

WCA—Global Legislative Assembly—Closing WORHIP
LEADING OUT of RUBBLE
Nehemiah 2:13-20

Story: I am a second generation UM pastor. I was eight years old when the UM Church was formed—and remember Dad bringing home t-shirts and other stuff with the cross and flame on them. My Dad’s name was Harold—and he was my pastor, colleague and friend. He died in 2009—and I miss him every day.

I have been thinking a lot about my Dad lately. Dad—never paid attention to this stuff. He loved Jesus and the people that Jesus loves—EVERYONE—and faithfully pastored his congregations. Every congregation he served grew—not by letters of transfer, but by professions of faith. He LOVED Annual Conference—not because of the “business” but because of the relationships—but he never dreamed of speaking on the floor of Annual Conference. Dad did most of his important work during conference in the coffee shop with his many friends.

When I was ordained—I was interested in and even felt called to make a difference in the larger church—and Dad could tell. We sat together every year in Clergy Session and on the floor of Annual Conference—and would often engage in conversation about the action on the floor—but never engaged. That changed one day in the early ‘90’s. A pastor from my home conference who eventually became a Bishop was speaking. I found myself in disagreement with him—and told my Dad what I thought and how I would respond. He said, “Go ahead.” I said that I wouldn’t speak at Conference—and when he pressed me as to why—I said it was because he had never spoken from the floor. I will never forget his response. He said, “Jeff, I made a mistake. I didn’t think that any of this stuff mattered—but I was wrong.” He gave his permission—and that is why I am here.

My Mom and I were talking about him recently, and she said, “I am so glad your Dad is gone. He would not understand or recognize what the church has become.” I agree.

Yet—here we are—knee deep in an ecclesial mess—and what is needed is dependence upon God and resilient leadership to move us into the future—with a renewed Wesleyan/Methodist Movement. I have been reading a lot in Nehemiah

lately—which is a great book for those who are called or thrust into leadership in difficult circumstances.

Nehemiah’s story of hearing the call to and then leading the people to REBUILD the wall around the city of Jerusalem is a must read. In fact, it might provide a roadmap for us in these schismatic and destructive times. Jerusalem had been completely destroyed—not one stone was left upon another—by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The leaders of God’s people had been carted off and scattered throughout the Babylonian empire. Those who remained were the poor and destitute—and because they did not have a walled city to protect them—they were the victim of constant raids by the people around them.

Nehemiah is the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes of Babylon when receives word that Jerusalem lies in ruin and its residents are a laughingstock. God moves in Nehemiah’s heart. Eventually, Nehemiah asks the King’s permission to return to the city of his ancestors and rebuild the walls. Artaxerxes names Nehemiah governor of Jerusalem, gives him permission, as well as the money and protection he needs to REBUILD the WALLS.

Chapter 2 records Nehemiah’s arrival in Jerusalem—and provides some good advice for those who wish to BUILD the NEXT METHODISM. The first is: **DO an ASSESSMENT.** Once Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he rests for three days—but before he tells any of the leaders in Jerusalem what his intentions are, Nehemiah goes out at night with a small group of people to INSPECT the extent of the damage to the walls and to begin to DEVELOP a PLAN. As the governor, he now has ownership responsibility for Jerusalem—and he is INSPECTING just how extensive the damage is—so that he can develop a clear and concise plan of action. After his inspection, Nehemiah reports to Jerusalem’s leaders and people, **‘YOU SEE the TROUBLE we are in: Jerusalem lies in RUINS, and its GATES have been BURNED with FIRE.’” (2:17a)**

Nehemiah doesn’t sugarcoat the situation. The walls have been in rubble for 150 years. This is a BIG JOB—but IGNORING IT will not make it any SMALLER.

Some United Methodists have gotten so used to the brokenness in our DENOMINATION—that we cannot see the RUBBLE all around us. In fact, some would contend that all that needs to be done is “hold the line at the called GC” —

and we will be fine. I disagree. We tend to trivialize how much the consequential competing theologies have become—how extensive the damage from ecclesial disobedience—and how unrealistic unity is when we do not share a common interpretational approach to Scripture or a shared common understanding of the foundational beliefs of our faith.

I think I understand how Nehemiah must have felt. For the last two years—the WCA Council has been ASSESSING the REALITY of the DENOMINATIONAL RUBBLE we find ourselves in. What is working? What is not? Where is the biggest weakness? What is the greatest threat? What needs to be repaired? What needs to be replaced? What needs to be discarded?

