

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Faithful: Rebuilding the Wall and Celebration
Nehemiah 12:27, Ezra 3:10-13

We're on the verge of a construction season here. For those who are new, we spent much of last year getting ready for our sixtieth anniversary and feeling led to do some work in our community that would make this a place that is more open to anybody who would want to come, and so the construction is about to start, actually. We've been working with the architect as three different general contractors came in and made presentations last week, and we're within a week of selecting a general contractor. We asked them about their schedules and what they thought would happen, and most of them said, "Well, it looks like we could start just before Christmas or just after Christmas." We said, "Why don't we make that just after Christmas." We're excited because when you see a picture that looks like this of construction (shows picture on screen) you have a sense that there's life there; that they're not through, that there's not only incompleteness, but there's a plan moving forward. It's an exciting time. As a matter of fact, the cathedrals that dot Europe have fits and starts in their construction. They literally take hundreds of years to finish until they go up to the skies, and in almost all of those cathedrals, there is in one corner of the building—there isn't in the National Cathedral of D.C. by the way—a pile of bricks that gives the idea that we are not finished yet. When you build you say, *we are not finished yet*, whether it's new construction or rebuilding broken walls. But as people see the cranes here and all the yellow tape, they will realize there are some real inconveniences as well. Look at the next slide here. This is for those of you who have been to the Holy Land. This is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The people are all standing inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but that little place surrounded by scaffolding, that's the original Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Almost two thousand years old, it has been built and rebuilt and added on to and rebuilt, so that it is not a one-time thing. We're all in that process, as a church and as individuals. In some ways construction never stops, and I'd like to talk about what our church is going to look like, and what's your life in process? Where are you right now? Does your life need a complete remodel? Have the walls fallen down or are you just starting the great adventure and you're doing great?

The story we're going to tell today comes after the story of the Ebenezer. Remember last week we talked about the Ebenezer? The stones are actually out there—a pile of stones that came from the center of the Jordan River when the people of Israel were going into the Promised Land. God split the Jordan River, so the Israelites picked stones out of the middle and put them in a big pile as a reminder of what God had done. When the kids and the grandkids, and the great-grandkids go by and see the pile of rocks, they learn that *this is the place where God saved us. This is the Ebenezer, a stone of help; this is where God helped us.*

Our story today comes after the Israelites entered the Promised Land and after the time of the kings. The kings built the temples and they built the walls of Jerusalem. Our story comes after the time when there was a civil war that split the nation and made it vulnerable. It comes after the time when invading armies came and destroyed the temple and knocked down the walls of the city and knocked down all the Ebenezer's—saying *your God has had His day, He's done*—and they scattered the people of Israel all around the Mediterranean, all over the Babylonian and Syrian Empires. Then we come to a new chapter in the story. God taps a man named Zerubbabel and says, "Bring some of the people back home, their story is not done." God taps a priest named Ezra and says, "See if you can't rebuild that temple as a sign of your god." God taps a man named Nehemiah, a politician, fancy that. He taps a politician and says, "Go back home and rebuild the wall. The wall is the sign that this is a secure place to live." So Ezra and Nehemiah do that at about the same time.

We joked last night that we're delighted that Melissa is here. I'm not as sure about Nick (her husband)! Nick is a PhD candidate. He's going to finish at Vanderbilt. He focuses on Old Testament and the Jewish influence on Christianity, so I'm a little afraid to talk about Old Testament the way that I use to, being able to just make it up! I mean, let's face it: I went to seminary when Abraham Lincoln was president, but I think I remember correctly that the story of Ezra and the story of Nehemiah are two different Old Testament books. They were originally one scroll, one book told from two different perspectives, the priest and the politician talking about the rebuilding of the temple wall and the rebuilding of the city wall, and this is what happens next. Nehemiah says this:

²⁷ At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication . . .
⁴³ And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away. [Nehemiah 12:27, 43]

That's in Nehemiah. Listen to the same thing happening in Ezra. In Ezra it says:

¹⁰ Then the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord, just as prescribed by King David of Israel. ¹¹ With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: "He is good; His love toward Israel endures forever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. [Ezra 3:10]

People always get excited when they see the buildings going up. They said, "God is good!" but that's not quite the way that Ezra ends the story. Ezra keeps going and he says:

¹² But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the old temple (the original temple in Jerusalem), they wept aloud when they saw this temple being built, while the young ones shouted for joy. ¹³ Nobody could distinguish

the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away. [Ezra 3:12-13]

