

COOPERATIVE TEAMWORK

Rev. Laura Finch

Nehemiah 2:17-20

Acts 2:41-47

Well, here I am the third person of your Un-holy Trinity of Interim pastors. There are three things you will notice-The first is pretty obvious- I am a woman and Jeff and Shannon are guys-least they were last time I looked. Secondly, I do pottery and I do sing-I don't play guitar. Thirdly, in time you will discover we all do things a little differently. When the three of us met we realized, that we do fortunately, have some things in common-we've all been at this a while and we are creative thinkers. But putting three Pastors together, especially some Pastors who are considered sheep and at least one who has been called a wolf-means you're going to need some serious cooperation and teamwork to make this happen.

So, with all this in mind, and as someone who likes to tell stories, I thought I would start by sharing one of my grandson's favorite stories which is Leo Lionni's simple yet appealing collage-illustrated book about a little minnow-sized fish named Swimmy.

Swimmy is just like all the other fish swimming in the large minnow school, except that while they are all reddish-gold, he is pure black. The school of little fish swims along peacefully until any larger predator fish comes along. Then whoosh-all the little fish, including Swimmy, scatter.

As Swimmy observes his watery neighbors, it seems that the big-intimidate, bully and consume the small. What could one tiny little misfit fish do about that? Suddenly Swimmy gets a brilliant idea. It is a plan that both celebrates his own unique style and depends on the cooperative teamwork of all his minnow schoolmates.

Swimmy organizes the school of his little friends so that they are swimming in the shape of a large fish. Swimmy himself, his dark body flashing, creates the "eye" of this illusionary giant fish. In the last scene of the book, we see a huge would-be predator take one look at this intimidating mammoth fish and then turn tail and run.

Now, you are probably asking yourself - "How does a children's book relate to the Bible and my life?" Well Swimmy and our Old Testament hero Nehemiah, are creative thinkers-they observe the situations they are in and think outside of the box. What can one little fish and one little Hebrew do against great odds? The answer for both is cooperation and teamwork.

In the fifth century B.C. the Jewish people were captives in Persia. When a new ruler took the throne, many Jews were allowed to return to Judah. Nehemiah, though he held a high position at the Persian court, received permission to return to his native land, where he was authorized to take charge of the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah used his creative thinking to organize and direct the cooperative efforts of the people. He pointed out the damage that had been done by their enemies, and the acute need for a wall around the city for protection. His appeal was effective and the people joined forces, to work as a team, in this most necessary community project.

When the people “said, ‘Let us start building!’ and committed themselves to the common good,” as the scripture says, they learned how much they could accomplish by cooperation. The work progressed well, until the people become discouraged by renewed threats from their enemies, the afore mentioned Horonites, Ammonites and Arabs. Under Nehemiah’s direction, the people proceed to strengthen their defenses, but wherever they might be open to attack, they stationed guards, with weapons. From that time until completion of the wall, half the people worked on construction of the wall and half were on sentry duty. The people’s teamwork paid off. At length the wall was finished and everyone in the city enjoyed its benefits.

As I think about both these stories, it reminds me that in all areas of life, if we are going to be successful, we need to learn to cooperate, and work as a team.

The first Christians who gathered together after Pentecost and became the first Church knew about cooperating and working together for the common good. Our passage from Acts says they joined together in close fellowship and shared all their belongings. They pooled their resources and when anyone had a need they were helped. They met daily in the Temple and shared meals together in their homes. I guess you could say this was the first Church Potluck. People in the community around them responded to them kindly and treated them with respect and their numbers increased daily.

These stories about Swimmy, Nehemiah and the folks in the early church can help us learn a few things about cooperation and teamwork within the Christian community.

First, we are reminded that life reaches a level of worth when we give something of ourselves to other people. I read, in a magazine article, about two women who were residents of the Southeast Senior Center for Independent Living in Englewood, New Jersey. Their names were Ruth Eisenberg and Margaret Patrick. Both were accomplished pianists and spent most of their lives giving lessons to children, until each suffered a crippling stroke.