The WCA has done an ASSESSMENT of the rubble of our CONNECTION—and what needs to be done to BUILD the FOUNDATION of what a NEXT or RENEWED METHODISM should look like. This time has NOT been WASTED.

As the NEXT STEPS Working Group of the WCA does its work—we are not interested in BUILDING on a FAULTY FOUNDATION—or to quote my friend, Chris Ritter, “We are not interested in RE-INVENTING the ROTARY PHONE.” We are interested in recovering our historic Wesleyan DNA in movemental form.

Back to the text—the job in front of Nehemiah is too BIG for him to accomplish by himself. So he **INVITES EVERYONE to PARTICIPATE**. He calls to the people of Jerusalem in verse 17 says: **“Come, LET US REBUILD the WALL of Jerusalem, and we will NO LONGER be in DISGRACE.’ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, “LET US START REBUILDING.” So they began this GOOD WORK.” (2:17b-18)**

It is not enough to just describe the situation. Everyone knows the walls are in rubble—the key is inspiring everyone to do their part. Nehemiah distributes the work by family—each family is responsible for REBUILDING and REPAIRING the section of the wall closest to their HOME. This is pure genius—the people are most likely to work the hardest to REBUILD the portion of the wall that directly PROTECTS their HOMES and FAMILIES.

Nehemiah shows implicit trust in God’s provision and the people’s capacity to get the job done—and in the end, the people respond, “Let us REBUILD.” Standing

there in the rubble of what once was—they understand that the answer is not going back in time—or to continue to stand in rubble—but rather to live into the future by going through the tough work of REBUILDING.

We stand at that place in this GLOBAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY. It is time for us to diligently and deliberately INVITE PARTICIPATION. We need to be talking with colleagues and congregations and help them understand the state of the church and the RUBBLE we are standing in—and then engage them in building for what is coming in our home contexts. We need to DESCRIBE the SITUATION and INVITE them to PARTICIPATE in the SOLUTION. We cannot do this ALONE!

But remember—as we find ourselves standing in the RUBBLE of what once was—the answer is not to GO BACK and relive the PAST—the answer is not to WALLOW in the PRESENT—the answer is to REBUILD and PUSH THROUGH to the FUTURE.

The third piece of good advice this passage holds for us—**ANTICIPATE OPPOSITION**. As soon as they start to REBUILD the walls, Nehemiah 2:19 tells us that they face opposition. It reads, **“But when SANBALLAT the Horonite, TOBIAH the Ammonite official and GESHEM the Arab heard about it, they MOCKED and RIDICULED us. ‘What is this you are doing?’ they asked. ‘Are you REBELLING against the king?’” (2:19)**

Sanballat—Tobiah—and Geshem—are mocking and ridiculing the people—trying to distract them from the work—and inferring that Nehemiah is not to be trusted. This sounds vaguely familiar. They threaten the people and plot to kill Nehemiah. These three have a vested interest in keeping Jerusalem weak and diminished—so that they can continue to attack and steal from them. Opposition started the very first day—and continued even after the walls were completed. They threaten to tattle to King Artaxerxes—but Nehemiah reminds them that Artaxerxes had sent him. They threaten to attack—but Nehemiah has the people work with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other. They invite Nehemiah to come and meet with them on the plains of Ono on four different occasions—and Nehemiah responds that he is doing God’s work and is not about to be distracted. The fifth time they send an unsealed letter—the equivalent of writing and posting an open letter online. Throughout—Nehemiah is undaunted in his courage and REFUSES to allow them to distract him.

Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem are constant reminders that when we decide we are going to attempt to DO SOMETHING GREAT for GOD—to REBUILD a DENOMINATION—to REPAIR a BROKEN COVENANT—to RENEW a WESLEYAN/METHODIST MOVEMENT—to RECLAIM the rich theological foundation of our TRADITION—WE WILL FACE OPPOSITION. COUNT on IT.

Nehemiah refuses to even engage his opposition after a while. He understands that when we decide we are going to REBUILD—to REPAIR—to RENEW—to RECLAIM or TAKE BACK TERRITORY that has been in the HANDS of the ENEMY—WE WILL FACE OPPOSITION—and sometimes it comes from the most surprising places. Where does your OPPOSITION come from?