I think that's true this morning. I think there is the sound of great joy, of being here with God's people and with a good God. And I think there's also the sound of weeping and wailing and broken-hearted, broken-walled people, and these are happening at the same time. Now, you can't hear it because you're Minnesotans, but it's happening right now in churches and in individuals, and as excited as we get about new buildings being built, there is more reconstruction of broken walls than there are new starts in the United States. And that's good, because rebuilding walls and repairing walls is a sign of hope. Things went bad, we're fixing it, it will be better. It also says we're not going anywhere. Rebuilding our walls here says God has called us to this place. God is the specialist in rebuilding broken lives and restoring broken walls. From Moses the murderer, to David the adulterer, to Jonah the runaway, to Peter the traitor, to Rahab the harlot, to Mary Magdalene the confused, to Doubting Thomas, all through the story, one of the names that people have for God is that He is the "Rebuilder of walls." If you feel like you're about to mess up, you're in good company and God is close by. He is the restorer and the redeemer. The key is not *am I a broken-down person?* Let me tell you the truth: you're a broken-down person. The key is what happens next.

Will you end up letting your fear and your despair turn into cynicism and throw your faith away? Or will you stop and find a sense of hope and new joy? One of the reasons I love the Olympics is because they are life lived fast and visually. This year in the Olympics we saw a great track and field. Especially, remember the guy who trained with his friend for the 10,000 meters and the world record holder was running with his friend, and they tripped together? The world record holder fell to the ground, rolled up, and still won the race. Cool story. Remember too, the long race where the two women were running together, somebody fell in front of them, they both fell over each other, and instead of running on, first one and then the other went back and helped the person get up. Great stories, right? The reality is a little harder in life. I'd like to show you . . . change the metaphor for just a second . . . I'd like to show you what it can look like in other settings.

In 1984, the Olympics were in LA, and the world record holder was Mary Decker. She was running against Zola Budd. You guys may remember that Zola was the one who ran barefoot. So, there she is running barefoot, looking back at Mary Decker. Mary had just taken a fall, and wasn't bouncing back up. As a matter of fact, the signature picture of that Olympics may have been what came next (showing pictures). Mary fell and didn't get back up. Many of you feel like that. I'd like to contrast that with somebody else. He's a missionary. I would show this clip every week in church if I could get away with it. It's two minutes long (shows video). Yes! That's the way it should be in life – yes! But I want to make sure we catch what's going on here. It's not that he won the race. We're all about winners; we love the comeback kids, we want that to be our story. The key is that we all get knocked down, all of us are broken people. It's what happens next. The night before that race Chariots of Fire race, Eric Liddell had been preaching and he used Isaiah 40. He said it in that cool Scottish accent:

For even young men grow weary and fall and all will stumble, but those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary. [Isaiah 40:30-31]

All will fall. What happens next? Why do people's lives fall apart? How do they break and what happens next? I just want to go through that for a couple minutes. I think—as I prayed about this—I think the story of Isaiah, of Ezra and Nehemiah, of Christ Presbyterian, says walls break for these reasons.

First, people get overwhelmed by things from the outside; outside forces knock down walls. Sometimes it's an illness, you didn't deserve it and you can't do anything about it. Illness changes life. Job loss, broken relationships, relocation, catastrophes in the larger world. Sometimes it just happens to you. The wall breaks. Sometimes though, it's not so much that the wall breaks, but we're doing the same thing. Churches face this all the time. We're doing the exact same thing we use to do. It's not that anything went wrong—the world changed! I believe the world has changed. I believe we live in a post-Christian world where it's not assumed that people will come to church. I say, "Thank God for that." I don't want people to come in here because they have to. But with that comes a distance between the church and society and we can, with our culture wars, start to make enemies of the bad people and talk about the good old days, and people outside the church can look at us and say, "Oh, how quaint. How irrelevant." They look at the church and the church doesn't look like, *come here, come here*. The church often looks like, *oh, you better straighten up*. And the wall between us is broken down.

I'd say the other common reason that people's lives break down and churches break down is when your relational world changes. You are so much, we are all so much driven in life by our friendships and our neighborhoods. The people we spend time with change us, and when we disengage and lose our friends or our friends do not reinforce the good, but instead drag us toward the bad, the walls begin to go down.

I'm in a total rabbit hole. I had a Bible study this morning with a group of guys I meet with about once a month, and because we can't find another time to get together, we got together early this morning. One of the guys said, "You know, this group is changing my life kind of. I had a trip to San Francisco with some guys, and in the normal course of things they were saying, 'Hey, let's go out.'" They had been in Napa all day. "Hey, let's go out. And I said, 'Wow, okay' and then I thought you know, I'm not sure that usually ends well, and I thought of this group and I thought of the kinds of friends I wanted to have and I said, 'Hey guys, I'm just bushed'", and he called his wife. Small thing.

