done. We limit God's purpose for us with our lack of vision and our lack of expectancy about what God can do in and through us.

Peter once said, "*Who am I to hinder God?*" We could ask the same question of ourselves. Who are we to stand in God's way? When we are truly open to God's leadership, the Christian way of life becomes exciting and unpredictable. As we learn to trust in God's direction for our lives, we will discover blessings and new meaning for our lives which far surpass our greatest expectations.

We must learn to live with expectancy and hopefulness about what God has planned for us. If we genuinely trust in God and God's direction for us, we will become excited about what the future holds for us. Regardless of the circumstances of our lives, we can look to the future with great anticipation about the things God will teach us and the ways in which God will sustain our every need.

Children of God should expect the unexpected with and from God. We can and will receive unexpected blessings if we seek to develop God's vision for **His** church, if we will respond to God's leadership, and if we have a high level of expectation regarding what God can do in and through us. With these objectives, our experience in the church will be more meaningful and fulfilling. Let the words of Paul be our guide: *"There is one body and one Spirit ... one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all."* It's time God's people stop constructing destruction over changes in direction and seek to work together to follow God's leading for God's church.