

BaptistWay Bible Series for July

4: Building community

June 22, 2010

We can exist without community. We can be self-sufficient and self-reliant. We can act as if the wishes and needs of those around us do not matter. We can be right about a lot of factual statements and yet present them to others with such a lack of gentleness and kindness that we lose the trust of those around us. We can intend the best for others and yet act and speak with such a lack of patience and goodness that we lose any communal relations.

The Christian life is best lived in community—family, church, the greater circle of disciples, the great cloud of witnesses. Community is not easy, nor is it required of us. We have to want it. We have to seek it. We have to build it. We have to maintain it.

Understanding the needs of the community (2 Kings 7:3-9, 16)

The four leprous men came upon a windfall. The hand of God clearly was in it, for it was God who made the Arameans think the overpowering army was at hand. The four leprous men walked into treasure. It was all theirs.

It would have been easy—and even correct—for the men to keep the treasure for themselves. After all, they found it. The rest of their community had no claim on the newfound wealth. They would have been within their rights to horde what they had found.

They did not. Instead, they told the king's household, and the entire community benefited. Note that the lepers would not have been welcome in much of the community. They were not acting for those who had necessarily been nice to them first—remember, they were outside the city

gate. The lesson is not about repaying good for good, nor is it about playing the right political game.

The lesson is that the four men understood that there were needs much greater than their own. They focused not on themselves but on the greater community from which they had come, where their king was. And the whole community was blessed.

Rebuilding the wall (Nehemiah 2:17-18; 4:6)

Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king. He held a position of authority, power and privilege. He could have stayed put and lived a life dedicated to himself.

Nehemiah instead took on a task for the good of the people. Nehemiah's story is different from that of the four lepers, for he did not simply share a windfall he had happened upon. No, Nehemiah left the luxurious for the dirty. He had worked his way to the executive level, and he set aside the perks to take on the task of general contractor for a volunteer job.

This was neither a random act of kindness nor an act of self-flagellation. Nehemiah saw a need, and he knew he was the man for the job. The need was not his own, at least not primarily. The need was for the people: the wall was in ruins, and the people needed their city—the great city of David and Solomon—to stand proudly once again.

The lesson is one of seeing our place in filling the need. The four lepers came upon the treasure by the hand of God working in their own happenstance. On the other hand, Nehemiah created the treasure through his will and his knowhow and his perseverance. Without Nehemiah, there would be no wall. He had the ability and the resources to get the job done, and he focused those on the needs of his people, his community.

Loving your neighbor (Luke 10:25-36)

The parable of the Good Samaritan is well-known. The lesson on community comes after the parable.

Having told the story, Jesus turns to the inquisitive lawyer, who has identified the “neighbor” as the one who has shown mercy. Jesus’ command is simple: “Go and do likewise.”

That is how community is built. Not by being right. Not by having good intentions. The priest and Levite of the parable were doubtless good men who knew the right thing and had great intentions for their work in the temple. But they were not the neighbor—they did nothing to build the community.

Neither is community built by asking the right questions and having the right answers. Jesus does not say to the lawyer, “Good job, you have figured it out. You understand my parable.” No, Jesus tells him to go and do.

Community is built with sweat equity. Our neighbors need us, just as we need our neighbors. Sometimes, community benefits as some share their blessings with all. Sometimes, community benefits as all pitch in together under the leadership of those who see how to lead. Sometimes, community is built one neighbor at a time as wounds are dressed and needs are met.

It is our choice. We can be right, good intentioned and alone. Or we can hear the lesson and follow the example of Christ, who surrounded himself with others, addressed their needs and sent them out to do the same.