Where do you look for the cracks in your wall? Where do you look for the cracks in the wall of this church? You know some of the cracks I see? I see a big crack right over here and it's labeled fear. When you see fearful people...what are they afraid of, why are they afraid? Fearful people react poorly. Another crack I see is people who are weary. You run. You run so much, you travel so much, you accomplish so much. Whether you are a senior in high school or you've retired and nobody would believe

from looking at your day timer that you've retired. We are fast people and we get weary, and sometimes when we get weary one of the ways that crack shows is in a resistance. *Really? We've got to learn another song? Didn't we just learn a new song last week? They're coming at us for more money? Didn't we give money last week?* Our weariness is a crack in the wall. We get tired of the discipline and it is a discipline of listening for God's voice whether that's worship, or study, or friendships, or service, or prayer . . . are you tired of it? That's a crack in the wall. I think another crack in the wall that I see particularly in churches, particularly in affluent white churches that are out in the suburbs—I don't know any of those, but I've heard they exist—particularly in churches like that, you tend to become self-satisfied and self-absorbed, and the crack shows that you are self-focused. You want to know what a church really believes? Look at their budget. How much of their staff, how much of their programs, how much of their work is toward us and ours verses how much God is calling us to go out there? It can be a crack in the wall. We need to attend to it.

The last one I scribbled down was secrets. All of us have secrets, but some of us have secrets that damage us. Again, with this group of guys this morning, one of them said, "I've got to ask you for some advice. I didn't do anything wrong, but I got into a situation that I think I've handled well, but the question is: should I tell my boss or not?" And what we came to see was that there is a power in keeping secrets. Secrets hurt us. As he lets his boss in, his boss will gain confidence in the integrity of this guy instead of being surprised later. But it's hard; it's a crack in the wall.

You know what the biggest one is? The biggest crack in the wall? It's called pride. You are proud people and you have a lot to be proud about. You have worked hard, some of you have studied, you have done well and you're trying as hard as you can. You have a lot to be proud of. The challenge for proud people of faith is that all those other things come into play. They keep secrets, they get afraid, they obsess with themselves, their pride stops them, and you know how I know it? Because I have been here for 27 years and I know you, but mostly I know it because I know myself.

I've told this story before. Probably ten years or so ago now our kids had grown out of the house and we wanted to move closer to the cities, closer to the lakes, get a smaller house. Laura found this perfect little house, beautiful little place, and we put our house on the market. The realtor said, "This is a great time to sell! It will probably take a month or two". So, we signed the contract and had a couple months wait. By the time we were finishing the contract for the new house our house still hadn't sold. The guy said, "Well, it might be another month or two, is that okay with you?" And I was nervous, but I didn't want to admit that I might have made a mistake. I was so nervous that the night before we closed on the second house, Laura rolled over and said, "Oh honey, you know I love this house, but if you think this is a mistake, let's just forget it. We'll give them the ten thousand dollars of earnest money and just walk away", and looking back ten years later, you know why we didn't do that? Because I didn't want to tell you how stupid I'd been to lose ten thousand dollars. You know what happened next? We owned two houses for almost a year, and I didn't lose ten thousand dollars, I lost a quarter of a million dollars probably. I lost all the equity in our house because in a down market you

don't sell the house as so much as you give it away and say, "Hey, have a good time." The reason I'm telling you that story is because pride is in every one of your hearts, every one, and so you won't look up here for the fount of wisdom.

C.S. Lewis says, "Think of me as a fellow-patient in the same hospital with the same disease, but I've been admitted a littler earlier and so maybe I can give you some advice." That's how we're in this together. What does God say to people who have broken down the walls? How do you rebuild them? How does God rebuild walls? I think I can tell you pretty quickly. **The first way that God rebuilds walls is He says, "Don't fix it, admit it!"** Oops! And then you scramble around trying to put the bricks together. Don't fix it, admit it. My favorite verse in the whole Bible is in the middle of the story of the prodigal son. He's in a pigpen and he's up to his knees in mud. It says, "When he came to his senses he said, 'I'm going to go back to my father and say I messed up.'" And that's where the grace of God finishes His story. Some of you need to stop working so hard trying to fix it and confess to God that you've messed up. It's so hard. It's so hard. Can I just say especially that it's so hard for you men to do this and it's so essential for you to do this? No poking allowed, okay? How does God rebuild walls? Don't fix it, admit it.

The second is don't get stronger, get weaker because in the life of the followers of God, strength is made perfect in weakness. We focus on God and not on us. It says, "Unless the Lord builds the house . . ." There needs to be, at Christ Presbyterian Church, a refreshed sense of humility. We are broken people and we tell broken stories and God shines through the cracks. Pain, and loss, and strain, they are the graduate schools of faith. It's where rebuilding happens and people on the outside hunger to know that we are not together, that we don't have some secret. We are all in the process of rebuilding broken lives. Will we admit it or will we let people still think we've got it all together? Laura spoke at Mom's Morning to kick-off the year—my wife is Laura—and she could have done the, you know, *I'm this successful mom, my kids are beautiful, my kids are smart, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, I've got this blog, blah, blah, blah, blah, I know the Bible...* And instead she said, *let me tell you about the places where I've screwed up and the places where I've been hurting and how God helped me through that process.* And woman after woman, young mom after young mom came up and said, "Oh, I thought I was the only one!"