Let me tell you the potential impact of opposition. If I allow it to take root in my soul it results in lost sleep, discouragement and even depression. I have experienced it all over the years—personal attacks through anonymous notes—angry phone calls—cyber-harassment—being told I am not relevant—out of touch—and a scourge to the Church. If I am not careful—that kind of opposition can distract and discourage me—but it has much less impact if I realize it comes with the territory.

As we decide to REBUILD from this RUBBLE—We WILL FACE OPPOSITION. Expect it—and ignore it. There is never a lot of traffic in the HIGH ROAD. Don't allow OPPOSITION of ATTACK to be a distraction. Press on. What we are fighting for is worth it!

Nehemiah ends in this passage by showing us the strength of always choosing to do the NEXT RIGHT THING when following Jesus. He reminds us to **TRUST GOD and STAY the COURSE**. Throughout the book, Nehemiah faces opposition by PRAYING and DECLARING FAITH. He refuses to get DISTRACTED. He will not let it stop what he believes needs to be done. Verse 20 tells us that Nehemiah was unphased by the opposition. Let's read the last verse together: **“I answered them by saying, ‘The GOD of heaven will GIVE US SUCCESS. We his servants will start REBUILDING...’” (2:20)** In other words, he refused to give them the time of day.

I have thousands of Facebook “friends”—and not all of them are friends. There are fellow clergy I have known for over 30 years who took to harass me on social media. At first, I tried to engage them—to respond rather than react—to try to

“reason” with them—but nothing worked—until I ignored them. When I ignored them—it took the teeth out of their attacks.

Nehemiah has some good advice: When opposition comes—and it will—PRAY—TRUST GOD and STAY the COURSE. Do what God is calling you to do. Don’t allow opponents the satisfaction. What we are trying to accomplish in God’s name is important—or else we would not be drawing the attention we are drawing.

Nehemiah’s OBEDIENCE and FAITHFULNESS are effective. In Nehemiah chapter 6, we read this amazing verse. **“So the WALL WAS COMPLETED...in FIFTY-TWO days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were AFRAID and LOST their SELF-CONFIDENCE, because they realized that this work had been DONE with the HELP of the LORD our GOD.” (6:15-16)**

52 days! This was an amazing feat—that could not have been accomplished without the GRACE of GOD and the laser-focused DETERMINATION of NEHEMIAH. All this occurred because ONE MAN—who heard God’s call upon his life to REBUILD the WALLS out of the RUBBLE of Jerusalem—ASSESSED what needed to be done—INVITED everyone who would benefit to PARTICIPATE—refused to be DISTRACTED by OPPOSITION—and TRUSTED GOD as he STAYED the COURSE.

But there is one more thing he did—which I think was consequential to everything else. He LEADS them in REPENTANCE. Chapter 5, Nehemiah sees a conflict arise among the people working on the wall. Some of the rich people had been taking advantage of the poor. Now—they were working next to each other—and the sins of the PAST were crippling their ability to work together in the PRESENT toward the FUTURE. Nehemiah calls them to REPENT—to STOP DOING what is DESTRUCTIVE to ONE another—and to START DOING what leads to LIFE. Sometimes—the best way to LEAD OUT of the RUBBLE is on our KNEES.

My concern in our movement—is that we may get so CAUGHT UP in DOING what is RIGHT—that we will IGNORE what is WRONG. We could win every vote—and get everything we want—but that will fix NOT what has us sick unto death. The lesson of scripture and every great revival in history is that until we humble ourselves and REPENT—the REVIVAL we YEARN FOR will be STIFLED. We need to REPENT of our failure to be an obedient church—REPENT of not being faithful to reaching salvation to the uttermost—REPENT of failing to redemptively love the

sexually broken and offer them saving and sanctifying grace—REPENT of institutionalizing our racism—REPENT of allowing ourselves to major on the minors as the world goes to hell in a handbasket—REPENT of not expecting one other to live by the highest ideals of faith and character—REPENT of not being willing to speak the truth in love and hold one another accountable in the process. Until we REPENT—the FAITHFUL and FRUITFUL FUURE we YEARN for will continue to ALUDE US. We need a SPIRIT of REPENTANCE—for God to grant us FAVOR for the living of these days. Where do you NEED to REPENT? Where do we NEED to REPENT?