Margaret Patrick barely survived. She spent months in hospitals and rehabilitation centers, finally regaining movement on her left side. Her right side was still paralyzed. She said often in halting speech, "I'm just happy to be alive."

Ruth Eisenberg was a wise cracking wit. She laughed about the moment when she suffered her stroke and lay on the floor of her apartment undiscovered for two days. I don't know how she did it but Ruth recovered---however she did not have the use of her left side, and she was confined to a wheelchair.

The two women met after both were referred to the center by their doctors. They soon learned of their mutual love for the piano. One day they sat down at the center's ancient green piano. Margaret's long black fingers moved back and forth over the left side of the keyboard. Ruth's shorter, white fingers carried the melody on the right side. They sat close together and leaned toward one another. Margaret's right hand draped limply around Ruth, Ruth's left hand lay motionless on Margaret's right knee. Their first attempt was Chopin's "Minute Waltz in D." It was truly a revelation to both.

Eventually they developed an extensive repertoire. They performed for countless senior centers, veteran's homes, hospitals, and television shows. They were an inspiration to all who knew them and heard them play. Margaret said, "I never thought that God could use us in this way. We are so happy---and we thank God every day." Life reaches a level of worth when we give something to other people.

A second point to consider is, when people cooperate with one another, their combined effort is often greater than their individual endeavors could produce.

At a Midwestern fair many spectators gathered for an old-fashioned horse-pull-an event where various weights are put on a sled hitched to a horse and pulled along the ground. The grand-champion horse pulled a sled with 4,500 pounds on it. The runner up was close ---with a 4,400 pound pull. Some of the folks wondered what they could pull if hitched together. Separately, they had totaled nearly 9,000 pounds, but when hitched and working together as a team, the winning horses were able to pull more than 12,000 pounds. Imagine the powerful force we could exert if we all "pulled together as a team."

So, if the first thing we need to remember is that life reaches a level of worth when we give something of ourselves to other people, then the second thing that we should remember is that when people cooperate with one another, their combined effort is often greater than their individual endeavors could produce.

There is a third thing that is important, as well: Cooperation gives us a sense of well-being that is impossible when we are only concerned with our own self. We live in a society where there is a great deal of admiration for rugged individualists. Much less is said about our responsibilities to one another and each one of us contributing to the wellbeing of the whole community. That is why I

believe we are going to have to cooperate in order to move beyond this Covid pandemic. This world, this valley, this church, continually needs those who are willing to expend a little extra effort, a little extra money, a little extra time, to help others.

The ancient Israelites in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem learned the necessity of working together. In the process not only did they strengthen their defenses but they strengthened themselves as well. The early Christians shared their possessions, their meals, and their worship. In so doing not only did their community of faith grow, but each individual grew in faith as well. When we make our number one goal living with and for other people, our own lives are enhanced as well. It seems a paradox but it literally can be the difference between heaven and hell.

Ann Landers wrote: A man spoke with the Lord about heaven and hell. The Lord said to the man, "Come, I will show you hell." They entered a room where a group of people sat around a huge pot of stew. Everyone was famished, desperate and starving. Each held a spoon with a handle longer than their own arm so it could not be used to get the stew into their own mouths. The suffering was terrible.

"Come now I will show you heaven," the Lord said after a while. They entered another room, identical to the first---the pot of stew, the group of people, the same long handled spoons. But there everyone was happy and well-nourished.

"I don't understand," said the man. "Why are they happy here when they are miserable in the other room and everything was the same?"

The Lord smiled, "Ah, that is simple, here they have learned to feed one another."

My friends, if we wish to be God's people, we too need to learn to feed one another-physically, mentally, and spiritually. And as a group of creative thinkers who know how to think outside of the box, we can use this kind of cooperation and teamwork to not only help others but in the long run it will help our own souls as well. And if the scripture is any guide, it might even grow the church. Never underestimate the power of God!