That's the third part of this. Don't fix it admit it, strength comes from weakness, and **the third thing is that God fixes walls when the wailing mixes with the cheering.** We should be able to celebrate life together and say, "Yeah, God! Yeah, God! Edina won, can you believe it?" We ought to cheer together and we ought to be able to wail together. This ought to be the fellowship of the bleeding heart. We need to make sure that we are not building a beautiful house that looks like that, a pavilion for saints. We need to build a hospital for sinners. That's what this addition needs to be about.

We often forget our purpose in building and we're surprised when we see the new cracks coming, but God is there to help us again. He focuses not on our programs, and not on our memories, and not on our buildings, He focuses us on our purpose. I heard

that purpose restated again by a friend the other day. He said he and his family were on the East Coast on vacation in the Nantucket/Cape Cod area, and they went to a museum of an organization that's over 300 years old. It's called the Humane Society and it's not the way we use it today as a place where you go and help animals. The Humane Society was formed on the East Coast of New England in the 1600-1700's when sea travel was so dangerous because of storms and bad navigation. Ships would often crash and people would die within a mile of the shore—the most dangerous part of the trip. And the Humane Society said, *let's do something about that* and they built what were called Huts of Refuge. Huts of Refuge. All up and down the New England coast, they built Huts of Refuge. I ought to make my house a hut of refuge. Christ Presbyterian Church needs to be a hut of refuge. In that hut of refuge, one person stayed 24 hours, seven days a week, and they looked out to see—especially when the weather was bad—they looked out, and when they saw a ship in trouble, when they saw a ship go down, they broke out these boats and they rang the bell and all the people, all volunteers—none of whom knew anybody in the ships—got in the boats and pulled out to see if they could save lives. The word would go out. They did it for no recognition, just because they prized human life. To remind themselves how important a job it was, how important the Humane Society was, they made up a motto. You know what their motto was? “You have to go out, but you don't have to come back.” If you're part of the Humane Society, you're saying *those people's lives matter; we have to go out, we don't have to come back*. Thousands of lives saved. It was such a success that it stayed, decade after decade after decade. They kept improving it, and they improved it by gathering their taxes together...and the improvement was the United States Coast Guard. And the Coast Guard and the Humane Society worked together for decades saving lives, and then the problem became that the Coast Guard did it so much better. The volunteers said, “Well, let them do it.” And do you know what the Coast Guards motto is? “You have to go out, but you don't have to come back.”

Finally, the Coast Guard was making all the rescues. The interesting thing was that the Humane Society did not disband. It kept its building, it kept its meetings. It meets every once-in-a-while in Boston or in New England to have dinners. They hand out awards for things like community service. They enjoy each other's company. They sponsor programs. They get together. They just aren't in the life-saving business any more. They don't scour the coastline to see if anybody is going down. They don't know the thrill, any more, of *okay, let's do this*. They don't speak those words to each other: *We have to go out there, people are hurting, but we don't have to come back*.

It happens all the time. It doesn't happen in a day. It happens in a season, over a month, over a decade, over time...a church forgets that it's in the life-saving business. Oh wait, a church is in the life-saving business? But we've got all these meetings, and programs, and staff, and communities, and services, and some community service, but are we still sending people out to those that are going down? A lot of churches aren't just scouring neighborhoods, offices, schools, networks, and cities to see if there is anybody out there whose wall is broken down and needs to be saved. A lot of churches forgot that Jesus put this rescue business in the hands of volunteers who would love the people that God loves so much. It can happen to a church, to a small group, to a family,

to you. Have you received enough grace lately that you want to share grace with people that are hurting?

Whether or not CPC stays in the life-saving business does not depend on how cool the new addition looks. Whether we stay in the life-saving business depends on you and me and this room, because Jesus is still looking for people. Jesus is still looking for people in the life-saving business, because that is what the church of Jesus is called to do.

Lord Jesus, thank You for this time. We're excited about the start of fall. We're excited about the new building. We're excited about how you bring folks to us, but today I've been reminded that there are a lot of my friends here with cracks in their walls and many others who won't admit that the walls have tumbled. I pray that they will not try to fix it, but to commit it to You and to others that love them. And Lord, there are others of us here who are doing so well, but we are so busy. We're so busy we don't see the people around us who need the grace and the mercy of Jesus Christ, as You've given it to us. And I pray that as we rebuild these walls, as You rebuild our lives, that Your grace will go ahead of You, and Your grace will send us out. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.