

Nehemiah 1:3-11

Building and Re-Building

Sunday November 13, 2011

Rev. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

During November our worship theme is **History**. We planned this theme to coincide with the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Town of Needham.

Last week some of our deacons took the parts of various leaders in the life of worship and faith in Needham, and in our church. The complete script for that history pageant is online. We also opened a history display in the Kimball Room last week. Our new archivist – Shala Howell has learned a lot and brought the stories of our church to life through the way she has organized the display and her writings about different periods in the history of the church.

As I read the letters and stories from the church archives, the people who came to this church and have been committed to it over many generations suddenly came to life in my imagination. The pictures and personal letters tell of a legacy of devotion to this church. For three centuries our Congregational forbears have gathered every Sunday. The first colonial farmers who worshipped in Needham prayed each week for their sovereign the King. They prayed for the new Republic. They asked God for guidance and strength during the French and Indian War, the War of Independence, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish War, two World Wars, Korea, Viet Nam, now Iraq and Afghanistan. They came on foot, and horseback, in buggies, and in cars, and now we are striving to come on foot again. Over time their notions about politics, technology, and faith evolved; yet for 300 years they gathered to worship God every Sunday. Like a relay race through history the clergy and people of this church ran their race and then passed the baton of faith on to each new generation.

This church was so significant in the life of Needham, that it reminds me of the Temple in Jerusalem. There in the center of the ancient city –then as now - sits the crown jewel of community life, the temple in Jerusalem. Stories like the one we read today about Nehemiah help us understand our history and our church today.

**In the first place, this church holds a prominent place at the center of this community.** For 1000 years from the time of King David until after Jesus died, the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of religious and community life for the Israelites. They prayed there. They brought babies to be dedicated there and sought the wisdom when life was confusing. The rabbis gathered at the temple to discuss and argued over scripture. Many Jews celebrated holy days there. The Temple was a sign of God's presence in their midst. The Temple reminded them how much God loved them, and how much they needed God's guidance.

In colonial America the parish church held the same kind of prominence in the community. You could not found a town until you established the parish. When the farmers in this area wanted to have their own parish, they petitioned the governor. The first requirement was to build a church and be prepared to provide for a minister. People could bring the parson extra food and firewood, but most town had to build a parsonage as a pre-requisite for incorporating. So when Needham celebrated the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the town, which was founded in November 1711, we are celebrating the founding of the parish church. The farm families wanted a place to gather, to learn about faith, to hear the news from England, to hire a school master. For farm families in the 1700's community life centered in the church.

Over the last 14 years serving this church I have officiated at several hundred funerals. In preparing for their services I would always invite the families to gather in my office and tell me about who their loved ones were over the span of their whole live times. Over and over I heard stories of men

and women who loved this church, and gained energy in serving God here. Frank Farwell served on the committee to build this new sanctuary. Madeline Page moved her family closer to the church, and took such pride in this church that she personally kept the church oven cleaner than her own. Jack Benson would enjoy telling stories about the days he served on the trustees before Dr. Smith came. Countless families have told me about how their parents put life on hold when it was time for the Holly Berry Fair. Other talked about parents who taught Sunday school or socialized with the Couples Club for decades here. Myrna Stanley loved to talk about the joy she had in the Linden Players. **This church has been at the center of community life.**

**In the second place, in hard times, people find strength in the church.** The passage we read today from Nehemiah tells of a time 500 years before Jesus lived. The Israelites were stubborn. They did not submit politely when other empires rolled over Israel. So the Babylonians got angry and destroyed the temple and took all the Israeli leaders away to Babylon. Eventually the Persians captured the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to go home. So when they returned they found their temple in shambles and started to build it again. But the people who had moved in during their absence kept destroying their work, and undoing the construction.

Nehemiah lived far from Jerusalem, and served the Persian king, but he was a Jew and his relatives sent word that every time they tried to rebuild the temple, the new people would tear it down again. Nehemiah was moved by their plight and took a risk in asking the king for a leave of absence so he could go to Jerusalem and lead the work of re-building the temple. To everyone's surprise, the king of Persian was touched by Nehemiah and granted his unusual request.

In the history of this church it is amazing to me how often the people had to start over. There were at least 6 fires in 300 years. There were four fires in the last 150 years. Often the people of this church have persevered most valiantly when they were up against the greatest odds.

In the 1850's the parish church split in this town and every town around. Rev. Charles Dall was influenced by Emerson and Thorough when he studied at Harvard. When they chose a pastor, the whole town could participate in that vote, so the community chose a minister who was a transcendentalist. It was a huge blow to the large group of Congregationalists. They felt forced out of the church, the church they had supported all their lives. They were not defeated. Dr. Josiah Noyes – the town doctor, and nephew of the minister in West Needham which became Wellesley – led the founding of a new church. When the chips were down, Dr. Noyes led the men to begin putting aside money for a new minister's salary. Elizabeth Hunt Noyes – started the Friendly Society and they worked to raise money to rent a hall until they could build a new chapel. That work galvanized their strength. They were not defeated; they were invigorated. Out of the dust of that experience the phoenix of our church rose again.

Their battle cry was “We may have lost the Paul Revere silver, which was very valuable indeed, but we kept the faith – which is priceless.

You may wonder why the only named room in this church is the one named for Dr. Harry Kimball. When you look at the history it makes sense. Dr. Kimball came to this church after World War I and the church more than doubled in size in a short time- growing from 300 – 800 members. For all their success they lost everything one Saturday night, after the Annual Meeting. Saturday January 5 a fire destroyed the building; all that remained was the flag, the pulpit, the Bible and the stained glass windows you see in Fellowship Hall. People rallied to help extinguish the flames, and before the blaze was contained Dr. Kimball had secured the Masonic Hall for services the next day. Within months the church was re-built.

**Finally, God has a plan for the Church.** When his family contacted Nehemiah he did not know how the king would react to his petition. In those days, if the king did not like Nehemiah's request or his hubris for asking, the king's anger could be lethal. So Nehemiah was confused and scared, and he prayed for

God's good advice. God told him it was safe to go ahead because God needed him to re-build the temple. Suddenly Nehemiah discovered that God had a plan for this temple.

Jack Benson was a trustee of the church who loved to tell me stories when I would visit him at North Hill. One of his favorite stories took place shortly after Dr. Herbert Rhodes Smith came to be the senior minister in the early 1950's. Dr. Smith called a meeting of the church leaders one night, and laid out the case for why he thought they needed a new sanctuary. Then he did something quite unusual. He told them it was their decision and left the room. The men were mystified. They looked at each other in disbelief, and said, "He thinks we can build a new church." That story tells me that Dr. Smith was a wise man. He knew if the people wanted it they would make it happen, and see it through. But he also seemed to know that this church and its people were finally in God's hands.

There have been many many times in these 14 years when I have felt I saw the hand of providence. When the deacons met last January to choose sermon themes, history was a logical theme only because November was to be the culmination of the town's celebration. Through the spring my work with the Board involved a big evaluation of our building. The deacons' concerns about lack of handicap access, and the building administrators' concerns about delayed maintenance, and the Green team's concerns about energy inefficiency all combined into a report that convinced the Board that we need to consult with an architect.

So many different things came together that I could never have foreseen back when we were choosing themes. But when we went through this archive this summer and I learned about the history of this church, I realized that we are a people who have been building and re-building here in Needham for 300 years. Often necessity forced us as a church to push out and to take risks in faith. It was not until I looked in the archives that I had a clearer sense of purpose about what we all need to do now.

That is how history works isn't it? We look to the past to see our own lives more clearly. We read the Bible to recognize ourselves in those stories. We pray – as people have done for centuries, to ask God for guidance. Then we listen to see what God has to say.